

Who will succeed Herzi Halevi?



MIDDLE ISRAEL

By AMOTZ ASA-EL

Of all October 7's countless tragic heroes, Herzi Halevi looms tallest.

Not because of his physical height, though he indeed is usually the tallest person in the room, but because the calamity that befell him on that cursed day and placed him at the epicenter of a national earthquake was by no means his exclusive fault.

Setting aside the politicians' cultivation of Hamas, the military responsibility falls on many generals in a succession of general staffs that failed to imagine, and thus to brace for, a broad-fronted attack of the sort Hamas waged. Even so, Halevi is the one on whose watch this fiasco happened. That is why his resignation is inevitable.

The tragedy is even worse, considering Halevi's personality. Unlike other generals, the former commander of the Paratroopers' Brigade and the legendary commando unit Sayeret Matkal is a truly modest man, besides being a courageous warrior, a born leader, and an erudite thinker, as can be expected from a scion of theologian A.I. Hacohen Kook (Halevi's grandmother was the great rabbi's niece).

The tragedy is even worse than that because of his wartime performance, which has been exemplary. Besides leading from the front and being visibly present among the troops wherever he sends them, once Halevi's IDF began fighting, it proved to be well trained, well equipped, and tactically inventive. When the dust will settle, all will understand that Hamas - having lost more than 15,000 gunmen, thousands of rockets and launchers, and most of its elaborate underground construction - has been stunned.

Now the fighting in Gaza is drawing to a close, and Halevi, being the humble man he is, is considering not whether, but when, to resign. Technically, he should aim for the fall because the Lebanese skirmish can become a full-scale war any day.

Substantively, however, Halevi's successor must be portrayed already now - especially because the names that have so far been touted are the wrong ones.

THREE GENERALS have been mentioned by military correspondents

as candidates for the IDF's next chief of staff.

The leading name is Eyal Zamir, now the Defense Ministry's director-general, but before that the IDF's deputy chief of staff, and before that OC (Officer Commanding) Southern Command. The other two are the current deputy, Gen. Amir Baram, who was previously OC Northern Command; and the current OC Northern Command, Uri Gordin.

All three have rich command and combat experience, but Zamir is more intriguing, not only because right now he is a civilian but also because, unlike the other candidates - who, like Halevi, are products of the infantry - Zamir is a product of the armored corps.

The IDF has been commanded by infantrymen for the past half century, a reflection of the Yom Kippur War's trauma, which has been related to armored corps graduates Haim Bar-Lev, who built the defense line that collapsed on the war's first day; and David Elazar, who commanded the IDF that failed to prevent the war and initially also failed to win it.

This harsh judgment of what happened back then is unfair, but the fact is that armored corps commanders really might be less imaginative than infantrymen. Despite this, Zamir's chances are best, first of all because on October 7 he was out of uniform, and secondly because last decade he served as Bibi Netanyahu's military secretary. Netanyahu trusts him.

Zamir's chances further improve considering the precedent of the Second Lebanon War, after which the resigned chief of staff Dan Halutz was replaced by Gabi Ashkenazi - who, like Zamir, was at the time director-general of the Defense Ministry, and before that deputy chief of staff.

Well, that very precedent should now make us seek the IDF's next commander in other places; not because Ashkenazi was not a good pick but because the problems Halevi's successor will face are entirely different from what the IDF faced in 2007.

THE FAILURE of October 7 ran deep, lasted long, and involved scores of generals over at least a decade.



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Clearly, parts of the high command became ossified. If there is an equivalent in Israeli history to the task that awaits Halevi's successor, it is

the General Security Service the morning after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination.

Back then, the government did something unthinkable: It picked a former commander of the Navy, Ami Ayalon, to lead the Shin Bet's spooks. The Navy's work is about as close to the secret service's work as ballet is to plumbing. Even so, Ayalon did a fine job, as became clear the following decade with the Shin Bet's performance during the Second Intifada.

Open-minded, experienced, inventive, and authoritative, Ayalon

was successful not because he knew the secret service but because he didn't know it, and thus had no commitment to its conventional wisdoms. By the same logic, Halevi's successor should not be a product of the ground forces. Instead, he should come from the Air Force.

Yes, there was the bad precedent of Dan Halutz, a former Air Force commander who as IDF commander failed to properly activate the ground forces during the Second Lebanon War. But that was because his task was to operate the IDF. The military will now need a builder; the operator will be his deputy.

There are four former Air Force commanders younger than 70: Ido Nehushtan, Eliezer Shkedi, Amir Eshel, and Amikam Norkin. Norkin,

at 56, is the only one younger than 60. Maybe this gives him an edge; Ayalon was 51 when he took over the Shin Bet.

Which one of them is chosen is immaterial. What matters is that all four are superb leaders, broad-minded planners, first-rate managers, and daring warriors who know the ground forces well but never belonged to them. They will know how to diagnose the ailments with which the IDF arrived at its worst day, and cure them.

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The IDF's next commander should come from outside the ground forces



IDF CHIEF OF Staff Herzi Halevi attends a changeover of command ceremony at the IDF Central Command headquarters in Jerusalem on Monday. (Oren Ben Hakoorn/Flash90)



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