

May 9, 2008 / 4 Iyar 5768

Dear Friends:

I write to you this Friday morning, May 9, 2008, after an extraordinary experience these last four days in our homeland. Indeed, the last forty-eight hours have been among the most moving and inspiring that I have ever experienced. Forty-eight hours ago, Israel began a twenty-four hour period of mourning, as it recalled each and every one of its nearly 23,000 souls, all our own brothers and sisters, who lost their lives defending Israel against those who seek its destruction or at the evil hand of terror directed against Israeli civilians. During the most recent twenty-four hours, the same country and, in many instances, the very same mothers, fathers, spouses, siblings, and children who mourned just hours earlier their inconsolable losses, joined in celebration of Israel's miraculous rebirth as a modern country, taking pride in its accomplishments in just 60 years of existence.

I've lived in Israel. I've mourned and celebrated before, during 48 hour periods quite similar to the past two days. I've visited cemeteries and lain wreathes before. I've held mothers who have lost sons and daughters to war and terror. And then, I have joined with Israel to celebrate the miracle that it represents. Yet, on this trip, the magnitude of the celebration of Israel's 60th Independence Day that followed immediately subsequent to Israel's 60th Memorial Day commemorations initially left me somewhat paralyzed in my attempt to transition from the latter to the former. Each distinct experience was magnified and complicated not only by six decades worth of remembrance and celebration, but, by the presently concurrent terror wrought by Hamas upon the innocent citizens of Sederot and Israel's entire south-southwest quadrant. Add to this the prospects of a nuclear armed Iran that threatens with annihilation this beautiful miracle of life that I gaze upon this morning from my hotel balcony, as I write to you, and the difficulty transitioning from mourning to celebration seems all the more to be the expected norm rather than the exception.

However, as I joined with our brothers and sisters over the last 24 hours -- Israelis of every color and origin, they appeared not to share my difficulty. And so, as I found my own way from mourning to celebration, I learned some things from Israel and from Israelis that might enrich us each and all, as Jews and as Americans.

To begin, let's consider that, in Israel, military cemeteries exist in almost every municipality and are often among the larger cemeteries in each city. Consider that they are overrun with citizens on Memorial Day (Yom Hazikaron). Consider that youth-groups hand out flowers and bottled water to citizens mourning loved ones, acquaintances, and even strangers, all of whom shared, in their death, one thing in common; their lives were taken because they represented the State of Israel and the Jewish People! Consider that it is hard to find a single extended family in the entire State of Israel that has not known the anguish and horror of losing a soul in the Jewish State's endeavor to shelter its children from the treachery of its neighbors. Consider the ages on the tombstones in the military cemetery, a cemetery reflecting the civilian composition and defensive purposes of both Israel's army and Israel's victims: 66, 4, 62, 38, 18, 2, 14, 19, 21, 18, 20, 18, 10, 6 months ... and this is just one row. No family is left unscathed, as Israel's future has been bled of so much of its promise, thinned by its tragic losses. The mourning is collective; the nation is, for a moment, a loving but deeply wounded family. And then, an entire country swings into celebration. A nation finds its voice in song. It revives itself in dance. The celebration is similarly collective. For a moment in time, Israel is one joyous family, basking in the light of its blessings.

Is Israel escaping its terminal sadness, simply avoiding its tragic losses? Perhaps, but, I believe otherwise; the celebration feels too real. Are Israelis simply so overwhelmed by their losses that all that they have left is the pleasure that can be derived in the present-tense of any given moment? Have they conceded to grief, so much so that they can't dare any longer to squander an opportunity for celebration with another moment's despondence? Perhaps, but, the tears of joy seem as honest and deeply drawn as the tears of sorrow; they seem to derive from the same well-spring - one rich with a history of painfully earned achievements by Jews throughout all time.

Israel's dynamic in this transition from mourning to celebration is unique indeed. Israel does not succumb to tragedy; it holds steadfastly onto life! To begin to understand this dynamic, we might consider Memorial Day and Independence Day in our own country, and how it differs from the Israeli experience. For one thing, the two days are calendared over a month apart in the United States; in Israel, they are separated by one minute. In our country, it is rare that anyone knows a veteran personally, let alone someone who gave his/her life for the safety of our country; as noted above, few Israelis can avoid knowing someone who has given his/her life for their country. In America, shopping, sales, and BBQ's mark both days; in Israel, neither day is materially oriented for the overwhelming majority of Israelis and the spiritual and emotional qualities of each day are entirely distinct.

Consider then that the very reason that Israelis celebrate their Independence with a joy that is, perhaps, rivaled only by Mardi Gras (though, Israel is much safer!) is precisely because Israelis mourn genuinely and deeply the tragic and painful losses of those who have enabled their independence as a nation to succeed and continue. Consider that a society that faces daily threats of death and destruction, and mourns the sacrifices that it makes to guard against these, celebrates intuitively, but, profoundly every breath of life.

My dear friends, my Ner Tamid family, Israel knows that life is not only worth living, but, that, when required, it is also worth dying for! Israelis have been left with no choice but to remember that every single life matters immeasurably, but, that self-sacrifice is sometimes necessary to ensure that others live onward. They know that Freedom doesn't come freely, that there is a price for Freedom and Liberty and that, if Heaven forbid it must be paid, all that is thereby retained and earned must be celebrated by those who are remain to celebrate. And, the lives preserved and freedoms sustained are indeed celebrated and lived onward in the very names and memories of those whose losses are mourned, those who gave everyone else another chance to live more life!

Yes, Patrick Henry's spirit lives on -- here in Israel, alongside David Ben-Gurion's. George Washington's spirit lives on -- here in Israel, alongside Yonatan Netanyahu's; Abraham Lincoln's, alongside Golda Meir's, and so on. To appreciate what is worth living for and to appreciate the value of life, it is necessary, from time to time, to consider what is worth our ultimate sacrifice. A free society that doesn't remember that anything is ever worth dying for is one that has forgotten the essence of that which makes life worth living. In the name of peace and freedom, we might avoid conflict, discomfort, and potential loss. For the stated sake of our children and their future, we might appease for the moment a sworn adversary to freedom. However, we must understand - as Jews and as Americans - that any society that gambles its future to secure its present is usurping Freedom's call for its own narcissistic and temporary benefits. Such a society deludes itself when it imagines that it is preserving a future for generations to come; in fact, such an approach may well lead the society to come to sacrifice its children for the momentary comfort of its parents, a cannibalistic price for an illusion of peace. Israel's grudging resolve to pay the price of Freedom today is therefore, in fact, its insurance policy for a tomorrow. Israel therefore celebrates the future, championing it in the spirit of those who have made it, and continue to make it, possible!

The reflections above, alone, might have constituted a sufficiently meaningful reminder on Israel's part for Jews, Americans, and all citizens of the Free World. However, Israelis model for all of us at least one more vitally important lesson: Israelis remind us that guilt is neither helpful nor productive when remembering those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on their behalf. Israel's alternative to guilt is sincere appreciation.

Israelis feel a deep thankfulness, an enduring and eternal debt of gratitude, to those who have paid Freedom's price, on Freedom's front-line, for all of us in the Free World.

Israelis celebrate Independence Day minutes after the conclusion of Memorial Day because those who paid for Israel's Freedom with their lives would demand nothing less of them -- in their memory!

And so, on Sunday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, back home in our synagogue, we will sing and dance together. We will celebrate 60 years of the extraordinary miracle of the modern State of Israel. And, when we do so, we will be grateful for the many sacrifices that have been made by the sons and daughters of this sacred and beautiful land -- for Israel's sake, for the sake of all Jews everywhere, and to the great benefit of every Freedom-loving human being in the world; we will celebrate, with a depth of joy -- in their memory, as they would want us to do so!

With love and blessings from Israel -- *Shabbat Shalom*,

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Spiritual Leader