

Israelis Salute Fallen Heroes

A two-minute siren sounded throughout Israel at 11 a.m. on Monday morning as Israelis stood in silence to remember and mourn the 23,085 soldiers who have fallen in the nation's defense since 1860. Israel's Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terrorism Remembrance Day began with a one-minute siren at 8 p.m. on Sunday night, followed by an official state memorial ceremony at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke at the state service held Monday at Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

"Last week I met with a group of young children and teens who lost their fathers in battle. To me, these wonderful children represent our family—the family of grief—a tribe made up of Israelis from all walks of Israeli life, Jews and non-Jews, whose lives have been touched by grief. I looked at these children and I thought—they are so young. So young, and already they have to carry the burden of grief."

He spoke of his brother, Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, a commander in the Israel Defense Forces' elite commando unit Sayeret Matkal, who was killed in 1976 during Operation Entebbe in Uganda. "One of the boys asked me, 'how do you deal with the loss of your brother?' I told him that with all honesty, I don't know how to give anyone advice on how to deal with such a loss. 'Mom says that we have to move on,' another child said to me. It reminded me of my mother's heroism, having to cope with the loss of her eldest son, and I said to him: 'Your mother is a hero.'"

"Another child asked me, 'Did it make you stronger?' I stopped for a moment and then I said, 'In a way—yes. Because nothing can compare to this kind of pain.' Some of the children did not want to speak at all. I told them that I understood them, because talking about the loss can sometimes be too emotional

and too difficult.”

“We know this pain will never go away, that this wound can never heal. Maybe, the answer to death is life itself,” Netanyahu said. “Our lives, each and every one of us, and the life of this people and this nation. Facing the threats we do now, the IDF is stronger than ever. We will continue to strive for peace with our neighbors and we will continue to protect our country. But we must always remember that we would not be here without the men and women who gave their lives to protect us.”

“We must always remember that Independence Day, the very independence that we celebrate, was achieved by our fighters—those who survived the battles and those who gave their lives. With hearts bursting with pride and with tears in our eyes, we salute our fallen soldiers. Our beloved heroes of Israel.”

The service was followed by a ceremony honoring the 2,493 civilians, including 120 foreign nationals, who were killed in terror attacks since Israel’s inception.

Speaking at the service, Netanyahu said: “The Zionist endeavor is soaked with the blood of terror victims. The names of these terror operations change but their aim remains clear—to kill us, to rattle our safety and security and to drive us from this land, our land. The terrorists believe that the end justified the means, but we will not give in and we will not give up.”

“We will always strive for peace with our neighbors but we will seek retribution for our victims. We will find [the terrorists], wherever they are, and we will defeat them. This terror is man-made and we will defeat it. We will continue to build in our land, to prosper, and our national strength will get us through every fight.”

On Sunday morning, Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon’s told

bereaved families: "With great pain and relentless longing we see the lives of those who paid the ultimate price—family, friends, brothers in arms—flash before our eyes."

"With their deaths they did more than bequeath us life – they gave us the right to fight for our existence here; the right to have independence in this land; to reach milestones only a few nations do; the right to be a part of this wonder called the State of Israel, which after 65 years of independence and hundreds of years of persecution against Jews, for nothing more than being Jews, has turned into a role model for the entire world."

Ya'alon stressed that "the battle, unfortunately, is far from over. It takes on new shapes and places, making us fight over and over again and sacrifice our finest sons and daughters. We are a peace-loving nation. We have been and we will be, but we will not compromise our safety and security and we will cut off the hand that tries to harm us."

Also on Sunday, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz issued a special Memorial Day order to the IDF: "For 65 years the State of Israel has been made to fight and win. Each generation has carried the mission of Israel's defense on its shoulders and each generation, unfortunately, has known the pain of fallen soldiers."

"Faced with an enemy who targets our nation and its civilians, an enemy who does not accept our existence in this land, we have only one option—to fight and win. Faced with the threats evolving around us, the IDF is ready. We will continue to hunt down those who seek to harm us and we will defend the State of Israel with resolve," the order said.

"Our hope is that the family of grief will grow no more, and as we usher in Israel's 65th Independence Day, we all pray for peace and security. We, the soldiers and commanders of the Israel Defense Forces will continue to stand guard of this

nation and its people until the days of peace arrive.”

Gantz also spoke at Sunday’s state service at the Western Wall: “If it seems that the enemy is no longer knocking on our doors—don’t let the quiet fool you. A storm of threats is brewing beneath the surface and a courageous and insistent battle is being waged, constantly, on our borders and far from them, for the security of Israel.”

Fallen Israeli soldiers “have achieved eternity. They are forever embedded in the character of this country,” the chief of staff said.

Addressing bereaved families at the ceremony, President Shimon Peres said: “Here, before you, words are lost. Your routine lives will never be like ours. There are no words that can heal the pain. You the parents, the fiancés, the children, the brothers and the sisters – you are the real heroes of life.”

“The Israel Defense Forces is ready and prepared for any threat, against any danger,” Peres said. “Our enemies have tested this. They should not err again.”

“It is our duty to spare no effort or cost to eliminate war from the land and to bring security and peace ... Israel is as dear to us as the bravery of her fighters, and as dear as the depth of the sorrow for each fallen soldier. Here, next to the sacred stones of the Western Wall, I say on behalf of all of Israel, that you, the fallen of Israel’s wars deserve eternal glory and our ultimate gratitude.”

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