

Why This 92-Year-Old Great-Grandmother Prayed a Special Blessing Over Israel

It's no secret that the Jewish people have preserved traditions going back thousands of years. But as a relatively new country celebrating just 71 years of independence, 71 years since the restoration of Jewish sovereignty to the land that God gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, it's incredible to be part of the unfolding traditions of the state of Israel as we observe our independence each year.

In seven short decades, Israel has thrived and prospered as God promised. Incredibly, Israel has created many new traditions that are as in stone as the ancient ones we celebrate as well. There are several pillars to Independence Day festivities each year including: back-to-back observance of Memorial Day immediately prior to Independence Day, the international Bible competition, local and national ceremonies, Israelis lighting up the barbecue and having festive meals together often in the same spot in a national park where entire extended families gather, and more.

One of the most incredible parts of these is the state celebration that is broadcast live on national TV. It is rehearsed for weeks and full of protocol that one would ascribe to a country many times older. The prime minister and many other leaders attend. Tickets are hard to come by. Like many such ceremonies, there's music, and it ends with fireworks. But the central pillar of the national ceremony is the lighting of 12 torches representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Lighting the torch is considered one of Israel's highest civilian honors.

This year, some of those who lit a torch included the team behind sending Israel's first spacecraft to the moon, the mothers of three boys kidnapped and murdered by Palestinian Arab terrorists in 2014, the leader of the Pittsburgh Jewish community that suffered an anti-Semitic massacre several months ago, a famous movie director who donated his son's organs after a horrible traffic accident and more. But the one who captured the heart of the nation was 92-year old great-great grandmother, Marie Nachmias, who went up on stage to light her torch—and prayed.

She began her words with the formula by which all torch lighters do, not by their title or what they've accomplished, but by their lineage, the way Jews do. "I am Marie Nachmias, the daughter of Shalom and Chana Sabach, of blessed memory."

Then the host interrupted the scripted remarks and interacted with her, live on national TV. Using the affectionate word that's a sign of respect for older women of her Tunisian origin, he said "Mamo, bless us, bless Israel."

And bless us is what she did. Marie raised her hands and eyes to heaven, and prayed from the heart, the heart of a woman whose life was never easy but always had something to give to others. While it's not common for Jews of North African decent, at 17, Marie fled Nazis hunting Jews in the streets during the German occupation of Tunisia.

As a young woman, she struggled through the early years of the state along with hundreds of thousands of others who sought refuge as Israel's population doubled in a decade. She's been privileged to live to see Israel prosper and exceed nine million residents.

"I bless the state of Israel, with all my heart, may God hear me ... may Israel continue rising and continue growing. And may no more soldiers fall in battle, oh please! With all my heart, the Jews, Arabs, Christians and Druze, so we will all be one

nation, all ... created by God, may He give us peace, and next year—another 10 million Israelis!”

Then, as the host prompted her to the formal closing line that everyone says, she got flustered. Right there on national TV. It couldn't have been more real—or precious.

“And to the glory ... I am sorry, and I am nervous ... to the glory of the state of Israel!”

Interrupting her, the crowd, including the prime minister, rose and gave her a standing ovation. The spontaneous cheering increased when she blessed all of Israel, not just Jews but our Arab, Druze and Christian citizens as well. The prayer of an elderly Jewish great, great-grandmother inspired moment of national unity by breaking through traditional divisions in Israeli society.

But this was not scripted. It was genuine and embodied her life and why she was honored to light the torch to begin with.

Among the challenges she's seen included raising eight children, two of whom have died. In 1973, her son was wounded during the Yom Kippur War, which she attributes to her becoming a foster mother to dozens. “My son was in a combat unit and was wounded when he tried to rescue his commander. He was hospitalized for a long time. I took an oath and prayed that he get well, together with all the other soldiers. I vowed that if God gives me my son back, I'd be willing to do any *mitzvah* (commandment) or mission that is given to me,” according to Ynet.

God heard her prayer, and her son recovered. He became a municipal social worker in their Galilee town. One day, he called her and said he had a little girl who needed a home. That's how it started.

The children she fostered were Jewish and Arab, with every kind of physical limitation and challenge. Eventually, she

would foster children from around the country, and even from outside Israel's borders.

"They knew everywhere that she was willing to take in and raise any child. Her message was that every person was made in the image [of God], no matter their origin," her daughter Ricky told Ynet.

The committee that chose the torch-lighters singled her out as "a symbol of the immigrants who established Israeli society on a foundation of mutual solidarity and help to the needy, and of the thousands of foster families in Israel who opened their hearts to help children in crisis."

At the moment, "Mamo" was too excited to talk, her sincere prayer and the authenticity of the moment united Israelis across the nation. If it had been scripted, it couldn't have been better.

After a week with more than 1 million Israelis suffering nearly 700 rockets being fired at their communities from terrorists in Gaza, and the day before mourning nearly 28,000 Israelis whose lives were taken defending the state or in acts of terror, we all really needed a heavy dose of "Mamo" to bring us together with joy.

May God answer her prayers and bless us. {eoa}

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