

Orthodox Jew: Celebrating Israel's Independence With Biblical Significance

The United States was founded by deeply religious Christians, and its tradition is rooted in what's known as Judeo-Christian values. Other countries also are founded on, and embrace, biblical values as well.

It should go without saying that Israel, as the Jewish state, was reestablished on biblical Jewish tradition, which is played out in almost every aspect of Israeli society.

When soldiers are inducted into the IDF, they are given a Bible.

Shabbat, the Sabbath, is not just the cornerstone of the weekend; it's a weekly affirmation of God's creation and the need, indeed the gift and obligation, to rest.

National holidays are Jewish holidays. Biblical themes run throughout society, the food and the culture – even the music in malls and other public places is Jewish.

There are many other examples.

It's often noted that Israel is the only country in the world that observes Memorial Day immediately preceding Independence Day. Memorial Day is a solemn day of national mourning. This year we commemorated more than 24,000 soldiers and security personnel who lost their lives in defense of the State, and more than 4,000 civilians killed in acts of terror. It's true that almost everyone in Israel knows someone personally, or someone who knows someone, who's been killed in defense of the State, or just because we live here. It brings us closer as an extended family, and makes the mourning and loss palpable and

personal to us all.

But then Israel does something unique, and even strange. At sunset on Memorial Day, the day of mourning turns into a day of unvarnished joy as we celebrate our independence. Because of the challenges and threats we face, we don't take our independence for granted. This year we celebrate 74 years since the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, the realization of prophecy and celebration of genuine miracles.

I really still don't understand how we flip our emotions like this, from the depths of sorrow to the highs of joy. But it's real, and extraordinary.

This year I found myself choked up numerous times, even wiping tears from the corner of my eyes, in grief and in celebration. The emotions run deep, but I find myself without the proper words to explain it.

The deliberate lesson from the back-to-back commemorations is that, sadly, the price for our freedom and independence was, and still is, the loss of our loved ones. It's not a price Israelis pay with joy. We don't take our freedom for granted. But it connects us – religious and secular, left and right, Jews and Arabs – on a national basis more than one can imagine. As hard as it is to understand this, and to experience the range of emotions in just two days, it is rooted in our historic and biblical connection to the Land which we defend, which has prospered, and which we love and celebrate.

As much as many understand the connection between these days, there's another national tradition that underscores this, and is unique to Israel. As a pillar of our annual celebration of Independence Day, Israel hosts an annual Bible Quiz. This highlights the biblical connection we have here, since God deeded the Land to Abraham and his descendants through Isaac

and Jacob.

Digging into the deepest, most obscure and challenging biblical questions that would stump a majority of rabbis and pastors is incredible on its own. The fact that the contestants are teens strengthens the passing of our tradition and heritage from one generation to another. Jewish teens competed in Hebrew, our revived ancient language, from around the world: Israel, the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Mexico, Belgium, Montenegro and South Africa.

The president and prime minister were not only in attendance but participated in asking the finalists some of the most challenging questions. Oh, and it's broadcast on national TV.

It's also not insignificant that even in the United States, with the widest religious freedoms in the world, there's also a distinct separation between church and state. Other countries have less of a separation, but it's unimaginable to think of ANY country that celebrates its independence nationally with anything biblical, especially in cultures where canceling the Bible and religion is so prevalent.

Celebrating our religious heritage and tradition was made all the more poignant when the prime minister celebrated the two contestants who tied to win, fluently including numerous biblical allusions during his remarks. At one point, he highlighted the tremendous fact that Jewish youth from all over the world had competed as they do each year. He remarked that it's part of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah that "the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing" (Zech. 8:5, TLV) {eoa}

Playing and studying Torah.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated 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. He writes a regular column for Charisma's Standing With Israel and is the host of the Inspiration from Zion podcast on the Charisma Podcast Network. He can be reached at firstpersonisrael@.

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