Single Handed

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To my late parents, Hannah and Avraham, whose lives were brief and difficult, but who also knew joy and fulfillment with the births of their children and grandchildren. Although they did not get to see the youngest generations growing up, those generations continue Hannah and Avraham's legacy in Israel, their home after surviving the Holocaust.

To my wonderful children Nadav and Noam, who, from their day of birth, continue to fill my life with unique content. Our special family ties are engraved in stone, endlessly filled with love, joy, respect, modesty, friendship and emotion.

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Slogans… that is what we hear constantly, and that is what also made it so difficult for me to write what you are about to read here. However, it is my hope that despite any possible "sloganism" in my life motto, explaining it will offer you something more.

Our past shapes the future. When things are going well, when it is all positive – physically, socially, financially and emotionally – we tend to forget what we have been through. We tend to stuff the problems, failures, and disadvantages, the ones we have overcome and which have led us to where we are currently into a back drawer. However, as soon as the going gets tough, all the troubles of the past and the present suddenly surface and flood us again. Why?

This world is becoming increasingly competitive and increasingly based on materialism. The famous psychologist Professor Abraham Maslow considered self-esteem as one of the most important of an individual's needs: but what raises self-esteem in our own view? What is success? Can it be measured?

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War, Injury, and Rehabilitation

June 24, 1982. First light in Lebanon, on the Beirut-Damascus road between Aley and Bhamdoun. I was flat on the ground, covered in blood and dirt, and screaming in pain. A medic raced over. I begged, “I know my arm’s gone… but what’s with my face?” His own face did not give away much, but the looks on my friends’ faces said it all. That was it, it was all over for me. No right hand, and a messed up face - a death sentence.

The pain kept reminding me I was still alive. The living dead, that was the thought that passed through my mind. Crazy pictures ran through my mind while in a state of utter despair. I did not look after myself. What will I tell my Mom? I hoped that my life would not come to an end there. I could just imagine the scene: soldiers knocking on the door at home in Be'er Sheva, where I grew up from the day we came here after leaving Canada behind. I thought about my parents. No, no, they mustn’t find out this way.

I knew how hard their lives were. Now I would be adding to that hardship. They went through the Holocaust. They went through all of Israel’s wars. They had been through so much, all those years in our crappy neighborhood. Then, because of me, they would have to cope with the worst thing that could ever happen. My arm, it hurt so much. “Doctor, give me something. I can't take this anymore!” All I could think was, why? Why me? What normal girl would want me now? I could forget about the officers’ course as well. No right arm, right? But what about work? What about everything else?

The pain was blowing me apart.

“Doctor, please…” He collected what was left of my hand and the skin dangling from my arm and stuffed it into the

sock he peeled off my foot. Then he fastened the whole thing to what was left of my arm and scribbled something on my forehead. It seemed as though my screams had sliced through his heart. He injected something, morphine maybe, and then he gave me valium.

Years later, we met by chance and he remembered the mass of painkillers he gave me, and how he wondered if I was an addict because nothing seemed to help. I said that the quote, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem” can be really risky for right hands!

On Sunday, exactly eighteen days ago, we went into Lebanon. The whole weekend before that, heavy artillery was being fired on the Galilee. That weekend, hanging around our border posts, all of us in the unit watched the endless rain of rockets flashing over our heads. We knew what their target was. We also knew what to expect, and we knew the government could not just let this keep happening - that they would send us, the Golani Brigade, in there, and we would be heading the counter attacks. On Saturday, I managed to catch my parents at home. I told them that the officers’ course was postponed, and that I would not be on leave on Sunday, as I had told them earlier. In this family of four sons, which had known its fair share of war and was used to the short and pretty uninformative messages - which could not give out classified information but provided just a hint that we were okay - that was enough for my parents. They did not press me for anything more. I learned much that in the early days of the war, all four of us brothers were in Lebanon at the same time. How hard that must have been for our parents.

We moved fast that Saturday morning, joining other Golani forces at the border. I was about a year and half in the army, and served as a squad commander of a unit handling 81mm mortars. I led my small band of men into the unknown. We

were on an adrenalin rush, a bit euphoric. We wanted to get in and strike our enemies down for attacking Israel's northern region. I kept focus on getting the soldiers and their gear ready, keeping thoughts of war and its implications out of my mind. I focused on myself, my friends, and my family. I was not afraid, but in the back of my mind, there was this nagging thought that action goes with injury.

On Sunday, we went in. The goal was not completely clear yet, but the direction was - north, and fast. We were over the border in no time. Lebanon is so green and lush. Wherever we went, people came out cheering, tossing rice and flowers over us for good luck. It almost felt like a picnic. They were also pretty fed up with having their lives disrupted.

However, by the afternoon, we saw the signs - the signs of war, for real. Sprawled across a car was a dead body, the man's feet skimming the ground. There was a sigh of relief - at least he was not one of our own. Yet reality struck like a slap to the face, and our confidence was shaken. Once we saw a few more like him, we became really cautious.

That first night, as we were ready to sleep, we came across an enemy force of four or five vehicles. The fire that erupted was crazy. We ended up with a few light injuries, mostly grazes. That's it, I thought, it's starting. It was clear to me that from that moment onwards, it would only get worse. War mixes in a whole lot of factors, but my feeling as a soldier was that I was in a movie. I had a role to play, but I felt like an outside observer, even though I was shooting non-stop. The situation strikes me as surreal.

However, I was still totally aware of what was going down around me. I was holding maps, I was involved in updates from my commanders, and I was taking an active stance. I saw fire, I saw injured and dead people, but at some level, it was as though none of it had anything to do with me , even when an anti-tank missile whizzed right above my head and slammed into the embankment behind me. It was tense

and scary. Suddenly, I realized I was not thinking about myself at all. In the middle of it all, I was thinking about my parents . I could not stop envisioning it in my mind – how they would be given bad news. I made a decision: that I would do everything to stay safe.

I was being taken back. Later, I was told that because of the heavy fighting and Syrian forces in the area, I was treated in the field. For three hours, I could not be airlifted out without any risk that the chopper would be downed. The evacuation took ages. I was losing a lot of blood, which later resulted in my being classified as badly injured. I was a statistic all of a sudden.

The evacuation command car had another soldier in it, with a leg wound. Above us were two more guys. I did not have a clue who they were and despite my haziness, I noticed they were not saying anything. They were not even moaning or grumbling. On the trip to the evacuation point, the man with the wounded leg told me the names of the

two guys above us. They were dead, which explained their silence. I managed to stay quiet, and kept slipping in and out of consciousness. In the chopper, a doctor accidentally touched the severed arm. I groaned. The pain was really tough and consciousness jolted me for a few moments. Whatever it was that my face was showing, he looked back with concern and compassion, apologized and touched me lightly on the shoulder. I lost consciousness again.

The trip from the landing pad only took a few minutes. As soon as I was taken out of the chopper, I begged the medic not to phone my family at home. “Please…” I begged, “Wait, let me tell them myself, please.” I lost consciousness once more, and woke up at the entrance to the operating room. I begged again that no one call home. “Let me do it,” I could hear myself saying. I have no idea who respected my wish and made that happen, but I remain grateful for it to this day. Once I would speak with my mother, I would know I did the right thing. As far as they were concerned, I was alive, and that was all that mattered.

“Hello,” she said after I dialed.

“Mom…” was all I managed to say weakly, trying to avoid sounding like I was suffering too much.

“You're wounded…” she choked on her words, and everything moved forward from that point on.

I opened my eyes. A pretty nurse was wheeling my bed down the corridor, and I was in love with her. She had to be in love with me too! That is how it goes in the movies, right? I showed her my left hand. “Look at how cool this one is,” I said. “That’s what I had here too.” She smiled - she was like the shining sun, her eyes caressing, and she looked at me with what I was convinced was the softest, most loving gaze I had ever seen in my life. So I quipped, “I only hope my right arm slammed into a Syrian soldier’s face and landed him a ringing slap!”

The room I was in was completely white. I was unable to smell anything. My arm, or what was left of it – I could not bring myself to say 'stump' for years, since it sounded gross to me – was wrapped in an enormous white bandage, and everything was swollen and painful. My face was covered in some kind of net and bandages intended to let the burns and shrapnel wounds heal. Most of the shrapnel was removed.

Everyone was running around, trying to make things easier for the soldiers in the hospital. They pampered us, gave us phones and arranged TVs for us - anything to make us feel better. I was mostly feeling confused. I spoke to my parents and my oldest brother a few minutes earlier. He played as though he was angry, "What kind of birthday present is this you're giving me!" Ever since then, we have a new birthday greeting. I wish him happy birthday and he wishes me happy re-birth day.

It is weird to be twenty and feel as though you are being reborn. It is like being a baby: everything is new and strange. I had lost more than ten kilos by that point, and I was unable to do anything alone. The hand and arm that were functioning were not the ones my brain was used to ordering around. I kept trying to do things with my right arm. It was an automatic reaction! I had to keep correcting myself. In one instant, I had become a wreck - I lost my self-confidence, became totally dependent, and needed to cope with waves of pain penetrating my skull.

Towards evening, my parents arrived. The social worker stopped them at the doorway to my room. She was prepping them for this new reality. Mom took that as a sign that things were much worse than the social worker was letting on, and fainted.

Next morning, there was an endless stream of visitors. Friends, mates from my unit, from the company, from the squadron, from the battalion, from high school, from our

street… from everywhere! I tried to smile at everyone. At the age of ten years old, my nephew could not figure it out, and went for a pragmatic approach.

"How are you going to eat?" he asked, eyes wide with concern. "What about… going to the toilet?"

I was unable to eat even a fraction of the piles of sweets people brought with them. Mom, who hovered constantly alongside me, packed them into bundles. My oldest brother's kids were going to get a massive bellyache! I wondered which of the visitors were there out of curiosity to check out what an injured soldier looks like, and how many came out of sincere support. It is possible that they came for both. Meanwhile, I felt like I needed to do something. I started copying from a book with my left hand. I started working on myself, not really knowing how useful it might be.

Five days later, the stand holding the IV drip was detached, providing me with a bit more freedom of movement. In the evenings, a friend who lived not too far away turned up, and we snuck out for a bit of fun. Recovery was slow, but somehow I felt as though I was on the right path. I kept getting taken to the operating theater to fix one thing or another. I still had no idea how things looked under the bandages, but I knew my arm was swollen to beyond the point of reason .

There was a social event for the soldiers one evening. Yaffa Yarkoni, a much-loved singer, was performing. I was not keen about going, especially because I just had another operation, but traditions are traditions. My bed was wheeled into the hall along with all the other guys. Suddenly, I remembered how I played the mandolin at the age of eleven years to cheer up wounded soldiers at Be'er Sheva's Soroka Hospital, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The mind conjures up weird things: I am a bit shocked by that image! I was told that on my tenth day here, I would be transferred to Tel Hashomer Hospital's rehab section.

“Winner of the Bronze Medal, representing Israel: Hanoch Budin”

That was how it sounded in the summer of ’84, when I was on the podium at the Paralympic Games. Just a few minutes earlier, I finished the 100-meter freestyle, beating out the swimmers in fourth and fifth place by a few hundredths of a second. I felt like shouting at the top of my lungs with joy. I hugged everyone who came by, and loved that medal hanging around my neck. I left it dangling there on my chest for as long as I could. It was a double win for me: my first large-scale international competition, and my first medal.

I felt so proud… my thoughts wandered back to room 7 in Tel Hashomer’s rehab department.

Rikki’s voice echoed in my ears. “You’ve got to use the stump to work the loom.” Rikki was the occupational therapist, and weaving on the loom was apparently the best way to train me to use the painful and immobile severed arm. I needed to make the effort to use it in every action I took to train my body to function without hesitation. Fear of

pain can be paralyzing. So Rikki kept going at me, gently but persistently. The movement needed to come naturally.

And that was only part of the work Rikki has set out for me. I learned how to shave with my left hand, which is quite a trick, and learning how to crack an egg and beat it in a bowl, the left-handed way. When you have two hands and you are right handed, who gives such things a second thought? Now, with only one hand, and not the dominant one at that, every action becomes complex. Suddenly, the idea of left-handed scissors made a whole lot of sense!

The tasks I was given were really difficult. That sounds like I was given endurance training exercises! But no, even the simplest everyday acts required focus and concentration, like getting my socks on or tying my shoelaces. The latter was not only a left hand problem, but a one handed problem too! It was a real challenge!

The occupational therapy department is a wondrous world of intricate improvisations and inventions. The staff there dreamed up all kinds of ideas and apparatuses geared at retraining me and helping me adjust. Every one of us was related to individually, based on what we needed for each stage of adjustment and progress.

Rikki followed me absolutely everywhere, even to the toilet! I need to relearn everything: how to wipe myself, and what to do. Practice followed by more practice. You clip your fingernails with a gadget that clamps onto the nail clippers and is pressed down with the stump. It was one of the things I passed on, opting for using my teeth. It took a while, but now I have it down to a fine art.

The rehab department was a really unique place. It looked like a scene from a Federico Fellini film - everything was weird. Young men, older men, all of us missing at least one limb, in different states of ability. We filled the rooms, the corridors and the treatment spaces. There was a sort of continual motion between medical treatments, corrective

surgery, adjustment of prostheses, and rehab exercises intended to help us adjust to our new lives. The place buzzed with nurses and doctors who looked really comfortable making what seemed to us as snap decisions, such as giving us reduced medication, or making us do more for ourselves by giving us less assistance. The term “cutback” takes on a different meaning in the rehab slang dictionary.

It was noisy in the dining room as the nurses served chicken meals. People who were hungry, but not for food, piped up with black humor. “I want a leg,” one called out. “With or without the knee?” another answered. “Gimme a wing,” said someone else. “Me, I want an eye,” and the black humor ritual carried on like that every day. Discussions among the patients that took place there focused on the type of vehicles they would be allowed to get, rather than on prostheses. On the subject of prosthetics, about two weeks into my rehab program, the available options were presented to me. I quickly realized that if I was going to use anything at all, the best prosthesis would be the one with the hook, which was the more efficient of them all. It made activities such as holding a knife, knocking in a nail, grasping things, and many more routine actions, possible.

But it was hard for me to look at it. The hook was very blatant, not to mention ugly and even frightening. I could not imagine myself walking around with it outside in the street, and so I initially went for the prosthesis shaped like a hand. When I would be at home, the hook would be the obvious choice, but outdoors, appearance is also important. I comforted myself with the idea that if it ever becomes necessary, I could swap for the hook. Actually, at home, the best thing was nothing at all. That is because the straps were uncomfortable and the prosthesis got hot and unpleasant. As time went by, I learned to handle that, but I am sure that not choosing the hook immediately and as my sole option helped me reach the best decision.

Visitors could come and go freely, and they did: friends, family, volunteers… all kinds of well-meaning and helpful people. In the evenings, there was no shortage of activities: performances, outings to restaurants, conferences. We were a kind of attraction: the newly injured war casualties.

“So, do you have a girlfriend? Did you make out yet? How’s she taking in what you're going through?” That was how the conversation one evening with the psychologist sounded. I gazed at her, not sure what she wanted from me. A girlfriend? Well… yeah, but I was not sure she knew that yet. Sex? Intimacy? I was not sure she was keen on seeing my broken, busted body. Surely, she would prefer to be touched by two hands… one hand must be really frustrating.

I did not want to talk to the psychologist. This conversation was embarrassing, and I preferred to withdraw into myself. That was the advantage of being in the hospital: we did not have to cope constantly with the inquiring faces of all the healthy and “whole” people out there. I was still in shock from my first visit home. All those pitying eyes did not make me feel good at all. They simply emphasized the dreadfulness of my situation. The first thing I did back home was to go to the main shopping area, at the busiest time, and walk around so that everyone could cluck and gossip, and that it would all be over with. I was so happy when Sunday came around and I could get back to hospital, where I was like everyone else, not special, or strange, but just an amputee practicing at reconstructing his life.

“Winner of the gold medal in 100m backstroke with a new world record.”

In October 1988, nine thousand spectators in Seoul, South Korea filled the huge and well-equipped hall overlooking the competition pool. Just two weeks earlier, America's legendary Matt Biondi had swum here. Now I was in the

same pool, and the same lane, on the same starting block. What an honor!

The atmosphere was electric. The French record holder was in the lane next to mine. I was super charged, focused and ready, especially since two days earlier I disappointed myself in the breaststroke and “only” got the bronze. I imagined myself swimming, going through each stage in my mind. First of all, the start. Then the dive, the leg movements, and lastly, the distance to be swum in backstroke. After that letdown with the breaststroke, I could not let myself off for anything less than gold. Failure has two possible outcomes: either it weakens you, or it will strengthen you. There is no midway - it is one or the other.

I was totally focused on the water and the swim I was about to do. I did not see or hear anything. I was running the race through my thoughts, counting seconds, movements, and breaths. I knew I was going to give it everything I had. It was not pressure: it was focus, tremendous energy flowing, and I loved it. Other than feeling like I needed to run to the toilet every two minutes, everything was fine. The referee’s whistle readied the swimmers.

I entered the water with a dive of thirty meters, using only my legs for the dolphin movement. Until 1988, this long dive was allowed, but afterwards the rules were altered, and the dive could not be for more than fifteen meters, whether from the starting block or on the turn. I lifted my head out of the water and saw that after the dive, I was ahead of the French guy by about half a body length.

The crowd roared wildly. It was exhilarating, and it charged me up, boosting my motivation. There was a storm of thoughts running through my mind. I needed to swim fast enough to maintain the gap I opened, all the way to the end. My hand reached out forcefully and quickly to touch the wall and stop theclock.

I look up at the scoreboard. What?! I was in first place!

And it was a world record! Wow! The electronic board flashed out my achievement. My mates in the swimming team were screaming, cheering on the stands, waving their arms in celebration, and I felt the joy and pride bursting inside me. My fist, thrust upwards, and my victory shout were caught in a photo that to this day goes with me everywhere, at home and work. My first Olympic gold medal!

The two months in rehab came to an end, and I was released home. Now I would get to taste real-time coping. When you are in the army and know there is a year until your release, you do not think about the future too much. You do not think too much about the present, either. You have clothes, you have food, you have a defined role, and your time is pretty much organized by other people. All of a sudden, I needed to take care of food and clothing myself. I needed to think about the future, and especially, handle my time and its content. Suddenly, unexpectedly, and way ahead of schedule, I needed to make my own plans. No one was going to be making them for me.

My first few months were tough as I adjusted to the new situation. The flip side was that they were also easy because no one was expecting too much of me. It would have been so easy just to give in and sink into self-pity, rather than cope. Coping is the really tough part. You need to prove to yourself and others that you are capable. You need to face and overcome endless challenges at the physical and mental levels. And it is constant.

As time went by, I saw the traits that are vital to getting through all this: a really good sense of humor, including about myself; patience, in bucket loads; tolerance towards all the well-meaning folk around me; self-love, because that is how to cope with the failures and continue on, again and again, on the way to success. There are plenty more traits that developed as I continued on this journey, and

they became so integral that they ended up reshaping the old-new personality.

Pretty quickly I figured that rebuilding my life meant making another change, an essential one. It did not take long for me to decide I needed to move. I needed to find an apartment instead of living with my parents. I initially moved into an apartment in Be'er Sheva. That kept me close enough to home to feel like help was round the corner if and when I needed it. A few months later, I transferred to Tel Aviv. For me, this change was vital, because I felt a strong need to rebuild my whole life. Even though it sounds a bit weird, my greatest fear at that point revealed itself as staying in the greenhouse of my immediate family. Pleasant and embracing as it was, it belonged to my previous life. I was not planning to disconnect from my family, but I needed to work on being independent and see where it could take me.

Moving to a different city was an encounter with an entirely new and even foreign environment. That meant new people, too, who did not know me from my previous environment. Now, when I meet friends from my childhood and adolescence, I feel so distanced from them. And I am barely in touch with anyone from my military unit. For me, Tel Aviv is like overseas. It is so unlike Be'er Sheva; the buildings, the people, the entertainment, the atmosphere, and of course, there is the sea.

I found the closest “Beit Halohem,” centers set up by the IDF that offer wounded soldiers life-long access to a wide range of opportunities in sports, rehab and social avenues. My new friends at this center were swimmers in the Israeli team that participated in national and international competitions. They would come to visit us while I was in the rehab center, encouraging us by shedding light on how our lives could look some years down the line. I connected to them easily, and even though I was a good bit younger than they are, and a bit cocky, they accepted me warmly.