



By Bayla Sheva Brenner

Photos courtesy of the Sapir Center for Jewish Education and Culture.

General Mordechai Piron fought in four Israeli wars without a grenade, M-16 or Uzi. Armed with a holy *sefer* Torah and the power of an encouraging word, for thirty-four years the former chief rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) placed himself in mortal danger on front line after perilous front line to support thousands of Israeli soldiers in their time of greatest need.

Providing spiritual succor to the defenders of Israel, Rabbi Piron supplied Israel's soldiers with *siddurim*, *Chumashim*, tefillin, *tallitot* and mobile shuls. "[All we needed was] an ark, a *sefer* Torah and a tent; whenever the unit moved, the synagogue moved with them," says Rabbi Piron. The [soldiers] could be stationed in the middle of the

desert with nothing around, and within a few minutes we had a synagogue."

Rabbi Piron's rabbinical responsibilities were much like his civilian counterparts; he officiated at occasions of both joy and sorrow—conducting marriage ceremonies, overseeing conversions to Judaism and consoling mourning families. He also provided Jewish instruction and kosher supervision on military bases. The most difficult part of his job, he says, was the heartbreaking task of identifying and burying fallen soldiers.

Additionally, Rabbi Piron held popular educational seminars for soldiers on Jewish ethics, history and philosophy. "There is a thirst to know the real ideas of the Torah," says Rabbi Piron. "I tried to create a connection with understanding, empathy and care."

"[The soldiers] loved his lectures," recalls Yakov Piron, Rabbi Piron's son. "My father knew how to talk to them,

to reach their hearts. I saw it on their faces. I remember as a child he took us with him [to the army bases] during the holidays. Spending Pesach, the *chag* of freedom, with the Israeli soldiers, in an army camp, gave it special meaning."

His son, fifty-eight, now of Kedumin in the Samaria region of Israel, grew up feeling proud of his father's hard-won accomplishments. "My father came to Israel with only the shirt on his back," he says. "He is a completely self-made, extremely dedicated man. The military was his life."

ESCAPING THE HORROR— FINDING HIS WAY ALONE

Not unlike the many soldiers he comforted and inspired, Rabbi Piron knew well—and early on—how it felt to be far away from family, alone and afraid. Rabbi Piron (born Mordechai Pisk) was a sixteen-year-old boy the day Hitler

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and his troops pounded their ominous black boots against the streets of Austria. “Vienna had become a very dangerous place for Jews,” he recalls. The Jews of the city were frantically searching for a way out. At the time, British rulers of Palestine were slowly issuing certificates of *aliyah*. Youth Aliyah (under the auspices of the Jewish Agency), a movement aimed at rescuing young Jews from Nazi Germany and training them in the building of the *Yishuv*, assisted young Mordechai in obtaining a certificate. Although he was his parents’ only child, he knew the decision was clear that he had to leave. His mother wept bitterly as Mordechai boarded the train headed for the port in Trieste, Italy, hoping against hope that he would return when things got better. He never did.

Young Mordechai’s welcome to the Holy Land began with an Arab uprising that abruptly rerouted the ship full of Jewish youth from Jaffa to Haifa. “[Seeing Israel for the first time] was a revelation. Everywhere, I saw uncultivated, barren desert and stones; so desolate,” he says. “In Vienna, we spoke of the Holy Land as a place flowing with milk and honey. I was disappointed.” Because the Germans wouldn’t permit the passengers to take anything with them, Mordechai arrived in Palestine penniless. Representatives from Mikveh Yisrael, an agricultural school organized by Youth Aliyah, took him to its headquarters near Tel Aviv. Soon afterwards, he Hebraized his name to Piron.

Mikveh Yisrael transformed the young immigrant into an expert farmer—and a Zionist. The 10 AM mail call quickly became the highlight of his day. “To get a letter from Vienna was like a drop of life; the most wonderful thing in the world,” says Rabbi Piron. By 1940, the letters had stopped. “It’s [impossible] to describe the feeling of despair when there’s suddenly no communication,” he says. “Until 1942, I

still held out hope that they were hiding somewhere.” Years later, he obtained a paper from Yad Vashem documenting his parents’ deportation to and murder in Auschwitz.

JOINING THE UNDERGROUND ARMY— AND THE RABBINATE

Mikveh Yisrael was comprised of hundreds of young men and women from Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Morocco, Yemen and other countries eager to cultivate a Jewish state. It served as the central location for the Zionist movement in Palestine and was a hotbed for recruitment into the Haganah (Jewish underground army). “Three months after I had arrived, I was approached by two very serious-looking young men,” says Rabbi Piron. “They asked me if I was ready to join the underground Jewish forces. I told them: ‘I am ready.’”



From left to right, Rabbi Piron, former Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin and former IDF Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur.

Mordechai had been ready since his first night at the school, when an Arab attacker murdered one of the students standing guard for the area. “I remember the boy’s name to this day,” he says. “It made an impression on me; I was willing to do everything I could to help the *Yishuv*.”

Two months later, in the pitch black, a group of Haganah members whisked Mordechai away to a secret location. “They asked me questions [to determine if I was prepared to fight],” he says. “I agreed to everything joyfully.”

Mordechai underwent military training. “I remember when they put my first gun in my hand; I became a different person,” he says. “After [first] coming, just a few months prior, [I had felt] trodden down to nothing from the oppression and brutality in Vienna, [where] I saw Jewish men and women openly kicked down in the streets, forced to wash the pavement, while *goyim* stood around laughing. I no longer felt helpless in the face of murderers. I would be defending the Jewish settlements in Palestine and I was proud to do it.”

At the time, the Jewish population in Palestine was approximately 650,000, while the Arabs numbered more than one million. British rulers clamped down on Jewish immigration. “We were fighting two enemies,” says Rabbi Piron. “The Arabs were determined to drive us into the sea and the British did nothing to prevent it. We were fighting against terrible odds.”

Ever since his arrival in Palestine, a persistent thought had plagued him and only intensified in the midst of the country’s rising tensions: “We had been good citizens in Austria; we identified ourselves with the [surrounding] culture. Why do [the non-Jews] hate us?” The question triggered the realization that although he had received some Jewish education, Mordechai didn’t really know what Judaism was. The answer to his burning question, he thought, could only come through intensive Jewish study.

After completing a year and a half of agricultural instruction at Mikveh Yisrael, Mordechai enrolled in Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav Kook, which he felt best fitted his Zionist fervor. One of thirty *talmidim*, he studied under Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, son of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook. Mordechai also began delivering lectures every Shabbat for Bnei Akiva, a Zionist youth organization. It was at one of these lectures that Mordechai met his future *rebetzin*, Ahuva.

After marrying in 1946, the Piron moved to a modest apartment in Jerusalem, where they hoped to start a peaceful life together in the Holy Land.

Unfortunately, that was not yet to be. In November of 1947, the United Nations adopted a resolution ordering the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, unleashing Arab violence against Jews throughout Palestine. At the time, the standard weapon of the Jewish underground was a domestically produced “Sten” submachine gun. The 9mm bullets needed to operate it were extremely hard to come by, and the British Mandate security forces did everything in their power to ensure that the Jews did not get their hands on ammunition.

Arab militias barricaded Jerusalem, cutting off its water pipe, as well as its supply of food and fuel. “We were surrounded on all sides,” recalls Rabbi Piron.

On May 14, 1948, the fifth day of Iyar 5708, after the Jewish Agency’s Executive Committee ratified the decision to announce the formation of the State of Israel, David Ben-Gurion publicly read a declaration of independence. “We felt like we were in a dream,” says Rabbi Piron. That night, Egyptian bombers attacked Tel Aviv. The armies of Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia all invaded Israel.

Throughout the fighting, Jerusalem remained isolated by an Arab blockade. “The Arabs advanced with tanks at the Gate of Notre Dame,” recalls Rabbi Piron. “A Haganah soldier climbed up on a tower of a church and threw a few handmade grenades on the armored tanks; they never tried that again. In the meantime, we erected defenses; everything was handmade. We had very few weapons and many of them were created in [clandestine] Jewish workshops.”

The Arabs repeatedly attacked armored vehicles transporting supplies

to Jerusalem—inflicting heavy casualties and bringing the residents to the brink of starvation. The trapped inhabitants accessed water from small private water reservoirs found in a number of the city’s houses. “People stood [in] line for water and petroleum

refrain from shooting. Jewish soldiers bringing sacks of wheat flour to the beleaguered city manned the jeeps. Within a few hours, a convoy of trucks arrived with more food. “[The Jewish forces] had constructed Burma Road [a makeshift path through the Judean Hills], so they could enter the city behind the Arab positions,” says Rabbi Piron. “We started eating again.”

While crossing an open area on the way to his defensive position, Rabbi Piron was struck by a ricocheting shell, which fractured his collarbone. Told that he couldn’t fight anymore, he was transferred to the IDF’s *sherut dati*, religious service arm. In that moment, Rabbi Piron went from IDF soldier to IDF rabbi, from defender of Israel to the vital provider of spiritual succor to the defenders of Israel.

The War of Independence ended in January of 1949.

As a result of the fierce battles and brutal civilian attacks, Israel lost more than 6,000 Jews, over one percent of the population of the *Yishuv*.

SPIRITUAL DEFENSE

Rabbi Piron became second-in-command to Rabbi Shlomo Goren in the fledgling Rabbanut Hatzva’it, military rabbinate, until the latter’s retirement from the position in 1968. As head of the army’s department of Jewish education, Rabbi Piron visited different units, particularly before the *chagim*, acquainting and inspiring the soldiers with the beauty of their heritage. In 1969, he was appointed to the rank of *aluf*, general, and became chief rabbi of the IDF.

Although most soldiers were interested in receiving spiritual services, some commanders refused to abide by certain religious regulations, including the requirement that all military kitchens be kosher. “It was something many didn’t understand [the importance of],” Rabbi Piron says.



Rabbi Piron speaks to soldiers on the battlefield during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. “[All we needed was] an ark, a sefer Torah and a tent; whenever the unit moved, the synagogue moved with them,” he says.

for cooking [because the electricity was cut off],” says Rabbi Piron. “Some stood for hours, exposing themselves to danger. The Arabs bombed the city every twenty minutes. Tragically, some were killed while waiting for their portions.” As the food supply dwindled, the inhabitants made soup from wild

“RABBI PIRON KNEW HOW TO TALK TO THEM, TO REACH THEIR HEARTS. I SAW IT ON THEIR FACES.”

grass and weeds. “The situation seemed hopeless,” says Rabbi Piron. “There appeared to be no chance of winning, but we had to keep fighting.”

One night in early June, as Rabbi Piron and his wife stood guard at the entrance of Jerusalem, they saw two jeeps approaching but were ordered to

Rabbi Piron's presence and support had a profound impact on the *dati*, religious, soldiers. During the Yom Kippur War, amid a shower of shelling, he was summoned to the field hospital set up in the desert and was directed to a severely wounded soldier. "Many were wounded by burns, their faces [completely] bandaged, leaving three holes for the eyes and mouth. It was terrible," Rabbi Piron says. "The doctors told me one soldier wasn't responding. They thought I could do something to help. I felt powerless. Then, I noticed a *kippah* on [the soldier's] head, and I started talking [to him] about whether a soldier is permitted [or] not to carry food to the battlefield on Shabbat. I purposely stated that it is forbidden, which is inaccurate. Suddenly, the wounded soldier started to murmur something, and then he said: 'Rabbi, you are wrong.' I restated my position and he kept insisting I was mistaken. Everyone around us was jubilant. I said, 'Okay, maybe you are right.' Ten days later, I visited him in a

hospital. His family embraced me; he had made a complete recovery."

In his role as rabbinic authority on the battlefield, Rabbi Piron often faced difficult halachic dilemmas. "At one point, [the dead bodies of] soldiers who were killed were lying on the ground when Shabbat arrived," he says. "The question was whether to carry them off the field. In the meantime, the shelling continued and wild animals roamed the area. I made the decision to take the bodies to safety; it was a question of honoring the dead and also maintaining identification in the wake of more violence." He later consulted with prominent *rabbanim* who agreed with his *pesak*, halachic decision.

Participating in the liberation of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount during the Six-Day War, in June of 1967, remains a highlight of Rabbi Piron's career. "After the fierce fighting had stopped, the Kotel was [initially] closed to the public; only soldiers could enter," he says. "The area was totally unkempt,

filled with dirt and debris ... [After the area was cleared,] we put up a movable Holy Ark with a *sefer* Torah within, in anticipation of Shavuot, a few days away. At 2 AM, on *erev yom tov*, we opened the area and people started to come. Within an hour, masses of men and women, young and old, approached the Kotel. There were thousands. Some wept openly, others stood stone still, some prayed, and others embraced and [broke into] dance. It was one of the most stirring sights I had ever seen."

THE RABBI'S FAREWELL SALUTE

In 1980, Rabbi Piron resigned from his beloved post as chief rabbi of the IDF. "In the beginning of my tenure, I was a friend to every soldier," he says. "Over time, I became their father. When I realized I had become their grandfather, it was time for me to leave." It was clear, however, that many thought he still had much to offer the Jewish com-

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munity. That same year, Rabbi Piron accepted the position as chief rabbi of Zurich, Switzerland, where he served for more than a decade until his wife, a sabra, said "it was time to go home," he says.

After fifty-five years of marriage, Ahuva passed away in 2001. At eighty-six, Rabbi Piron is far from retired; he has published six books on Jewish philosophy and theology, and heads the Sapir Center for Jewish Education and Culture in Jerusalem, where he also lectures. He resides in Jerusalem, near his two children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, gratified that they are "all going *bedarchei* Hashem."

Looking back sixty years to his original dreams for the Jewish homeland, Rabbi Piron admits to having feelings of disappointment. "In 1948, when we fought for the foundation of the State, it was a desperate struggle," he says. "I and many others thought it would become a state of ethics and spirituality, a light for all peoples of the world. Sadly, this has not been realized." His disenchantment with the country extends to the condition of the military and to the Israeli youth in general. "The army has always been an organization of men and women ready to fight for Israel, and [that] hasn't changed to this day," he says. "We have a modern army much improved in many respects with an extraordinary air force. But, spiritually, it is lacking. The eagerness to know what Judaism means, which I saw in the fifties and sixties and even in the seventies, has diminished. I hope I am mistaken, but it seems to me that material aims and achievements are more important to our youth than spiritual pursuits—and it's happening all over the world."

When Rabbi Piron fought in the army, his deepest wish was that his children would not have to fight in any more wars. This dream, too, was dashed. "My grandchildren are in battle," he says. "God willing, my great-grandchildren will live in a time of peace. The time has come. Let the Almighty send us His help."

Ever the persevering general, he is, however, optimistic about Israel and the Jewish people's future. "I believe the people of Israel will raise the banner of their Jewish heritage; they will come back to Judaism, understanding [the centrality of] Torah and carrying out *mitzvot*. If we, the religious, reach out to them and do it with our entire hearts, then we will succeed."

To each of his posts in life—soldier, rabbi and committed Jew—Rabbi Piron brought a profound and genuine love for his people and his Land. He never gave up his treasured vision of the Jewish homeland, where "people would come to learn from us." More than three decades of defenders of Israel who were touched by the brave and gentle rabbi will attest that during the darkest times of their lives, Rabbi Piron shone a pivotal life-affirming light, reminding them of the sanctity of their *neshamot* and of their mission. **IA**

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