

Bringing Smiles to an Israeli Soldier This Holiday Season

After moving to Israel, it was common to receive all kinds of greetings for holidays and birthdays from friends and relatives who we left behind in the “old country.” This was constant for the first year or so, but diminished afterward when our friends and relatives got used to our not being there, and our move to Israel became less novel as we built our new home in our ancient homeland.

I’ll never forget the day the doorbell rang and I answered what looked like a big cellophane-wrapped gift basket on two legs. After relieving the person holding the basket of this gift, my kids descended to unwrap it with glee. We discovered good friends in America had remembered us for Rosh Hashanah. The basket, loaded with goodies, included fresh-baked cookies and snacks. Although my kids remembered the people who sent the gift basket, a couple who were our good friends and their kids who were their playmates, we were all taken by the introduction to the new friend in our life, Gili’s Goodies.

Over the years, we had lots of other opportunities to experience and enjoy Gili’s Goodies. Occasional gift baskets would come our direction for holidays and milestones. We also got to interact with students studying in Israel who anticipated receiving such gift baskets from their families back home to celebrate a birthday or other occasion. I even got to know the man with endless energy behind Gili’s Goodies, David Erlich, who donated snacks for American tourists who came to Israel to give of themselves to help Israelis in a unique and tangible way. It was his way of partnering and saying thank you.

Recently I reconnected with David and heard of an exciting project where he was the vehicle through which nearly 200

people from outside Israel participated to purchase a *lulav* and *etrog* set for soldiers of the Israeli army. The *lulav* and *etrog* are part of the biblical four species (along with willow and myrtle) that are used during Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. It was especially noteworthy that Christians expressed interest in participating in this project, since during Sukkot, Jerusalem is packed with thousands of Christians who come to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles and show their love and support for Israel.

David shared photos and video of soldiers beaming with joy at the gesture of kindness of people they didn't know, from thousands of miles away. It reminded me of my kids' elation with that first Gili's Goodies basket we received years earlier.

Chanukah's overlapping with Christmas this year offers both a special opportunity—and a unique imperative—to bless Israel's soldiers who will not make it home for the holiday. Gili's Goodies is stepping in to make the holiday joyous, even for one far from home guarding a border or manning a checkpoint.

Because Chanukah is eight days long, Gili's Goodies wants to bring joy every night, each night going to a different base and delivering no less than 100 gift packages to soldiers. And because they understand this is a holiday season celebrated by Jews and Christians internationally, for less than \$20, Gili's Goodies is offering people the opportunity to send a gift basket loaded with goodies and greetings from the sender to the recipient. Because of the miracle of the oil associated with Chanukah, it's traditional to eat fried foods. In that spirit, popular jelly donuts will be featured in these special Chanukah gift packages.

In two years, when my son will be serving, I know we'll go out of our way to visit him and bring him treats from home if we can. But the army is not like summer camp. There's not always the time and ability to visit. Soldiers defending our country

don't get a day off as much as parents would like to visit.

So when the Gili's Goodies van drives up, it will bring true joy along with the tasty treats. It's like a sweet, edible hug. If a picture is worth 1,000 words, I can only imagine the words that will be written behind the beaming smiles of young Israeli men and women who receive these packages.

Although my family adopted a lone soldier who has come from overseas without his family to serve in the Israeli army, and we gain pleasure making him feel at home in our house, one can't do too much for our soldiers. So I'm in.

I am buying a gift basket for some other parents' child who won't be home this holiday season, someone giving of him or herself to keep us all safe. Please join me and bring smiles and joy to hundreds, if not thousands, more.

Casting a cloud on the upcoming holidays, Israel has just been through a wave of fires that have brought terrorism to yet another low. Hundreds of fires were set deliberately, burning tens of thousands of acres of forests. This is particularly painful for us as we express our love for the land in so many ways and celebrate Israel's uniqueness as the only country that entered the 21st century with more trees than when we entered the previous century.

In addition to losing trees, many families and businesses lost everything. Their homes and places of business were in the line of the wind-driven flames, burning everything to the ground.

At times of national emergency, soldiers are called upon uniquely to maintain order and protect the people. Overlaid with the added security threats during holiday seasons, this month there's little rest or respite for the weary.

So whether you're in Boston or Boise, New York or Nashville this season. you have the opportunity to bless Israeli

soldiers in a tangible way, to bring joy to their holiday whether they're out in the cold on the border with Lebanon, or guarding a small isolated community, our airspace, coastline or anything in between. {eoa}

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