

If You're Happy and You Know it, Live in Israel

There are a few paradoxes as the World Happiness Report was published this month by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), ranking Israel as the 11th happiest country in the world.

As summarized in the daily Yisrael Hayom, "Israel is caught in an intractable conflict and situated in a region that is crumbling amidst religious extremist violence. And yet, Israelis are among the happiest people on earth."

It's noteworthy that the top 10 happiest countries this year were Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, and Sweden. Comparatively, Israel surpassed the United States (13th place), the UK (23rd), France (32nd), and Italy at 50.

One of the most obvious yet noteworthy things about this is that none of the 10 placing above Israel are countries in an ongoing state of war with its neighbors that see daily threats to the safety and well-being of its citizens much less the threat to destroy their country entirely. I have to believe that there is a statistical way to measure happiness relative to threats, and if that were employed, Israel would be No. 1.

It's important to note this, and hard to think of any major conflict in which these countries ranked above Israel are engaged. But Israel doesn't want to be measured uniquely. Ranking No. 11 out of the entire world is more than just fine. We just want to live, and obviously to live happily. And we do.

Hardly a day goes by on one of my speaking tours in North America or subsequent emails, when I am not asked in one incarnation or another, something like "Isn't Israel

dangerous?" The question is understandable based on how Israel is represented in the media as the center (if not, falsely, as the cause of) a deadly ongoing war, almost as if there's a battle on every street corner. These are not just academic questions posed to me.

Sometimes it's stated (nicely), and sometimes it's implied, that I must be crazy or brave (or both) to live in Israel, much less to raise my children here and expose them to the threats we face. This often accompanies an explanation why the person asking the question is afraid to come visit.

But here's the thing, and a paradox indeed. The threats we face are real, albeit over reported and without context or caring about accuracy. I don't diminish that. Three dozen have been killed in terrorist attacks in Israel over the past several months, hundreds hurt, and thousands are traumatized. Nevertheless, the level of personal safety that we feel is high. Despite these threats and others, Israel is an incredible place to live and raise children.

Part of the reason I wanted to live in Israel was from my first trip here as a teen where somehow I perceived that Israel was a wonderful place to raise children. How I perceived that then, as a child myself, remains a mystery. But I remember feeling it, I remember that being a factor in my waiting to raise my family here, and indeed it's played out. My kids are very happy, and life is imbued with a sense of purpose. Being in the homeland that God promised to Abraham and his descendants, meaning us, doesn't hurt either.

Perhaps understanding some of the paradox as to how happy we are is in the very reality of the threats we face. With nothing scientific to back me up, I would argue that in part it's the challenges we face that underscore our purpose and therefore help us enjoy, appreciate, and give meaning to our lives. In short, perhaps the challenges make us value all the more that which we do have, and make us happier for it. What

do you think?

Professor Jeffrey Sachs, head of the SDSN and special advisor to United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, reflected on what this might mean. "There is a very strong message for my country, the United States, which is very rich, has gotten a lot richer over the last 50 years, but has gotten no happier. For a society that just chases money, we are chasing the wrong things. Our social fabric is deteriorating, social trust is deteriorating, faith in government is deteriorating."

That's not to say that Israelis don't chase money, but we don't "just" chase money, and have a clear set of values that just happen to be biblical that ground us. As a result of the SDSN surveys, some countries have appointed Happiness Ministers, to enhance quality of life.

But the fact that this year's survey was released in the Jewish month Adar, during which we celebrate the festival Purim, is no coincidence. Adar is known as the month of happiness, during which it's common to hear the Talmudic phrase spoken and sung (in Hebrew) daily, "whoever enters the month of Adar grows in happiness."

Who needs a Happiness Minister when we have a month dedicated to happiness, and countless festivals and other celebrations that give our lives meaning.

Also unique to Israel, the survey also aims to rate how people have "someone to count on in times of trouble." This is a hallmark of Israeli society so much so that Israelis often turn to total strangers for help with a variety of things. Where hitch-hiking with strangers is still considered a safe and viable mode of transportation. With values relating to a near universal draft and sense of national service are imbued from youth. That people have someone to turn to, to rely upon, may be a contributing factor that's unique in Israel. It makes me happy just thinking about it.

Since the publication first launched in 2012, Israel has seen its place rise from No. 14, and hold firm at 11th place for three years in a row. By way of comparison, Israel's happiest closest geographical neighbors were ranked 80 (Jordan), 93 (Lebanon) and 120 (Egypt).

So if you're looking for a great and happy place to visit, come visit Israel. And if happiness is not your thing, try Madagascar, Tanzania, Liberia, Guinea, Rwanda, Benin, Afghanistan, Togo, Syria and Burundi which rounded out the bottom 10.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for 's Standing With Israel. He can be reached at FirstPersonIsrael@.