

Keeping the Heart of Israel Beating

I don't recall her name, but I will never forget the encounter I had with a woman visiting Israel in July 2006. The anniversary of our meeting always reminds me of the experience, what Israelis went through that summer, and ongoing and wider implications today. I think of her as "Sarah," matriarch and protector of the Jewish people.

Earlier that year, I launched a program to proactively bring Americans visiting Israel to donate blood. Little did I know then the nerve (or more accurately, the vein) it would touch and what a success "Gift From the Heart" would become. I coined the phrase "The best gift to bring home is the one you leave behind" and other seasonal and holiday-themed marketing ideas that would bring thousands of Americans and others to donate blood. One of Israel's daily newspapers picked up on the trend and called it "Israel's newest tourist attraction."

On July 9, 2006, I arranged a blood drive for a tourist group of hundreds of people in a classy five-star hotel. The hotel pulled out all stops and provided abundant refreshments, all for free because they, too, wanted to share in this special event. The mood was truly festive, and it overwhelmed me how dozens of people gave of their time, and of themselves physically, to go out of their way to donate blood when they could have been out shopping, swimming or at any of the limitless religious and historical sites.

About halfway through the afternoon, a woman came up to me with the Hebrew questionnaire in her hand. Usually that meant the person had questions about how to fill out the form. Instantly, she became animated, even agitated, waving her hand with the form in it, and the other to balance the waving of the one with the form, to accentuate the passion of her words.

"I only want to donate blood to go to the brave soldiers of the Israeli army," she emphasized, as if to suggest it wasn't worth her time if it wasn't going to a soldier, complementing the public awareness that Israeli soldiers selflessly give of themselves to defend the land.

I remember my reply, all the more impressive now given how new the "Gift From the Heart" blood donation program was: "Israel's national blood service provides 100 percent of the blood to the IDF in the event that there is a soldier injured, but also provides 97 percent of the blood in the country to save lives of all Israelis. Thank God, things are quiet now but if there were a need, you can be sure your blood will go to a soldier."

As I spoke, I thought to myself how admirable her intention was, but that *all Israelis* need the benefit of a safe and plentiful blood supply. My words were sincere and designed to get her to donate all the same. I didn't want her to walk away. Comforted by my assurance, she filled out the form and joined the line of people waiting their turn.

The blood drive ended, a great success, and I packed up and went home, happy and proud. In only a few months, the idea of Americans donating blood in Israel had taken off, and this one set an early record for the largest number of Americans donating in Israel at one time.

Barely had the good feeling of the success of July 9 passed when three days later, my words from that day became prophetic. On the morning of July 12, an Israeli patrol along the Lebanese border was attacked by a brazen incursion from Hezbollah terrorists, leaving soldiers dead on the scene, and two soldiers kidnapped and held for ransom, only to be returned years later, dead, and clear that they were killed in action from injuries suffered on the scene.

This became the trigger for what's called the Second Lebanon

War, leaving 44 Israeli civilians and 119 Israeli soldiers dead. During the monthlong war, nearly 4,000 rockets landed on Israel, more than 900 in urban areas. An additional 4,262 civilians were treated in hospitals. Six thousand homes were hit, 300,000 residents displaced, and more than a million people were forced to live in shelters. Almost one-third of Israel's population—more than 2 million people—were directly exposed to the missile threat. (Click [here](#) to see a moving video, "Roy's Story.")

By the time the July 9 blood drive was done, the blood arrived at the national blood center and was processed over two days, July 10 and 11. By the time it was ready to be sent to a hospital somewhere in Israel, it was July 12, the first day of the war. We don't know for sure who received "Sarah's" blood, but it's probable that it went to a soldier, just as she had pleaded.

A year ago, it seemed as if war with Iran was imminent. Today, while that's less so, what I have learned is that while it may be quiet today, we literally don't know what tomorrow may bring. For that reason, maintaining and preserving Israel's precious blood supply is a must.

It's why "Gift From the Heart" took off and became so popular and why people throughout the U.S. who have a heart for Israel have joined Heart to Heart, the innovative "virtual blood donation" program I was blessed to establish. This way, both individuals and ministries everywhere can participate and partner, to be sure Israel's blood supply is always safe and abundant, even from the comfort of their own home, thousands of miles away.

I pray that Israel will never have the need to provide blood to soldiers again as we did in 2006. But, not knowing what may come, I am comforted by the "outpouring" of love and generosity to support Heart to Heart, and that if there is ever a need, the millions of people praying for us and helping

to save lives through Heart to Heart is, well, heartwarming.

At a blood drive in Jerusalem some time after the 2006 war ended, another woman summed up the emotion and experience so well: "My heart is in Israel, and now my blood is too."

Jonathan Feldstein is the director of Heart to Heart, a unique virtual blood donation program to bless Israel and save lives in Israel. Born and educated in the U.S., Feldstein emigrated 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.