Memorial Ceremony for the Events of October 7

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Good morning.

The past week has left us with an acute sense of fragility. Life in Israel is fragile.

One minute, one second, a fraction of a second can determine the fate of dozens of people.

There is no other country in the world where the lives of its citizens hang by such a thread, while they themselves do not know where to turn. A music festival in the open becomes a death trap; a holiday trip suddenly turns into a mortal danger.

Everyday life has become a succession of alarms and sirens, real or virtual.

We are confronting an impossible reality - one that, in our case, is possible. The fact is that it is happening.

Since October 7, we have been accompanied by profound questions, some of them seemingly practical: Why did we fail to recognize the approaching danger? Why did we not act more quickly? Why did we hesitate, while only heroes, in uniform and out of uniform, threw themselves into the fire to save their country?

And, of course, there is more.

The question of responsibility hangs over these and other questions, and it remains unresolved. If we do not ask the questions, we will never know the answers.

Let me say only this: Captain Smit, the Indian pilot, was responsible for the aircraft and for saving it. Correct? Well then, what about our political and security leadership, which stood at the head of the country on that day, October 7th, and throughout the many years that preceded it? It bears responsibility - full responsibility. There were others as well, but at the top of the pyramid there is always one person. In our case, that person was Benjamin Netanyahu.

We are obligated to demand accountability from everyone who was at the controls of our national aircraft. This is our duty to ourselves, to our generation, and to generations to come.

My generation has experienced two such formative events in its lifetime - as if one were not enough. And every day I continue to think about both of them, and about how they occurred at such a remarkably close distance in time.

Fifty-three years ago, at precisely this time of year, the armies of Egypt and Syria surprised us and struck us with the opening blow. Yet at the end of a three-week war - not a three-year war - they found themselves defeated on their own soil, while the IDF stood deep inside Egypt and on the Golan Heights.

We are a people proud of our memory, a people that repeatedly promises to remember and never to forget. Deuteronomy 32:7 says:

“Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will explain to you.”

The meaning is that, in our tradition, to remember does not mean merely to avoid forgetting what happened. It also means deciding what will happen because of it.

Let us remember: the entire leadership of 1973 eventually left office. No one remained in his position. That is what must happen this time as well. Beyond that, we must ensure that this disaster, which unfolded on our watch - as a people and as a society - is not erased from our national and personal memory, but instead guides future generations of leaders and citizens.

Grief, pain, and anger led us toward revenge - harsh revenge. These are emotions that feed one another. Even those who today recoil from the images of devastated and destroyed Gaza and from the number of casualties must admit that, deep in their hearts, they felt a certain sense of relief during the first weeks and months of the war, when the IDF acted with a heavy hand in Gaza.

We felt that our pain and frustration over our helplessness justified actions that went beyond international norms and beyond the standards we set for ourselves as Jews and as Israelis - the principle of the purity of arms.

Now, looking back, the time has come to judge our actions and assess them. But we know that we acted with a very heavy hand, and those actions too must be examined. Not for the hypocritical world that surrounds us, as always, but first and foremost for ourselves.

Throughout world history, and throughout our own history, we lived for long periods without a state, scattered across the world, without the instruments of statehood whose meaning is power: an army, police, and intelligence services, all intended to protect ourselves and guarantee our independence.

Power can be tempting. It can intoxicate and deceive. It can draw us into dark places. But even in darkness, we must never forget who we are and what we stand for.

Revenge has accompanied us throughout our history. I return to the Bible to remind ourselves of Leviticus 19:18:

“Do not take revenge or bear a grudge... but love your neighbor as yourself.”

The desire for revenge is a human and understandable emotion. But we must not allow revenge to control us and become our moral conscience.

Since then, we have perhaps been directing our anger, as a lesson from the war, toward Palestinians in Judea and Samaria, toward the Arab residents of East Jerusalem, and even toward Arab citizens of Israel.

The images we saw just last week from the village of Jalud in Samaria, from a series of villages in the West Bank, and even from the heart of Jerusalem - where hundreds of ultra-Orthodox Jews beat an Arab resident who had fallen into their hands - leave us with no shortage of examples. They show that we have removed the restraints on the use of our power.

This is a grave matter.

Friends,

The opening of the academic year at this particular moment, three years into the war, is a meaningful statement. It brings with it joy - the joy of a new beginning - and great hope for the future. Yet hovering above them is the heavy shadow of the recent and distant past.

And still, none of this is accidental. The past, the present, and the future are always intertwined.

Our responsibility - as Israel's liberal-democratic public, and as a college that trains spiritual leadership for the Jewish people in Israel and around the world - is to renew our vision of a moral, peace-seeking, justice-pursuing society.

These are words that have not been heard in our public space for far too long. We must return to them, repeat these values, and commit ourselves to fulfilling this leadership and educational role in the future.

History offers many examples of people who were persecuted by their own societies, and even by those closest to them, because they expressed views that were unpopular or unacceptable.

Many of the prophets of Israel are remembered precisely because they dared to raise their voices and speak uncomfortable truths. It happened before, and it will happen again.

That should not deter us. Quite the opposite - it should be our life's mission.

Thank you, and I wish you success.