

Speech of the Outgoing IDF Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi

For more than fifty-seven years, I have been a citizen of the State of Israel, nearly forty years a soldier of the state; two years and two months in this important role during a challenging period. The morning of Simchat Torah 5784, October 7th, 2023, divides all of this into two: before and after, and it will never be forgotten. I had the privilege of standing and saying "Here I am" - in both failures, and successes.

Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, ministers, my dear mother – who is representing both my parents, my wife Sharon's parents, General Kurilla - my dear friend, commanders, Eyal and his family, and of course my own family.

Upon beginning my role, there was a dispute within Israeli society. It was not a military or security dispute, but the IDF is the army of the people, and the dispute primarily seeped into the ranks of the reserves. The IDF faced a challenge that threatened its cohesion and unity. The IDF does not have the authority to prevent citizens from expressing their opinions, even if they are reservists when not in active service, but we did not allow them, in the course of fulfilling their roles, to become involved. We received criticism from both sides of the dispute, but we chose to keep the IDF united.

We acted in the spirit of the sources in Tractate Sanhedrin: "Always let the left hand push away and the right hand bring close." With a strong hand, we brought people closer, we did not give up easily on anyone serving, and where necessary, we took clear action and distanced them. This is how it was on October 7th, at 06:29 in the morning, everyone came, the IDF was one. The dispute remained on the margins. We operated, as always, out of responsibility for the security of the state.

When the state you love so much is in danger, there is no place you would rather be than where I was, to lead and to influence. I would have preferred to prevent it. I would have preferred, of course, that none of this had happened. This was under my watch, and what happened is my responsibility, and I bear and will bear it forever.

In the name of responsibility, I also end my role. Of the great words, many of which have been spoken, but their meaning is in the eyes of the beholder.

I see responsibility as a matter of values, not of law. Values are higher than laws. I have always felt my responsibility as the commander of the military, particularly on the day of Simchat Torah. This will stay with me forever. The responsibility to the citizens, to the commanders and

soldiers who fought valiantly and did not return, to those who waited for the IDF that did not arrive, to the wounded, to all of the hostages.

For four decades, I was responsible for some of the achievements that occurred before October 7th and also after - important actions that we took, my subordinates and I. I have always examined responsibility from me downward. I have always believed in backing my people, in teaching and mentoring – to make mistakes, to rise, and to go forward, commanding from the front.

The former Minister of Education, Zalman Aran, used to say that he followed Ben-Gurion with his eyes closed, but from time to time, he would open an eye to ensure that Ben-Gurion himself kept his eyes open.

I have never followed anyone with my eyes closed, but I trusted. I always opened my eyes, and in this way, I also looked at the failure. Those who do not do this will not know how to correct. Last Monday, about 600 senior officers in the IDF gathered to present the inquiries into the events of October 7th. It was a deep, professional, painful, and thorough process. We did not look for excuses.

We presented to the officers of the IDF, we presented to the communities in the western Negev, and to the heads of the councils and localities, we presented to the bereaved families. These were not easy events and they have not finished. This is our moral duty, this is our professional duty.

From now on, every officer and commander must see themselves as if they were personally present on October 7th. This is how we must remember, learn the lessons, and act to ensure that such a day never happens again in the history of the nation.

For many years, the IDF stood firm in its missions. On October 7th, the IDF failed. There was a deep failure here, but it is not correct that such a failure of this magnitude will only be inquired by the IDF and the ISA.

The IDF is part of a system of national priorities, it receives policies and operates according to them. The establishment of a state commission of inquiry is necessary and essential – not to place blame, but first and foremost, to understand the root of the problems and allow for correction.

We saw many acts of heroism on October 7th and in the many months of war that followed. Citizens who went out with a single handgun against terrorists with rifles, citizens who defended their families with self-sacrifice, supreme bravery, and a glory that is magnificent – magnificent because it was required, eternal glory in its values. The courage of commanders and combat soldiers from the security forces and the IDF, who under difficult conditions fought and did everything to stop the massacres.

In this war, IDF commanders led from the front – battalion commanders, brigade commanders, division commanders, and command officers, all were at the forefront with their people. This is the way of the IDF. Thus, we also lost senior commanders in the war, in the name of leadership, personal example, and especially in the name of the great influence of a commander who is at the front – this is right, and it will always be right.

"I swear to be loyal to the State of Israel, its laws, and its governing authorities... and to dedicate all my strength, even to sacrifice my life, to the defense of the homeland and the freedom of Israel." This is the soldier's oath. I have been committed to this every day anew, endlessly committed, even today. Even tomorrow. I have always been loyal to the state. I hid nothing from those in authority over me. I acted with transparency, always putting the good of the state and the public before my own good.

I have never vowed to be loyal to any individual, except one. We are all temporary, the state is more important than us, and therefore our loyalty is always given to it, and to the chain of command, with the IDF being subordinate to the political echelon. I know, Prime Minister, that as one rises in rank, the approval of actions becomes more difficult, and the responsibility heavier. I appreciate the freedom we were given to initiate and act.

The IDF sometimes experiences hostile treatment, before and during the war. It does not help us become better. It can harm the trust of subordinates in their commanders, destabilize parents whose children are risking their lives on the battlefield. The erosion of the IDF will not help motivation or the choice to serve over the years. One does not have to be a combat soldier to express an opinion, but some of those who preach about a lack of courage and determination have never felt the cold trigger at night against an enemy, nor heard the breath of an injured comrade on a stretcher carried through enemy territory. IDF commanders are not heroes in hindsight, and they do not choose to be part of a process based on its success rate. We are responsible for both the good and the bad. We stood next to our people in every difficult event, we experienced hurt with them, and learned with them, we placed a hand on their shoulder and moved forward together.

I have always listened to criticism, especially the constructive kind, to statements from which one can learn and improve. I acted for the greater good with professional integrity, and this is how I leave here today. I lower my head in sorrow towards my people, stand tall in front of our enemies, and lift my eyes with pride to my subordinates – for their bravery, to the wonderful reservists, to the citizens of Israel who sent their sons and daughters to be our soldiers, even after we erred.

I want to speak about my senior subordinates, the major generals, the brigadier generals. About those who ran to the field and back, who moved between planning and implementation, who professionally signed off on the most complicated and dangerous plans. Each of them commands tens of thousands of people. Command is more than management. It involves daily responsibility for human lives and risks. It is a total responsibility, as you know. Each of these commanders developed over years as a field commander. Throughout the war, in my frequent meetings with the field commanders, I knew how much I trusted my subordinates and how important it was for them to feel that. I am certain of their abilities, their values, and their courage, on the battlefield and beyond.

I put myself to the test in every move during this war: I never agreed to send commanders and combat soldiers to a place I was not willing to stand in myself and lead from the front. I never sent anyone on a mission that I was not ready to carry out first. It was my honor to be their commander, and I am prouder of them than I have ever been in my position. I salute the reservists, the commanders, and the soldiers. You jumped into action, before we even called you, and went out to fight. You walked on foot, flew on planes from far beyond the borders of the country, fought bravely over a long period, and I know you will be there whenever needed. You were in Gaza, in Lebanon, and in Judea and Samaria, you were citizens with different opinions - and soldiers with one mission. I salute you and, no less, your families.

I want to hope that the gravity of the moment will help in making brave decisions, which will allow the enlistment of all segments of the population. The IDF is prepared and ready to enlist everyone, and they are needed. In this way, among other things, we will reduce the burden on the reservists.

The war is not over. Victory is a necessary goal, but victory is not achieved by words alone. We have taken the right actions – the Iranian axis is damaged, fragmented, and its security is significantly lower than it was. It has experienced our strength. We have inflicted severe damage on Hezbollah, Nasrallah's absence is notable for the better throughout the region; we have struck significantly in Iran, our capabilities are clear to them, and there is more; we have created a significant Area of Separation in Syria and diminished most of its strategic capabilities; and we are extensively and thoroughly combating terrorism in Judea and Samaria. Hamas is a severely beaten terrorist organization, but we must not stop. It must not rule, it must not rebuild its strength.

All of these together allow us to reshape the region. If we do not connect these achievements to a new reality, they will erode. There will be a good future here, I am sure of this. We must do everything to bring back the hostages, all of them, both the living and the deceased – this is an

essential part of victory. I wish to send condolences from here to the Yahalomi family, who, at this moment, are bringing Ohad to his eternal rest in Kibbutz Nir Oz.

Among the heaviest burdens in the past year and a half were those of the wives of the division commanders, brigade commanders, and battalion commanders, and in general – the wives of all the field commanders. It was never easy, but in war, everything is intensified. I am aware of the worries, the loneliness, the enormous responsibility placed upon you.

On behalf of the IDF and myself – I thank you for the initiative, the assistance, and the support from home. Few know the labor of your days during this period, and your part in the strength of the IDF.

Among the wives of the commanders, I thank mine and thank our children. You stood by my side always and were a source of strength and pride. With humor that contains some truth, you occasionally said, Sharon, that the defense of the country for me is a priority above you. Through a challenging family path, I am so happy that you chose to walk with me. You paved the way for me and lit it up. You agreed to give up large parts of me for the greater good, and from the day the war broke out, you did not give up on yourself.

I know you asked that I not mention it, but I allow myself. You went to every place where there was pain and sorrow. You went to listen, you went to strengthen, even if you heard criticism – you didn't give up. You wanted to hear about the son or daughter. You remember everyone. Every day, you went out and visited every corner of the country, from all walks of life, and came back and wrote to me about the wonderful people here and how many we lost. And amidst the sorrow, you found much good.

Eyal, the IDF is a strong and powerful army. The IDF is also a national army, and this is its strength – in its steadfast and independent stance. It does not belong to a person, but to the nation. Many great and worthy individuals have held this significant position before me. It was my privilege, and now it is yours. Many challenges lie ahead of you, and I believe and know you will overcome them.

Keep October 7th in your mind every day, every hour, as you lie down and as you rise.

I appreciate you, Eyal, and wish you a successful path, filled with meaningful achievements.

I have never liked the spotlight. I have always preferred the depth of the night, to walk quietly, whisper into the communication device, and think clearly.

I am now passing on the command.

If you ever need a soldier for a dark night, I am yours, always.

Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi,
Chief of the General Staff.

