

Israelis: Don't Worry, Be Happy

On the Jewish calendar, we are entering the month, Adar, during which we celebrate Purim, the victory of Esther and Mordecai over the evil Haman, some 2,500 years ago, and recounted in the book of Esther.

Because of Purim, Adar is a month filled with joy. Our tradition is "From the Beginning of Adar-Rejoicing Increases!" This is played out in our actions, celebrations and song.

While we hope that life is always filled with joy, and even among trying times there are always things to celebrate, Adar makes us seek these out and highlight them. In this context, two thoughts came to mind.

(By the way, I have loved receiving feedback over the months of writing these articles and was wondering what brings you joy at this season and in your life in general. Please write to me and share your thoughts at firstpersonisrael@.)

A few months ago, Israel was ranked 11th as among the most happy people/countries in the world. The UN-commissioned world happiness report listed only 10 countries in which the citizens are happier. For some, this will sound like a paradox, almost justifiably, as it's most common in the media to depict Israel simplistically as a place of conflict, war and terrorism.

Indeed, every time I travel to the U.S. to speak in churches, on TV and radio programs, and in other venues, I am asked, "Isn't it dangerous in Israel?" The idea of threats we face (which are real and I do not diminish) and Israelis being among the happiest in the world on the surface does seem like there's a conflict.

The truth is, I am happier here. My kids are happy. We have a great quality of life, and I perceived that as a kid in high school myself, which became one of the driving factors in my moving to Israel. But not wanting to write just about how great my life is in Israel, I asked friends what they thought. Did they agree with the survey's results? If so, why?

The following is not scientific but gives a sense of why the survey got it right. Why are we happy? Here's why:

- We merit being here after 2,000 years in Diaspora.
- The people we see daily are Jewish and also love being in a Jewish country.
- We are home.
- The majority of Israelis are religious to some degree, even if just traditionally. Religious people are happier because belief in God gives people hope when times are tough, and when things are good it reinforces your faith.
- We have a sense of national purpose that many Western nations have lost.
- For some it is related to the religion, but even secular Zionists feel that just being in Israel, they are doing something good and it makes them happy.
- We believe in the future—that is why we have so many babies.
- The country is full of life. People do things here. They do things with their families. Have you ever noticed family events involve children, parents, grandparents and sometimes even the great grandparents?
- The Israeli economy and security situation have been improving very fast since the second intifada. As long as things are improving, people are happy. It doesn't matter how much money you make; as long as you make a little more every year, you feel like you are making progress and succeeding.
- Israel is a place where it's easy to be happy—it's a

very beautiful country with a very diverse population.

- The beaches are amazing. The hikes up north are breathtaking. The weather is beautiful. No snow storms, no hurricanes, and no rain for half a year.
- Every six months there are festivals when the whole country goes on *tiyulim* (hikes through the land). And usually people take another vacation as well in the summer.
- The food in Israel is healthy and delicious. This might seem like a minor thing, but I just bought a whole bag of grapes, and they are so delicious I literally started laughing. I never had fruit like this in America.
- We lend one another mutual support institutionally, as we are a culture wherein people will tell you to put a hat on your kid and a clerk can bend the rules if you're in need of help.
- Israel is a culture that supports families and family life.
- We feel connected to each other, to our history and to traditions. We are not anonymous. When you hear the weather report, it's for the whole country. We're a whole.
- Here we have meaning from our collective past, from our history, from having a bit of struggle, from seeing miracles as part of our survival to see the Jewish dream materialize and us being a part of it.
- Actually things are pretty good here—or at least things are pretty bad everywhere else. We are glad we don't live in Greece or Detroit, for example.
- We'd rather our Arab neighbors kill each other rather than killing us.
- Barack Obama is making Netanyahu look good by contrast.
- I am far happier here than in the U.S.
- Overseas, people focus on images and the outward appearance of greatness and beauty. I'm not against any of those, but when living like that, it's hard not to value those things out of proportion to their

importance.

- I spent 15 years in orchards in Gush Etzion, and there's a prophecy in Ezekiel that says that when the mountains of Judea produce fruit in abundance, then that's the indicator that the redemption is near. I've been privileged to have been a part of that.

I am nearing my 10th anniversary in Israel and would add one point personally. While Israel is a place that's been a refuge for Jews fleeing hatred and persecution in countries around the world, it's also a magnet for people like me who look to move up, spiritually and qualitatively. The word to move to Israel is *Aliyah* which means "to go up," reflecting this reality.

Finally, going back to Purim and the Book of Ruth, one sentence from 2,500 years ago still resonates today: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, be of the seed of the Jews, you shall not prevail against him, but shall surely fall before him" (Esth. 6:13).

Happy Purim and a joyous Adar.

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