

From Zahav to Paz

Making 5787 a Golden Year

Rosh Hashanah — First Day 5787

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A Year of Paz

The new year is 5787: Tav-Shin-Pei-Zayin. Following the familiar Jewish custom of finding a blessing in the letters of the year, we might read them as: Tehei Shnas Paz - May this be a year of paz, a golden year.

תהא שנת פז

Paz has the gematria of eighty-seven. The Mishnah Berurah notes that Baruch She'amar contains precisely eighty-seven words. He also records an extraordinary tradition: this praise came to the Men of the Great Assembly on a petek, a heavenly note, upon which its words were written.

The Mishnah Berurah connects those eighty-seven words to a phrase in Shir HaShirim:

ראשו כתר פז

"His head is fine gold." Baruch She'amar is the rosh, the beginning and crown, of our daily praises - and that beginning contains the numerical value of paz.

There is something deeper here. Baruch She'amar opens Pesukei D'Zimrah. Ordinarily, zimrah means song. But the Alter Rebbe, in Likkutei Torah, explains that zemer also means to prune or cut away. A vintner does not prune a vine because it is worthless. He prunes it precisely because it possesses life and the ability to produce beautiful fruit. He removes the dry and unnecessary branches so that the vine's strength can flow into what is healthy and fruitful.

Pesukei D'Zimrah performs that work within us. Before we stand before Hashem in the Amidah, we sing about the Creator and the wonder of His world. Those praises prune away the noise, self-absorption and spiritual heaviness that prevent the neshamah from speaking clearly. Baruch She'amar begins the pruning with the declaration that Hashem spoke and the

world came into being. The world is not ownerless; history is not random; and we are not alone.

Every morning, then, we begin with paz. We begin by praising, pruning and uncovering the gold. Perhaps that is also the avodah of the year ahead: to prune away one obstruction, one excuse, one "but," so that the gold already within us can become paz.

It is a beautiful blessing for the year ahead. But it immediately raises a difficult question.

How can we speak about a golden year amid so much antisemitism? Israel remains surrounded by enemies. Lies about Jews circle the world in seconds, while the wicked regime in Iran and its allies threaten Jewish lives. Is Tehei Shnas Paz simply a pleasant slogan, disconnected from reality?

I believe the opposite is true. Paz does not ask us to ignore the darkness. Paz

tells us what can emerge from it.

What Is Paz?

Paz is not simply another Hebrew word for gold. Dovid HaMelech says of the words of Torah:

הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב ומתוקים מדבש ונפת צופים

"They are more desirable than gold, than much fine gold, and sweeter than honey and the drippings of the comb."

Commenting on these words, the Radak explains that paz means:

זהב טוב ונקי

Especially good, clean and purified gold.

Zahav is precious. Paz is precious metal that has been refined.

A Shnas Paz does not necessarily mean a year without challenges. It means a year in which the preciousness within us, Am Yisrael and the world is revealed, as the impurities lose their hold and the gold shines as it truly is.

The Refiner's Fire

The Navi Malachi describes the process:

כי הוא כאש מצרף... וישב מצרף ומטהר כסף... וזקק אתם כזהב וככסף

"For He is like a refiner's fire... He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver... and He shall refine them like gold and silver."

A refiner subjects precious metal to tremendous heat. The fire does not create the gold; it separates the gold that was there all along from the dross mixed into it.

There is a beautiful later mashal told about the refiner. How does he know that his work has reached its purpose? When the surface of the metal has become so clear that it reflects an image.

Refinement reveals what was there all along.

Once the dross is removed, we see our faith, courage, generosity and tzelem Elokim more clearly. The gold was waiting to be uncovered.

We are not asking only for an easy year. Paz requires avodah: tefillah, courage, discipline and achdus. It may be a year of great effort - and therefore extraordinary reward.

Yerushalayim Shel Zahav

In the spring of 1967, Jerusalem was divided. Since 1948, Jews had been barred from the Old City, the Jewish Quarter and the Kosel. They could look toward its walls, dream about it and pray for it, but they could not enter.

Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, asked Naomi Shemer to write a special song about the city for the festival held on Israel's Independence Day. It was not one of the competing entries. It was meant to give voice to Jerusalem itself.

On May 15, a twenty-year-old, almost unknown singer named Shuli Natan stood on the stage with her guitar and sang Yerushalayim Shel Zahav for the first time. Naomi Shemer had written not a song of victory, but a song of longing. Jerusalem was beloved, ancient and golden - yet wounded and incomplete. Its sacred heart remained beyond reach.

Nobody listening that night could have known that twenty-three days later Jewish soldiers would stand at the Kosel. A song written about distance was about to become a song of return.

After the liberation of the Old City, Naomi Shemer added a new verse announcing the Jewish return:

חזרנו אל בורות המים

Something can appear permanently closed, and then open with breathtaking speed. For generations we prayed to return to Jerusalem. Even in May 1967 the dream appeared far away. Then history changed in days.

That was Yerushalayim shel zahav - a golden moment of return. But the year before us asks for even more: paz.

Can the Hatred Disappear?

In 1967, the geography changed. In a Shnas Paz, we pray that humanity itself will change: that the hatred, falsehood and antisemitism surrounding the Jewish people will be burned away.

We cannot imagine how centuries of hatred could suddenly lose their power. But Jews outside Jerusalem's walls could not imagine how quickly its gates would open either.

On Rosh Hashanah we do not merely pray that the Jewish people will survive wickedness. We say:

וכל הרשעה כולה כעשן תכלה, כי תעביר ממשלת זדון מן הארץ

"May all wickedness disappear like smoke, when You remove the rule of evil from the earth."

Smoke can appear thick and suffocating. Yet when its source is extinguished, it can vanish quickly. Antisemitism, the murderous regime in Iran and terrorist movements are not eternal. They are dross, not gold. We pray that Hashem will destroy their power and allow innocent people, including Iranians suffering beneath that regime, to live differently.

We cannot predict how Hashem will do it. But Jerusalem taught us never to confuse what has lasted a long time with what must last forever.

Westmount: From Zahav to Paz

And now we must bring the message home.

Baruch Hashem, Westmount is already zahav. The gold is here. This is a kehillah filled with Torah, tefillah, generosity, loyalty and genuine concern for one another and for Eretz Yisrael.

But even real gold can contain a little dross. We may care while keeping that concern at a comfortable distance. We care - but we are busy. We care - but it is inconvenient. We care - but someone else will take responsibility.

Perhaps the small avodah of this Shnas Paz is to remove one "but."

Refinement takes place when love asks something of us. By surrendering a little convenience, making room in our schedule or accepting responsibility for another Jew, we remove some of the dross.

***Caring is purified when it
becomes something we do.***

That is when caring becomes carrying. That is how zahav begins to become paz.

From October 11 through 18, we will welcome nineteen released Israeli combat soldiers and reservists, accompanied by two therapists, through the Peace of Mind program. It is not simply a vacation or public tribute. The soldiers and their therapists will spend an intensive therapeutic week together, doing serious and private work as the soldiers process what they have carried from military service into civilian life. Our congregation will provide the surrounding circle: homes, meals, transportation, financial support, hospitality, sensitivity and privacy.

These soldiers have already passed through the terrible fires of war. We should never suggest that they needed those fires to refine them. The question is what their experience will bring out in us.

The world gave them the fire of war. We will try to give them the warmth of Shabbos.

Some are opening their homes; others are helping with meals, rides, organization and sponsorship. I thank everyone who has already accepted a part.

I would like every family to find one concrete way to help carry these soldiers. Not everyone can host or give the same amount. But everyone can remove one "but" and take some part in surrounding them with the warmth of a Jewish home and a Westmount Shabbos.

Perhaps, through them, Hashem will refine us as well. We will see more clearly who we are and what this kehillah can become.

A Story Still Being Written

One final chapter of Yerushalayim Shel Zahav was completed only weeks ago - and it brings the story directly into 2026.

On June 6, 1967, the second day of the Six-Day War, a young soldier named Aharon Bar-Oz was serving with a reconnaissance unit on the northern front. He wanted to write to Naomi Shemer, but there was no table and no chair. He asked another soldier to stand in front of him and used the man's back as his writing surface.

He wrote that Yerushalayim Shel Zahav had become part of the soldiers' lives at their outposts. The men could not stop singing it. He even recorded the moment: Tuesday, 9:35. As Israeli aircraft operated over the Golan Heights, Naomi Shemer's song was playing on the radio.

The timing is almost unbelievable. The postcard was written one day before Jerusalem was reunited. Aharon was praising a song of longing without knowing that, by the following day, its meaning would be transformed.

Naomi Shemer did not discard the postcard. She preserved it in her personal archive. Nine days later, she answered Aharon on pink paper, telling him that she was pleased her song had been able to help the soldiers from afar. Aharon framed her reply and hung it on the wall of his home, showing it to visitors through the years.

For fifty-nine years, those two halves of the conversation remained apart.

Then, in 2026, one of Aharon's daughters visited the National Library of Israel on a work tour. The guide reached the Naomi Shemer exhibition and showed the group a postcard written by an unidentified soldier during the Six-Day War. She looked at the handwriting and immediately knew it: "That is my father."

Aharon, now eighty-nine, was finally identified. The discovery revealed that while Naomi Shemer had preserved his postcard, he had preserved her answer. His family gave that response to the National Library, reuniting both halves after nearly six decades.

No literal verse was added in 2026. A human verse begun in war was completed: two people had each guarded the other's words without knowing that history would bring them together.

Something can appear forgotten without being lost. Something can appear unanswered without being unheard.

Not one Jewish tefillah is lost.

For generations Jews prayed for Jerusalem while nothing seemed to change. Then history answered with a return no one could have foreseen.

Today we pray for the defeat of our enemies, the disappearance of antisemitism and a world capable of seeing the Jewish people truthfully. We do not know how that prayer's next verse will be written. But Hashem is still writing the story. Through our tefillos, achdus and responsibility for one another, we will help write it.

May this be the year in which the fire does not consume us, but refines us.

May we become clear enough to see who we truly are.

May the nations become clear enough to see who the Jewish people truly are.

May the dross of hatred and wickedness disappear like smoke.

And just as a generation that sang of an unreachable Jerusalem lived to say, "We have returned," may we live to sing words of redemption that no poet has yet known how to write.

Tehei Shnas Paz - may this truly be a year of paz.

Source Notes

Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim 51:1; Shir HaShirim 5:11; Tehillim 19:11 and Radak; Malachi 3:2-3; Likkutei Torah, Bechukotai 47d, on zimrah as pruning; National Library of Israel materials on Naomi Shemer and Yerushalayim Shel Zahav; Ynet and National Library of Israel reporting on Aharon Bar-Oz, August-September 2026.