

## ***The Souvenir***

*Eliezer Shore*

The sun rose harshly over the Sinai Desert, casting its crimson rays over the shattered remains of an Egyptian bunker, and waves of heat over the bodies of the young Israeli soldiers who lay sleeping in the sand. An unearthly silence gripped the scene. It was hard to believe that only hours before, this had been the scene of a fierce battle. Now the Egyptian outpost was taken, its soldiers were all dead, and what was left of an Israeli troop lay sprawled out on ground, their eyes shut tight against the light of the rising sun. The Yom Kippur War raged on every border of the land. This battle, the Israelis had won.

Exhausted and grimy, the soldiers tried to block out the blinding light. Only Ronen Mizrahi was fully awake. He squinted at the blue expanse above and ran his fingers through the sand beneath him. He knew that he was alive, though for the life of him, he didn't know why. This was the toughest battle he'd ever fought, and he had almost given up hope of surviving. But here he was, along with the remains of his platoon.

As he lay there staring up at the firmament, a strange sensation stirred within him and something like a desert breeze began to blow across an empty place in his heart—a growing sense of exultation and the feeling that something—Someone—far above had spread forth His hand to protect him during the previous night's battle. This powerful feeling lingered for a moment, as if searching for a suitable place to land, but Ronen, the child of a secular kibbutz and a stranger to even the most basic tenets of the Jewish faith, lacked the words to capture it. He was a foreigner to religious texts and rituals, and so now he just observed the sensation as if from without. Had he only known the words, he would have uttered a prayer.

The soldiers began to stir and, one by one, rose and shuffled toward the charred Egyptian bunker. They were looking for souvenirs. After such a battle, a soldier can't return home empty-handed. He must have something to show his parents and friends: an Egyptian army knife, an officer's signet ring, or maybe a decorative medal.

But Ronen continued to lie quietly on the sand, watching the feeling of exaltation slowly fade away. Suddenly he rose and strode rapidly toward the bunker, anxious now to find something to fill his surprising inner emptiness, something to show his friends back home, as he told them about the battle they had won.

In the bunker, everything was burnt and bloody. Ronen's eyes scanned the bodies of the Egyptians for a souvenir, but the soldiers before him had already taken everything of value.

Suddenly, he noticed a bulge in the breast pocket of one of the dead soldiers. "A pack of cigarettes will have to do," he thought. Unbuttoning the pocket, though, he pulled out a

small book written in Arabic. “What a great souvenir!” he said to himself, and rushed back outside to join his friends.

Back at camp, he showed the strange book to his friend, Amir, who read Arabic. Amir laughed, “Don’t you know what this is?”

“No,” Ronen replied. “Is it something special?”

“Ronen, it’s a *Koran*!” Amir laughed again as he tossed it back to him. “Use it in good health!”

Ronen returned the book to his breast pocket. So what if it was a Koran? he thought. Even better! Now he could tell his friends how he had taken a holy book from the pocket of a dead Egyptian.

Days went by, the war dragged on, and the strange feeling of emptiness remained in Ronen’s heart. Night after night, he would lie awake thinking about life, pondering subjects that had never before entered his mind—God, fate, the purpose of existence. Ideas for which he didn’t even have the words. Sometimes, he would take out the small Koran and flip through it at random. The foreign script meant nothing to him, yet the book had many stories to tell. He would rub the cracked leather cover, examine the various pages. Here was one more thumb-worn than the rest; there the owner had underlined a word and written something in the margin; there a wet spot marked the page. “That Egyptian believed in something,” Ronen would think to himself. “But what do I believe in? Nothing.”

The war continued, more battles, more victories. One morning as the convoy crossed a desert plain, they suddenly came under a barrage of enemy gun fire. The soldiers threw themselves to the ground and responded with their rifles in the direction of the shots. There was a moment of silence, and then an Israeli soldier called out, “Cease fire! We have him.” A lone Egyptian gunman rose from behind a sand-dune. Tall, thin, dusty and exhausted, he raised his hands high above him and walked slowly toward the soldiers in surrender. Amir ran over to him with his pistol drawn. “He’s okay,” he shouted. “We’ve got him! Take him to the personnel carrier.”

There were about thirty men in the carrier. Ronen was sitting in the far corner when they placed the Egyptian on the floor beside him. The man seemed dazed and confused. Ronen eyed him suspiciously. He opened his canteen and offered the Egyptian a drink. “Take water!” he said. The Egyptian took the canteen with trembling hands and drank its contents in one gulp. “He’s so thirsty,” Ronen thought, as he gave him another drink. The man blessed Ronen in Arabic—he blessed his father, his mother, for ten generations back. Ronen gazed at him with a mixture of hatred and pity; the Arab kept his eyes to the floor.

There was something bulging in the Egyptian’s breast pocket, a suspicious object. “Take that out,” said Ronen with a gesture and a nudge of his rifle-butt. The Arab reached into his pocket and slowly pulled out a small leather-bound book embossed with Hebrew letters—a Jewish *siddur* (prayerbook).

Ronen stared in disbelief. His mind raced wildly. A thousand thoughts flew through his head. Then slowly, instinctively, he reached into his own breast pocket and removed the Koran.

The Arab stared in disbelief as he read the words on the cover. He looked at Ronen, their eyes met—two worlds, two cultures, two enemies—yet at that moment, speaking the same silent language.

Ronen looked at the siddur and understood. He understood how the prayer-book had fallen into Arab hands; just as the Koran had fallen into his. And he understood that Heaven moves in mysterious ways—that God has many messengers. And he knew what to do next.

He stretched forth his hand and gave the Arab the Koran, and the Arab gave him the siddur. The Arab put the Koran in his pocket, and Ronen looked down at the prayer-book in his hand. He opened it to the first page and read the words, “I give thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul to me with compassion; Your faithfulness is great.”

And at that moment, something opened up inside of him. The heart that had been empty for twenty-one years, that had waited impatiently to leave Israel after the war in search of adventure, that had scorned the religious life but found nothing better in its place—the heart opened up with a cry of longing that sounded across the desert like cannon fire.

That prayer was only the beginning. The siddur gave Ronen the vocabulary he had never had. As the days went by, he turned to it more and more. It spoke to his soul and brought tears to his eyes. He underlined its words and wrote notes in its margins.

Prayer led to understanding, understanding to Torah, and slowly, to a return to the religion of his forefathers. It was a souvenir that held more memories than he could imagine—memories of the distant past and hope for the future.

Ronen never did leave Israel. After the war he entered yeshiva. Eventually, he married and settled down to build a Jewish home. Today, the siddur sits on the bookshelf in his study, a souvenir of the most important battle he has ever won.

~~~~~

*Source:* Translated and retold by the author from the Hebrew weekly, *Sichat Hashavua* (#192). **Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Shore** currently lives in Jerusalem, where he is a published writer and author, storyteller, and Torah teacher. The above story appears in one of his books, *The Face of the Waters*, available from Amazon.

*Connection:* Seasonal -- This week, on Wednesday, *Hei (5<sup>th</sup>) Iyar*, is Israel Independence Day. The “Yom Kippur” War is one of the many modern Israel has had to fight in order to remain in existence and independent.