



Musings on Life in Israel May 2, 2008

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Memorial Day

It's 4:15 a.m. and Meir is standing on the curb awaiting his "sheirut," his ride to Ben Gurion airport. The streets are still and, as I lie in bed next to the open window, I can hear his distant characteristic cough from across the courtyard every few minutes. Then the Muslim calls to worship start- mystical, longing, chilling, incomprehensible megaphone chants. The calls seem to come from every direction, rising up into the sky, echoing off the hills, off the concrete. Meir is so small, so vulnerable, standing out there on the curb alone with his suitcase, his siddur, a box of rugelach for home, standing there in the dark with his dreams of peace. By day, we Jews own the streets of Jerusalem, but after the sun sets, we have no claim on the silence and the sounds that fill it. In the darkness, it becomes clear. We are surrounded.

Flashback to a few weeks ago: It is the eve of Yom HaZikaron, the holiday commemorating fallen soldiers-- Dusk, my favorite time of day because I get to watch the trees outside our window turn from golden green, into inky black, swaying silhouettes of palm and cyprus against a tangerine sky and the birds too grow quiet, just the sound of the wind and bedtime stories.

8 p.m. exactly, the siren goes off. Gavi and I run out onto the balcony. The tile is cold on his bare feet, so I pick him up, and he wraps his little body tightly around me, rigid in his T Rex pajamas. We stand, as the whole country is standing, perfectly still. This is the cry of war. This is the alarm before missiles start to fall. The siren's pitch rises and wails. It lasts a long time. "I wonder how it felt." Gavi says when we return back inside. "How what felt?" I ask. "How it felt to die."

The next day, the image is of a sun-filled courtyard—the one at Hebrew Union College. A thick flame dances atop a pile of rocks, lyrical black letters: /*yud, zayin, kaf, vav, resh*/ spell out the reason we have come: /*yizkor*/. One hundred preschool kids, stand in circles, dressed in blue and white. Flags flutter. Sweet and clear, the children's voices. And when the siren sounds again, they are still.

The grief and meaning of Memorial Day is palpable here- drawing me outside my internal reality to a shared communal experience. Even I, who am so new to this people, to this land, even I, a tourist of sorts with an extended visa, feel a part of something larger. Swept up in the fervor of Israel's 60th, I bought a Star of David air freshener for our car's rear view mirror with a tiny dove that hangs inside. I don't even think it looks tacky.

As an American, national holidays do not color my internal world. In a certain sense, I like it that way. I am a person who tends toward privacy, and I treasure the opportunity to avert my gaze from the outside world and to determine, from the inside out, what I will make of any given moment... But in Israel, I leave the psychic safety of my personally defined world and am called to define myself, not only from the inside out but to allow the outside world to color my internal



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reality.

The colors these days have been blue and white.

Soldiers

Yom HaZikaron, Israeli Memorial Day is followed, the very next day, by Yom HaAtzma'ut, Independence Day. The Hebrew word for independence, atzma'ut is directly related to the Hebrew for bone- etzem. You feel things in your bones here.

We were at the Rose Garden recently, just around the corner from our apartment, picnickers on the grass, children's laughter from the playground and a spectacular view of the Judean hills. I notice a father standing straight and proud, speaking softly to his blond curly-haired daughter as she wobbles her first toddler steps. My breath catches in my throat as I notice. He has only one arm. So young and only one arm. And Dor with whom we shared a seder table in Tel Aviv this year—the skier, the cyclist, the business man. He has only one leg, lost the other in Lebanon. What is it like to lose a part of your body in defense of your homeland?

Back in the States, I was a bit of an “anti gun” mom. When my brother sent Gavi a bunch of Star Wars Storm Trooper action figures for Chanukah, I removed all the guns. Thus, in Gavi's mind, Storm Troopers are just menacing looking snowmen. (Boy does my brother make fun of me for that.) But here in Israel, how can I be anti-gun? They are everywhere, huge rifles on soldiers, little pistols shoved into civilian waistbands. I watch Gavi as he studies the soldiers, his little eyebrows scrunching together the way they do only in intense moments of focus. Yesterday, with paper, tape and crayons, he spontaneously created a green army vest, gun holster and a whole set of different sized weapons, complex in their design. He knew the name for each one.

Do Israeli soldiers represent something that I can share with my son, something I can stand for with pride?

Often the answer is, “yes.” It was last Tuesday night in Tel Aviv, as we watched the Tzofim (Israeli Scouts) dance and sing in preparation for their summer trip to America. How can one not be swept up in their energy and enthusiasm, the feeling of unity among these young soldiers-to-be, their hope for peace and passionate dedication to their homeland.

But sometimes the answer is, “no.” No, I cannot explain with pride to my son the meaning of these weapons and the motivation of those who hold them.

Flashback to this past Sunday (the first day of the week here). It is 5:30 a.m. and I am getting out of my car to go to the pool. Usually at this hour, the street is empty except for the occasional pedestrian or delivery truck. But this morning, there are three soldiers, one woman and two men,



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standing on the sidewalk. They are speaking loudly and are decked out in, what looked to me like, SWAT-team gear, complete with helmets (the visors propped open), padding on their chests and knees, and massive rifles. Why are they here outside the Jerusalem Pool? I and the elderly ladies in flowered swimming caps don't pose much of a threat. These three soldiers are pretty jovial for such an early hour, a little too much for my taste. They laugh and snap photos of each other, proud of their uniforms. Then they cross the line.

Posing for a picture, one of the two young men gets down on his knees in front of the other... a momentary lewd gesture. It lasted maybe three seconds, and no one saw it but me. I am appalled. Eighteen year olds will be eighteen year olds. Putting them in uniform and giving them heavy artillery doesn't change that; maybe it only heightens the potential for boundary crossing... But we Jews */can't/* behave that way. After all, I have a blue and white air freshener that reads, “Ain li eretz acheret.” (There is no other land for me.) Who are we any way? I rush inside to swim my laps wishing I hadn't seen what I did, knowing there is so much more that I never see.

That same morning, coming back home from the pool, I get stuck on a narrow road (they are */all/* narrow here) behind a garbage truck. Rather than being annoyed, I find a quirky smile on my face. The two garbage men there in front of me, hopping on and off the back of the truck, lugging foul-smelling trash cans as all garbage men do, are both wearing yarmulkes. Ha! These refuse-dumping-dudes probably davened shaharit before heading off to work! We say the same prayers.

Ahad HaAm said that we must sink our hands into the soil and do the grunt work of becoming a nation if we want to truly reclaim our Jewish soul—that includes all of it, from collecting trash to defending ourselves. The key though, as we become a nation like any other, complete with garbage and semiautomatic weapons, is to somehow keep our eye on the essence of why we are collecting trash in the first place, why we have taken up arms.

The View

Driving back home after dropping Adina off at daycare each day, I look directly out through my windshield, past my blue and white air freshener, to the “Tayelet” which overlooks Jerusalem. I can see it all from there: the Mount of Olives, the Dome of the Rock, the stately walls of the Old City—a palate of muted gray, green and gold, timeless, against a backdrop of desert mountains and open sky. It's still surreal that */this/* is my daily driving route. Usually, I am rushing, but this past Tuesday morning, I stopped to walk the promenade and noticed two unexpected additions to the scenery, separate and unrelated, perhaps. ___

The first: A cab driver has gotten out of his taxi. He kneels down in the grass on the side of the road, facing directly away from ancient Jerusalem and touches his forehead to the earth. I rarely get to witness Muslim worship, even here in the Middle East, and am struck by the utter



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submission and humility it must take to physically prostrate yourself before God five times a day. Can I honestly say that my prayer has that kind of fervor?

The second: Only fifty yards away from the taxi driver, an Israeli "Mishtara" or police van has stopped, and a policeman, in his blue and white uniform, stands in the shade of the open van door. He faces the Temple Mount, swaying in his pure white tallit, around his head and arm, no helmet, no rifle just the black straps of his tefillin. Bound to something higher, we are. Bound to take in the view. To see the site where Isaac himself was bound. The question is, will we ascend as did Muhammad, as did Avraham?

Whatever we wear-- a green bullet proof vest and helmet, a garbage man's stained uniform, or a little boy's paper costume with crayon scribbles and scotch tape, my prayer is that we can remember why we put on the uniform, that we can remember why we came here in the first place.