

Memorial Day in Israel Actually Means Remembering Those Lost

In modern Israel's short history, we have suffered the loss of 23,320 victims of war and terror. In a country of 8.3 million people that started out 67 years ago with just 600,000, (then, losing a full 1 percent of the population in its first war), this is a huge proportion.

In the past year, 116 new names were added to the list. But they are not anonymous people. Israel is a small country and it's rare to find an Israeli who is not directly touched by the loss of a relative or loved one. They are our sons, daughters, parents, neighbors, students, teachers and even rabbis.

This week we observe Memorial Day. Most of the day I walk around with a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye.

It's a solemn day full of sadness that's balanced by stories of heroism and selflessness. I've spoken in many churches about this, and one of the things I have shared and still find fascinating and special is that Memorial Day is truly meaningful here and there is a sense of national mourning. There's no public entertainment. Restaurants and cafés close. Memorial ceremonies take place throughout the country. Two minutes of silence are observed when air raid sirens wail during the day.

By contrast, in America at least, we are used to Memorial Day being the start of the summer with a long holiday weekend marked by sales and shopping. I've even been in stores where people wished me a "Happy Memorial Day" after making a purchase! Oy vey.

Our media reflects our heart. Radio stations air interviews with families of victims and play mournful music. Unfortunately, we have more than our share of these that make up the fabric of our culture. Our TV broadcasts stories about those lost and appropriate movies. Watching these is inspiring and sad at the same time because so many of those lost were remarkable and inspiring people whose lives were cut short at the hands of our enemies. We weep and pray and try to understand why.

Imagine solemn national mourning across America where victims are remembered and respected, where commercial TV reflects this either because society demands it or to make an important social statement, and where radio stations broadcast music that's appropriate in theme rather than "the top 1,000 songs of all time."

Perhaps it's a sign of having lived in Israel long enough that the loss of some of the victims hits very close to home.

Three teenage boys were kidnapped and murdered on June 12 from a bus stop near my home, down the road from my daughters' high school, Gil-Ad Shaer, Naftali Frenkel and Eyal Yifrah. One boy was my next door neighbor's nephew and an American citizen.

Among soldiers killed in last summer's war with Gaza, two were American immigrants like my family, Sean Carmeli from Texas and Max Steinberg from LA. Despite being known as lone soldiers, meaning that they had come to Israel on their own and left families behind, they were not alone. More than 50,000 people attended their funerals.

When the war started, my daughters listened to the hourly news reports with a sense of anxiety and fear that one of their friends might be among the victims at any time. Early on in the war, Yuval Hyman, a 21-year-old talented cadet in the Paratroopers course, from our town was killed. It hit home literally as he grew up with my oldest daughter and her

friends.

Another young soldier, Yishai Shor, who had been a volunteer in Israel's national ambulance service, was killed. Though I never knew him, from working with people who did, I have heard he was a particularly exemplary young man, always steeped in religious studies and helping others.

Israel was horrified when four rabbis, Moshe Twersky, Avraham Shmuel Goldberg, Kalman Levine and Aryeh Kupinsky, were literally butchered to death while praying in a Jerusalem synagogue, one of the most grotesque of recent terrorist attacks. Three of the rabbis were Americans. Together they left behind 24 children.

A Druze Israeli Arab police officer, Zidan Nahad Seif, was shot in the head by one of the terrorists at the synagogue after murdering the four rabbis. People think that a Jews and Arabs can't or don't get along. That's not the case, and is exemplified by Officer Seif putting his life on the line to protect Israeli Jews, and the outpouring of Jewish support for his widow and orphan baby.

Dalia Lemkus, 26, was waiting at a bus stop for a ride home to her town near mine, coming from a day at work helping special needs children. A terrorist tried to run her over with his car, and then repeatedly stabbed her to death in cold blood.

I was traveling when two soldiers were killed by Hezbollah terrorists on January 28. When I heard the news I went online and was shocked and saddened to see photos on every website of friends comforting their daughter who had just buried her husband, Yochai Kalangel. Days earlier he came home to celebrate their daughter's first birthday, just months before she was due with their second child. An officer, he was mourned by his soldiers and friends who shared stories of his giving money to junior soldiers who didn't have enough from his own small salary.

Through my work with Heart to Heart, , providing resources for Israel's national ambulance, EMS and blood service, I was especially moved by the memorial ceremony at the national blood center. Providing 100 percent of the blood for Israel's soldiers and 97 percent of the blood for the public, Israelis literally can't live without it, especially during times of war and heightened terrorism.

As Memorial Day ends, and millions of Israelis' deep emotional wounds that have been opened again begin to heal, again, Israel does something unique. The grief of Memorial Day is replaced by the joy of Independence Day. One is inseparably tied to the other and we can't appreciate one fully without the other.

I've been in Israel long enough to hope and pray that enough is enough—that next year, no new names will be added to this list. But I've also been here long enough to know that's probably not likely.

Please join me in praying that in the coming year there will be no new victims. But if there are, let us pray that the ambulance arrives in time and, when there's a need for blood, there's always more than enough to save the lives of those in need.

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