

“Strange Fire” Chapter 7 excerpt

For Effi, having a photographic memory was both a blessing and a curse. Useful at times, but not so much when he couldn't forget the 7th-grade picture of three Himmelfarb school classmates taken during *Shacharit*, morning prayers, years ago. He remembered every detail of the photo of Aner Shapira, Ben Zussman, and Hersh Goldberg-Polin, which was juxtaposed with individual images of the three as young men in their 20s. Only none of them would ever get any older.

Staff Sergeant Aner Shapira, age 22, and his best friend, Hersh Goldberg-Polin age 23 went to the Nova Music Festival on October 7. After the Hamas attack began, Aner, Hersh, and twenty-seven others sought refuge in a roadside bomb shelter roughly the size of a walk-in closet. Dashcam video showed Hamas terrorists peppering the entrance with machine gun fire and tossing grenade after grenade into the shelter.

Aner, who was off duty at the time, stood by the doorway, defending the terrified group, tossing one grenade after another back out of the shelter. The talented musician's last song spoke volumes of his heroism and honor in standing in defense of others no matter the cost. Hamas terrorists threw seven grenades into the shelter, all were tossed back out by Aner... the eighth, however, found its hero target, killing Aner and severing Hersh's arm below his elbow. Of the twenty-nine young festival goers who'd gone into the shelter that day, only eight survived, many hid themselves under the dead bodies of their friends to avoid capture. Four of the festival-goers were kidnapped into Gaza, among them Hersh Goldberg-Polin... the rest, including Aner Elyakim Shapira, were murdered by Hamas on October 7th.

That day thousands of reserve soldier heroes didn't wait to be called up by their commanders or receive their orders. Young men, *giborim*, like Ben Zussman drafted themselves into service, racing to fight in defense of the people and the land of Israel. Day by day, the horrors of October 7 emerged, and were quickly denied or dismissed, swatted like an annoying fly, despite the overwhelming, indisputable evidence of evil. Video evidence broadcast around the world of twenty-two-year-old Shani Louk's twisted, half-naked body surrounded by RPG-wielding terrorists in the back of a white pickup truck, became emblematic of the violence, one of the hundreds, one of the thousands, brutally, callously murdered that day.

Were those kidnapped into Gaza still alive? How would they survive, if only as bargaining chips and ratcheting up fears for their lives and the suffering they were forced to endure in the Hamas terror dungeons. Days passed. More videos emerged. But still no word about those kidnapped into Gaza or outcry from the world demanding the release of the innocents, of the men, women, children, and elderly stolen from their lives on October 7. Painfully, slowly, videos of the hostages taken into Gaza emerged, gleefully posted by the monsters themselves. But for too many, the fate of their loved ones, living or dead, remained unknown while the International Red Cross shrugged their shoulders, impotent and silent.

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By a strange twist of fate, CNN’s Anderson Cooper discovered video footage of Hersh being taken captive. He privately shared the video with the Goldberg-Polin family which showed Hersh (23), Or Levy (33), Eliya Cohen (26), and Alon Ohel (22) being dragged over to a white Toyota truck and taken into Gaza; all were bloodied by hate. Hersh’s left arm had been traumatically severed below the elbow... his shattered bone clearly evident in the video footage and a makeshift tourniquet, he tied by himself, to try to stop the bleeding.

And then nothing. No word, no news about the hostages was forthcoming, only a number... 251 hostages, men, women, and children, even a nine-month-old baby, Kfir Bibas, and Ariel, his four-year-old brother, along with their mother Shiri and father Yarden. Families, cousins, relatives, old and young... people from twelve different countries taken from the festival or the nearby communities of *Kfar Aza*, *Nachal Oz*, *Kibbutz Be’eri*, *Nir Oz*, *Netiv Ha’Asara*, *Ofakim*, *Sderot*, and others. Whole communities along the Gaza border were decimated, entire families murdered, shot dozens of times, others burned alive in their homes and cars, and where safe rooms offered little protection from gunfire and RPGs. By week’s end, the count stood at over twelve hundred people brutally murdered on October 7; and the fate of hostages remained unknown.

Hersh’s parents, Jon and Rachel, knew nothing about the whereabouts of their son who needed immediate medical attention for his severed arm. In many ways, they became the voice and public face for the hostages and hostage families as the horrors of October 7 continued to be revealed. Joined by other hostage families, they waged a public war, traveling around the world, speaking to leaders and people of influence; a public campaign to raise awareness about all the hostages abducted by Hamas while advocating for their only son. A torn piece of masking tape marked the painful passage of time... the number of days the hostages had been held captive by Hamas since October 7th. Placed next to the heart, the number was updated day after day; the symbol, a rallying cry heard around the world: Bring Them Home. In November, a first hostage deal was struck; 101 people were released between November 24th and November 30, 2023. Hersh was not among them. One-hundred-fifty-one hostages, living and dead, remained captive, starved, and abused in Hamas’ terror dungeons. That much was known.

On December 3rd, days after Hamas broke the ceasefire deal, Sergeant Major (res.) Ben Zussman, age 22, was killed in combat in Northern Gaza. At the time, he became the fifth former Himmelfarb student to be killed since October 7th. His final letter to his parents crystallized Ben’s character and strength... *I am writing this message to you on my way to the base. If you are reading this, something has probably happened to me. As you know, there’s probably no one happier than me right now. I was just about to fulfill my dream soon. I am grateful for the privilege to defend our beautiful land and the people of Israel.*

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Effi was struck by the words, “I was about to fulfill my dream...” which meant Ben hadn’t gotten a chance to live his; though, in many other ways, he had. In the days following his death in combat, people learned more about Ben’s character and its tangible translation as Ben drafted himself on October 7. Because he was about to start his training with Israel’s internal security service, the *Shabak*, better known as the *Shin Bet*, he was exempt from Reserve Duty. Despite the exemption, Ben drafted himself on October 7, and only weeks later did his enlistment become official. His dedication to protecting the State and people of Israel was further evidenced when Ben’s “just in case” letter was published. His loving words to his family paved the way for other families to share the last words of their loved ones online and on stickers placed in bus hitches, car windows, and lampposts.

Effi hoped he would live a life of purpose and meaning, a statement that spoke for him after he was gone. Maybe, that was why his father wrote books, to make a statement, to leave a mark on the world... Effi re-read Ben’s letter in his mind.

That if I have to die, let it be in defense of others. Jerusalem, I have placed guards, and I will be one of them one day.

While not an exact quote from the words of the prophet *Isaiah 62:6*, Ben’s words captured their essence; words that resonated through time as Jerusalem had come under siege again and again through the ages...

I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, they shall never hold their peace, day nor night: 'Ye that are the LORD'S remembrancers, take ye no rest, and give Him no rest, till He establish, and till He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.'

Ben’s mission would continue. Effi wondered if Ben (z"l) and all the young men and women who’d been killed fighting since October 7 were really standing on Jerusalem’s walls, protecting her, protecting them all. Ironically, tomorrow’s *Haftorah* reading for *Shabbat Shuva*, the *Shabbat* before *Rosh Hashanah*, would include *Isaiah Chapter 62*. Maybe he’d go to the *Beit Knesset* tomorrow for *Shabbat Shuva* to honor Ben (z"l) and all those who had fallen since October 7.

The *Haftorah* reading was the seventh and final *Haftorah of Comfort*, readings from the *Nevi'im* that began after *Tisha b'Av*. Effi hoped Ben’s family would find comfort, as would those of Aner (z"l) and Hersh (z"l), along with all the other families. It was hard for Effi to let those feelings touch him, but denying the sadness meant also denying joy. He was smart enough to know that. He’d learned that when his mom died, it’s all a part of you... the good and the bad. The idea was captured in the still-popular 1980s song by Naomi Shemer, “*Al Kol Eleh*” which translates to, “On All These Things,” and which speaks of the sweet and the bitter, the honey and the bee sting. In other words, you can’t

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have one without the other...

In Effi’s mind, the iconic photo of Ben’s mother, Sarit, reaching her hands to the heavens in a strangled, silent plea was nonetheless a source of strength... strength reflected in the clarity of her remarks in the face of such a profound loss... *We will prevail. We don’t have any other option. We are a people that value life. Not like our vile and wretched enemy, cowards, Nazis, and their allies who sanctify death.*

Effi didn’t know any of them, but he’d gone with Aunt Davi to a special prayer program held mid-August, the day before the *Tisha b’Av* fast. The program was organized by Ben’s parents Tzvi and Sarit in support of Hersh and all the hostages. Hersh’s parents led a march from First Station to the plaza in front of the Great Synagogue where the program was held. There Effi first saw the picture of the three young boys juxtaposed with the photos of them as young men. He knew then that the image would never leave him. He could put it away, but the details were embedded in his brain. It was Sunday, August 11, 2024. All the names of the hostages held captive by Hamas were read, together with a special prayer composed by Ben’s father asking G-d to grant special wisdom to the leaders during the negotiations to effect the release of the remaining hostages and bring about a just end to the war.

Twenty days later, Israel heard the horrific news that six hostage bodies were recovered from the tunnels beneath *Rafah*; the entry to the tunnel was secreted in a child’s room. In a twisted bit of sick irony, the walls above the tunnel entrance were decorated with colorful Disney characters. The evidence was clear, Hamas had brutally executed six young people... Eden Yerushalmi (24), Carmel Gat (39), Ori Danino (24), Alex Lobanov (32), Almog Sarusi (26), and Hersh Goldberg-Polin (23). Effi couldn’t reconcile how Hersh and the others had survived for so long only to be murdered when rescue was feasibly just a few relative moments away... a breath between life and death. They had been alive and survived for nearly a year, each day measured from October 7, 2023, and displayed on a frayed piece of tape... Day 327, Day 328... Day 329. On Day 328, Hersh’s parents stood with other hostage families, calling through loudspeakers to their loved ones trapped in Gaza. Were they heard? By someone, anyone? Was Hersh already dead?

How could they have been alive and then executed with only hours separating them from a possible rescue? There was no victory for Israel and a brutal, demoralizing reality for the IDF in a true zero-sum game. No winners. At least the families had bodies to bury; others were not so blessed. Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul’s families were still waiting for the remains of their sons to be returned after ten years. Effi didn’t understand evil, and that was the only word he could think of to describe that kind of cruelty.

Aunt Davi asked if he wanted to go to the *Shiva*, the traditional seven-day mourning period, for Hersh. Every fiber in his being told him not to go, and every fiber in his being told him he needed to go. They went on the last morning for the *Shacharit* prayer service. A tent had been set up near the family’s home to accommodate the thousands

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of people who came to pay their respects to the family and Hersh. Effi didn't go up to the family instead he stood by the food table, looking up at the printed death announcements for the other five hostages killed with Hersh. He took a cracker and made a *bracha*, a blessing in memory of Hersh and those who were killed with him. He waited and watched as Aunt Davi stood before Hersh's parents and said the traditional words of comfort, *May G-d comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.*

They stayed for the *Shacharit* prayers, the final morning service during the *Shiva* period. Traditionally, during the month of *Elul*, the month before *Rosh Hashanah*, the *shofar* is sounded — a call for people to do *teshuva* (repentance), before the Day of Judgement. At the end of the service, the *shofar* was sounded. Maybe because of the circumstances, it seemed to Effi to be more than just a call to repent, but also a call to action. On the walk home, Aunt Davi told him the person who blew the *shofar* was Aner Shapira's father. The eleven-month period for saying the *Kaddish* prayer for his son had just ended, while the eleven months for the Goldberg-Polin family had only just begun. Ben's family still had a few months to go before they would mark the one-year anniversary of his death. He thought about Ben's family the whole way home...

Judaism gave structure to mourning rituals. Effi knew them all. The Zussman and Shapira families, like so many families since Oct7, and now the Goldberg-Polin family would mark the next “milestone” in mourning on the 30th day, counting from the funeral, known as *Shloshim*. The parents would then say the *Kaddish* prayer for the next eleven months, repeating the prayer multiple times during the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer services. They would also participate in communal prayers of remembrance called *Yizkor* on specific holidays.

The specifics of Hersh's murder slowly emerged, a more precise timeframe for when Hersh (z"l) was killed... sometime between Thursday, August 29th and August 30th, the 26th or the 27th of *Av* on the Hebrew calendar. The family could mark Hersh's *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of his death; though, without truly knowing when. In that cruel twist of fate, Hersh might already have been murdered when his parents stood outside the Gaza fence crying out to their son on Friday, August 30th. Effi imagined that Hersh, nonetheless, heard them from Heaven, where he and all the other Holy Ones, the *Kedoshim*, were now. Effi imagined a different image of the three boys, the three young men only as angels together once again. The thought didn't make him sad. Instead, Effi felt a sudden gratefulness for how lucky he was. His father was usually around when he needed to go to synagogue on those special days, for his mom's *yahrzeit* and the *Yizkor* service. If not, Aunt Davi took him. He would also light a memorial candle for his mother. Effi was glad he went to the *Shiva* for Hersh, even though he didn't speak with his parents. He wasn't sure if Aunt Davi had a special connection to Hersh's family, none was necessary in a small country like Israel. You just showed up... just because.

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Hersh seemed like a really good guy with a great attitude. He loved to travel, and everybody liked him. He was open to talking to everyone, to really listen. “A true light unto the nations,” he heard someone say. The posters he’d seen described Hersh as a *yeled* of light, love, and peace. Effi thought it was pretty cool for someone so young, just 23-years-old, to have that kind of presence and effect on the world. His parents were heroes too, able to raise the hearts of people around the world, while theirs were breaking. Had he spoken to the family, he would have said, thank you... “Thank you for sharing Hersh’s life and light with the world.” Not surprisingly, Ben and Aner were like Hersh in that way. Good people, the best of us. Effi usually wasn’t sentimental, but the words felt right.