Excerpts from a Yom Kippur War Diary
Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman

On Yom Kippur, 1973, I was a sixth-year hesder student at Yeshivat HaKotel, which overlooks the Western Wall Plaza in the Old City of Jerusalem.

That Yom Kippur, the tension was even greater than usual, although we never imagined that the words of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer – “who will live and who will die, who will die at his predestined time and who before his time … who by water and who by fire” – would take on such real and immediate significance just a few hours later.

Yom Kippur Afternoon
All of a sudden, the alarms began to sound, the rumors began to spread and the general call-up began. The first students began to leave the yeshiva on their way to their units.

Motzei Yom Kippur, Saturday Night
By the end of the day, most of the students, myself included, were on their way to the front.

When I arrived at my assembly point, in the center of Jerusalem, hundreds of reservists were already there. We got onto Egged buses and the mood was somber and silent. News of the battles being fought at the front were streaming in over the radio. Most of us sat deep in thought, looking out the window... would we come back from this war? Would we ever see these views again? Would we ever see our families again?

Sunday Morning, October 7, ’73 (11 Tishrei)
We arrived at the base, received our personal equipment and began loading the tanks.

Sunday Evening
On the second night of the war, we began traveling south toward the Suez Canal. Hard-fought, bloody battles were being waged along the front lines and they told us in the briefing that the situation was dire. We reservists must arrive as quickly as possible to reinforce the units already engaged.

Sunday Night
We ran straight into battle and fired our first shots at enemy tanks that were blocking our path. Eventually, after a tough fight, the Egyptians retreated. We then found ourselves in the midst of another battle near the Bitter Lake, which continued well after midnight.

Monday Morning, October 8, ’73 (12 Tishrei)
Today was our first attempt at a counterattack in the hope of throwing back the Egyptians. Close to 100 Israel tanks participated in the fray and I cannot adequately describe the scenes – shells flying through the air, tanks hit, screams, and the horrific images of the injured and the dead.

Several of my friends were killed today.

Tuesday, October 9, ’73 (13 Tishrei)
After a short night’s rest, our battalion rose at first light to prepare for another day of intense fighting.

Tuesday Noon
We captured a hill from which we could see hundreds of Egyptian soldiers and vehicles fleeing south. The command from brigade headquarters was “Charge! Fire all available guns!” The tanks lurched forward with me and others standing in our respective turrets.

Unprotected.
It quickly became clear that we had charged straight into an anti-tank ambush. They fired at us from all directions and we experienced heavy losses.

We also experienced, for the first time, the power of a Sager Anti-Tank Missile.

My tank took a direct hit.
Shrapnel flew everywhere and I was hit in my upper body. My face was bloodied, my left hand severely injured and I couldn’t see out of my left eye. I was losing consciousness.

I remembered my tefillin in the tank, then everything went black. The last image I remember is Ezra Bashari, my tank driver, coming up to the turret, extricating me and laying me down next to the tank, which in the meantime had gone up in flames. Later, my friends told me I had run to the equipment compartment, grabbed my tefillin and run away before collapsing. They had pulled me up and placed me in the adjacent tank. While the tank made its way to the road, a medical team began treating me and a helicopter took me to an emergency field hospital in Refidim. From there, still unconscious, they flew me, with other wounded soldiers, to Tel Hashomer Hospital near Tel Aviv.

Wednesday, October 10, ’73

I regained consciousness and asked the nurse for the time. I hadn’t been able to put on my tefillin yesterday and I didn’t want to miss another day. She smiled and told me I was in a hospital and my tefillin were not there. I remained in the hospital for several months, undergoing six operations.

November 1973

On one of those days in hospital, Rabbi Israel Klein, a member of my tank battalion, came to visit and brought me my tefillin. He told me that after they had moved the tank to the road, the tefillin in my limp hands had fallen into the tank, and they only found them after the ceasefire as they were cleaning up. Fortunately, my name was embroidered on the bag.

September 2020

47 years have passed since that terrible war. Since then, the Unetaneh Tokef prayer has taken on special significance for me, “Who will live and who will die”...

The person who stands in prayer is helpless before the Almighty G-d. He is “created from dust and shall return to dust.” G-d is the eternal King while man is akin to “broken clay, a wilted plant, the dust in the wind and the floating dream,” forever at G-d’s mercy.

The beauty of Unetaneh Tokef is in its clear and simple presentation of things that became real and tangible for me on the battlefields of war.

In the age of technology, modern man feels he is all-powerful. We can travel in space, create revolutionary and elaborate technologies for global communication, advanced spacecraft and fighting disease, yet we still can’t predict what will happen tomorrow.

As we have witnessed very clearly this year, everything can change in a flash and our worst nightmares can become reality at any given moment.

From my own experiences, I think the healthiest outlook on life is that we feel our lives are in G-d’s merciful hands.

We are truly “like pottery in the hand of the craftsman.”

Rabbi Yechezkel Wasserman is a member of the Zionist Executive Board and Head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora at the World Zionist Organization.