

On Israel's Independence Day, Let's Remember the Quest for Freedom Is Never Finished

In so many ways, Israel is a land of miracles. We have made the desert bloom. We are an oasis of freedom in a region of despotic nations. We make great technological and medical advances and share these achievements with the world. So many beautiful and amazing things happen here.

All of this could only have come about because we are a free, sovereign, secure Jewish nation. And the cost for this freedom, sovereignty and security has been high. People had to fight, and die, to protect our right to live here. And the recent threats by Iran's defense minister to "take out Haifa and Tel Aviv" remind us that the threats to Israel's very existence continue—despite the remarkable achievements we've had in the past year securing peace deals with our neighbors.

We've recently observed two very different holidays that speak to both the cost and the blessing of living in Israel. The first of these, *Yom HaZikaron* (Israel Memorial Day), reminds us that we are only able to live freely in this land because of the real sadness, real pain and real sacrifice of others.

Every Israeli has been touched, or knows someone who has been touched, by the harsh realities of terrorism and war. One of my neighbors, an elderly woman who my children call "Grandma," had a son named Amos who was killed in one of the many wars Israel has had to fight to defend itself. Each time we enter her house, we see pictures of Amos and feel the pain of his loss in a deep and personal way. We remember him through the stories his mother tells about him.

Sometimes Grandma laughs so hard when she remembers how Amos used to make jokes, always kiss her goodbye and be the first

to help others in need. But that laughter always turns into tears. Looking out our window, we see her mourning on Memorial Day. And indeed, we mourn with her, along with the entire nation of Israel, which mourns each fallen hero as one of their own.

On *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Israel Independence Day), which falls on the day after *Yom HaZikaron*, we will think again of Amos, who fell too soon. Because if it were not for him and thousands more like him who served our country so selflessly through the 73 years of Israel's existence, there would be no Israel Independence Day.

On *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, we remember both those who died for our freedoms and the high ideals that these freedoms are based on, which are enshrined in words penned by the Jewish leaders who gathered in 1948 in Tel Aviv to announce the birth of the Jewish state. The state of Israel, they wrote, "will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice, and peace taught by the Hebrew prophets." It would extend a hand to neighboring states "and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people."

And what a miracle that much of this prophetic vision has come to pass! In Israel, freedom of religion is written into law and respected in practice. Israel is a democratic, multi-ethnic state. It is a state whose founding citizens transformed barren desert into productive farmland. It is a state that has always sought peace and cooperation with its neighbors—and despite Iran's continued hostility, with the unprecedented peace accords signed between Israel and several Arab states in the past year, it seems that dream may finally be unfolding.

Though we are a people who have always faced anti-Semitism and persecution, we've kept alive the vision and dream of peace,

and the prayer for peace has never left our lips.

For my family, *Yom Ha'atzmaut* is also a time to reflect on our own return to the land. My husband and I made *aliyah* to Israel 16 years ago, as new immigrants tentatively stepping into the unknown. Today, we are proud citizens completely in our element in our ancestral home. I marvel at how our four children were born in Israel and regard Hebrew as their mother tongue. We hike where our forefathers walked; we eat from the seven species of the land, and we recognize that we are living in the times of which our ancestors only dreamed. God has done wondrous things.

It's become a cliché to note that "freedom is not free," but history tells us that it's true. And so, on this Independence Day, as we rejoice and celebrate the blessing of living in Israel, we will remember the fallen. We will pray for consolation for those they left behind—the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters who have a gap in their lives that can never quite be filled. And we will pray that the day the prophet spoke of will soon come to pass, when the nations will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks," and a true spirit of peace, cooperation, and understanding will cover the land—and the world.

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Yael Eckstein is the president and CEO of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. In this role, Eckstein oversees all ministry programs and serves as the organization's international spokesperson. She can be heard on The Fellowship's daily radio program airing on 1,500 stations worldwide. Before her present duties, Yael served as global executive vice president, senior vice president and director of program development and ministry outreach. Based in Jerusalem, Yael is a published writer, leading international

advocate for persecuted religious minorities and a respected social services professional. As president and CEO of The Fellowship, she also holds the rare distinction of being a woman leading one of America's largest religious not-for-profit organizations.

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