

Lone Soldiers Earn Countrymen's Love and Respect

It's long been said that Israel's greatest natural resource is its people. Even with the discovery of large natural gas and other mineral resources, this is very much the case in many ways.

One of the ways this is most realized is in our military. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is a people's army. It's rare to find an Israeli, particularly a Jewish Israeli, who hasn't served or have a relative (child, parent, etc.) who hasn't served. Military service is very personal for Israelis.

Shortly after moving to Israel, I went to the IDF induction center and presented myself ready to sign up. I was a few weeks past 40. The person before me was half my age. He looked perplexed, reviewed my papers and asked, "At your age?"

With the swift impression of a rubber stamp on the papers I brought, I was exempted from military service. I would make other efforts to serve, but because of my age, this reminded me of the Groucho Marx line that said, "I'd never want to be a member of a club [in this case, army] that would have me as a member."

When Israelis look at the young men and women on the front line of our defense, we look at people who could be our kids. As much as the young men and women of the IDF protect Israel, Israelis always are concerned with the protection and well-being of the soldiers.

Most synagogues add special prayers on Shabbat (Sabbath) for the well-being of the soldiers—not just because it's the right thing to do, but because it's very personal. Most Israelis were, are or will be soldiers in the IDF.

Serving in the army is far from summer camp, but underscoring the notion of a people's army, the IDF has "parents' day," where families go to visit their children on bases throughout Israel. It's just like visiting day at camp, sort of.

Recently, "N," the eldest son of close friends in the U.S., moved to Israel and enlisted with the IDF in a famed combat unit. Because he grew up overseas and immigrated on his own, he is considered a "lone soldier." He represents a growing trend of young men and women leaving behind the lands of their birth and planting themselves in Israel to build theirs and our future.

Lone soldiers are "adopted" by families so they can have a respite of short and well-deserved breaks from their service, spend a Shabbat unwinding and relaxing in a home, do laundry and have others to look out for their well being and needs, just as any native-born Israeli would have his or her family look out for their own kids. "N" has two adopted families—mine and other close mutual friends. He's always taken care of, knowing he always has a place to call home.

Previously, we also adopted a young man from Hungary who left the growing anti-Semitism there to plant his destiny in Israel and be part of building a future for himself in his homeland. Though we only met him once, he became like family. He's finished his service now, but he always knows he has a home with us.

In the summer of 2006, the Second Lebanon War placed my family's summer vacation in the north of Israel at jeopardy. Hostilities ended the week before, and hotels and resorts, which had largely closed or were being used to house troops coming back from Lebanon for a respite, started to reopen.

My kids were nervous, but we went anyway, thinking it was important to show solidarity and spend some money in communities that had been hit hard. We had a great time.

One day, I loaded up the van with cases of soft drinks and packed the kids in for what my father called a "mystery ride." Setting out from our Galilee hotel, I knew the direction we were headed but not where we'd end up.

As we headed north, the older kids got a sense that we were heading in the direction of the Lebanese border. Being well aware that this was real and not an amusement park, that military personnel and hardware were still visible at almost every turn, they protested. I continued to drive.

I drove as far as I could, passing signs pointing in the direction of the border, until two soldiers stationed on a dirt road that must have been yards from the actual border fence stopped us. My kids were not happy.

"Are we there yet?" was replaced by "Can we leave now?" The soldiers had no idea who we were or what we wanted, but they told us we couldn't continue. Opening the back of the van, I started pulling out case after case of drinks. It was blazing hot, and these two soldiers were dumbfounded.

I told them we had just come to find them and bring these drinks so they could stay cool and hydrated. They were jubilant. Their smiles alone were all the thanks that were needed, but they did more. They scraped together some spent bullet shells and gave them to my kids as souvenirs. Almost as quickly as we arrived and I unloaded the drinks, we left.

On the way back to our hotel, I was pleased to see that the kids got it. Though they had been nervous about going to the north to begin with—and to the border, when their crazy father told them they were going for a ride—now they understood. They felt good about what we did. I didn't need to add much to the lesson, other than making it clear that when their siblings are in the army, and eventually their own kids, this is exactly what they are going to do. It was one of the best lessons in the civics of raising immigrant kids in Israel that

I could have given them.

Native Israelis know what to do for their soldiers instinctively. New immigrants like us have to learn the system. Lone soldiers are caught in the middle. So, we adopt them as our children. We go to their “parents’ day” on base. We go to their induction ceremonies. We feed them and do their laundry. We give them a place to call home and to lie down and sleep when they get their well-deserved time off.

We do these things because, whether they are born into our families or not, they are our sons and daughters, and they are the protectors of Israel. The army provides the basics and we, their families, help make it more comfortable, show them our appreciation, and pray for them as we realize that they literally are serving to defend us and our future.

There are many ways to help and support. Soldiers love to get letters of encouragement from people overseas. They often need personal supplies and creature comforts that make their service more pleasant. There are organizations that provide an array of services to help our boys and girls in uniform. If you’d like to help, please email me at firstpersonisrael@.

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