

Reflections from Medinat Yisrael

Delivered by three Israeli members of the Bayit
Shabbat, April 25, 2009 – Rosh Chodesh Iyyar 5769

Tomer Grossman

Yom Ha'atzmaut in Israel for me is a visit at the Army bases. On this day the bases are open to the public.

The courtyards, the tanks, the Jeeps, the jets and helicopters all sparkling and with the most advanced equipment, some of it top secret. And Am Yisrael packs the bases, climbs the jets, plays with the tanks and listens to the same stories year after year.

In my service I served as a tank commander in the Barak regiment in the north of the Golan Heights. Each year I enjoy going back to those days and recalling the stories and meeting my friends.

I love trying again and again to see if even today in ten seconds we can jump into the tank and get it moving. It is great to show my family where we put our personal equipment, where we hide the treats from home, how we took apart this beast in order to fix the smallest part of the engine and how we scrubbed and polished it every Thursday so as not to stay on the base during Shabbat.

But the most Israeli and interesting part of that day are the conversations around these giant machines. Not the questions like "What is your age?" "How old are you?" "Where do you live?"

Rather the questions like "In what regiment did you serve?" "What type of tank did you have during your days?" "What was your position?"

A tank crewman's pride is in the tank that he trained and fought. Statements like "You don't understand, Merkava 1 is so much more reliable!" "No way, The Magach is so much better!"

It warms the heart to see all parts of Am Yisrael walking around the tanks, religious and secular, Charedi and Kibbutznikim, Olim from America, Russia, Ethiopia. Here everyone is bursting with national pride regardless of their origin or background.

One of the most Israeli statements that I took from my years in service is:

"The man in the tank shall win!"

On this day we see how accurate this statement actually is. It is neither the machine nor its enormity – rather the small people inside. Their spirit, their devotion, their readiness. The understanding that it is in your hands to change history and make sure that your children will not face what your own grandparents had just a generation away.

Yom Ha'atzmaut, where we wander the bases and take a trip down memory lane during our service days, is the day we mark the bravery of Am Yisrael and the courage of the soldiers whose spirit won all our wars.

As the years passed and I became a rabbi of a division consisting of 20,000 soldiers from all the different army units, troops, tanks, artillery intelligence and many more, I find that that message lives on.

Many non-Jewish soldiers come to the military rabbinate in order to convert – soldiers who are not yet part of the Jewish nation but as part of the Israeli culture they feel and understand the importance of serving in the army and thus ask to join the Jewish people.

Unfortunately this year I will be unable to experience that special feeling but I am sure that here in the Diaspora I will be able to feel the warmth and great love for the state and more than all: the Great Spirit!

Hag Atzmaut Sameach!

Rav Tomer Grossman was a tank commander and Division Rabbi in the IDF. Prior to his service in America, he was a software manager and a community rabbi. He is now the Educational Rav-Shaliach for Bnei Akiva of US and Canada. He and his wife Efrat have a wonderful daughter Ayala.

Efrat Grossman

When Rav Steven asked me what it means to me to be Israeli, I started laughing, because there are so many things that I can say.

But, I decided to share with you one story.

So, I don't know how you remember the dates of your families' birthdays, but in my family it's very easy. Each one of us has his/her own war.

It starts with my parents. They got married in the middle of the Six Day War. My father was fighting in the war and no one could contact him (at the time there was no cell phone, internet...). So my mother didn't know if the guests would come, if the band

would come, and if my father would come. Eventually, a day before the wedding he showed up, and in the pictures, where you should normally see suits and ties, everyone wearing the army's uniform.

Then came אבי ופנינה (Avi and Peninah) my first brother and sister, who are very close in age, both sharing the same war – מלחמת ההתשה (the War of Attrition).

When my sister was born, my father again was in the army, and my mom gave birth alone. מלחמת ההתשה (the War of Attrition) is one of the less known wars of Israel: we also wouldn't remember it if it were not for their birthdays.

Then was my turn. I won the biggest war of all, because I was born on יום כיפור (the Yom Kippur War).

All of my childhood stories are connected to that war and all of the war stories are connected to my childhood.

My father, of course, was fighting in the war. My mother had to stand for hours in the supermarket while everyone in Israel was buying canned food and war supplies. She was supposed to buy baby food and diapers, and when it got to her turn where none was left.

When Rina, my sister, was born, we were all jealous that she was born at a time of peace. It was after President Sadat came and there was a feeling of relief. My mother said there would be no more wars.

She was right for a long time, there were no wars, but then my little brother, Ariel, came, and with him the first Lebanon War broke out – and guess who again didn't show up to the birth?...

So, that's my family and that what it means to me to be Israeli.

I always felt bad for people that were born on a boring day with no wars, but I wish you all many more boring happy birthdays and הַג עֲצִמָאוֹת שְׂמֵחַ (Happy Independence Day)!

Efrat Grossman is a ceramic artist and designer. Prior to her service in America, she was the head of the Department of Art and Design at University of Ariel in Israel. She currently teaches Hebrew Language at SAR High School. She is a 12th generation Jerusalemite. She and her husband Tomer have a wonderful daughter Ayala.

Ariel Freidenberg

Thinking of what I can say in 4-5 minutes, while we are having Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut coming this week, I thought that I may just try and convey, through some memories and recollections I have from Israel, what Eretz YiIsrael and Medinat Yisrael mean to me, personally.

When I recollect the 80's and the time I spent in my teens with my friends in the Yeshiva I went to, in Beer Sheva, "capital of the Negev", where those friends came from Sderot, Netivot, Dimona and Ofakim, and being an "Ashkenazi" amongst a majority of Moroccan's and Sefaradim was considered those days in Beer Sheva – remote, distinct and even inferior – that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I remember the Shabbatot I spent with those friends where some of them had 7, 8 or even 9 brothers and sisters, living in a home that in my family's standards would reasonably accommodate only 4 children at the most, and seeing that they are still happy with what they have and further can share and open their homes for others – that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I recollect the pain we felt all over our bodies when we eventually finished "Masa Kumta", which is the 88 kilometer journey we did by foot, to be eligible to wear the long awaited red paratroop beret, helping those friends who collapsed and needed other's support on the way – that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I recall the pride I felt, standing with my friends in the "Tzanchanim" (Paratroopers) near Hakotel Hamaaravi (The Western Wall) for our Oath Pledging Ceremony - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I remember the mixture of fear and excitement I felt, when I could smell the burning fuel coming out of the loud engines of the Hercules air plane that came to take us to our first paratroop jump - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I recall those lovely family vacations we did each summer with my parents and brothers, where each year for a whole week, we chose a different place to tour in Israel with a *בית ספר שדה* of *החברה להגנת הטבע* (Field School of the Nature Preservation Society) whether it's Hermon, Meron, Katzrin in the Golan, Gilboa, or Eilat - that is Eretz Yisrael for me.

When it takes a rental car office in Ben Gurion Airport more than an hour to process my reservation and eventually allocate a car for me and my family on our recent visit in Israel for Pesach, while the same process takes here in NY, a minute or less - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I meet with my friends, and know that through the fact we lived together for months and months, in those hot and freezing days and nights, 20-30 people in the same cabin or tent, I probably know about them more than their own wife would ever know - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I recall the wonderful Shabbatot me and my best friends had in Jerusalem, while we were still bachelors, going to the 'Carlebach' minyan on Leyl Shabbat near the Kotel, spending hours and hours in dancing and singing, without worrying about anything – that is Eretz Yisrael for me.

When I recall those magical Shabbatot I spent in my grandparents' home in Jerusalem in one of the most beautiful and unique streets, known as "Ethiopia Street" near "Rehov Haneviim" and "Rehov Harav Kook", looking from their terrace to the Ethiopian Church on the other side of the street, hearing the "Muezzins" call from the mosques in the Old City of Jerusalem, and being just a short walk from the large Hassidic Tishes of 'Gur' and 'Slonim', we so much enjoyed going to - that is Eretz Yisrael for me.

When I recall that miserable Saturday night in November 1995, when I first saw the pictures coming from Kikar Malchei Yisrael in Tel-Aviv, showing the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin זכרונו לברכה, and terrified, realizing that the suspect shown on TV studied with me at the same class in Kerem Beyavneh and was in the same Law faculty with me at Bar Ilan University - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When you enter a café in Jerusalem and the only thing that bothers you is why don't you see a guard in the entrance to keep you and your company alive in case of a suicide attacker - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

Listening to the news on the radio every single hour, looking at the Internet constantly, buying 3 newspapers every Shabbat just to stay tuned and being scared of any ambulance siren on the street - is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I recall that Erev Shabbat in Chol Hamoed Pesach 2002, when we were called to immediately report to the army as reserve service ("Tzav Shmone") after the bomb attack in Hotel Park in Netanya, and seeing how the sun goes down and Shabbat enters, while we are still signing for our weapons, and having a deep feeling of "shlichut" (of a mission) of protecting the lives of our families back in their homes – that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

The 'Yartzeits' of my grandparents who are buried in Har Hazeitim in Jerusalem, and the magnificent view of Har Habayit we can see when we visit their graves - is Eretz Yisrael for me.

When Pesach goes by and most people greet each other for a “good summer” (“קיץ טוב”) and I then remember that כ"ב בניסן (the 22nd day of Nissan) is actually the Yartzeit of one of the best and fine people I ever knew, who was killed in Lebanon at the age of 23, and knowing that today he could have been a 39 year-old fine man, probably married, with beautiful children and wife – that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

When I remember I called Anat in July 2006, and crying over the phone, I said that I may not come back alive from the 2nd Lebanon War, given all the mess and disorder I saw, and promising myself, that if eventually Hakadosh Barukh Hu would get me back home safe, from now on I will really appreciate the most valuable present I ever got from Hakadosh Barukh Hu, of being alive and healthy, with my beautiful kids and wife - that is Medinat Yisrael for me.

Medinat Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael bring a mixture of deep feelings, sometime conflicting feelings, to anyone who has lived in Israel and had the privilege of going through some of the experiences I mentioned. Feelings of sadness, happiness, pride and yearning, are mixed all together.

Yom Hazikaron and Yom Haatzmaut are indeed adjacent to reflect on that sadness and happiness we feel combined at this time of the year.

Having the privilege of knowing and belonging to this unique and wonderful community at HIR, who welcomed us so warmly since we arrived, where values such as respect for the other, openness to different ideas, support to those who need, hachnasat orchim, and love of Eretz Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael, are amongst the more important values of the Bayit – we have no doubt, that if not in Israel, the Bayit is the place to commemorate Yom Hazikaron and to celebrate Yom Haatzmaut, while we are here.

Ariel Freidenberg is one of the founders of an Israeli start-up security software company. He holds a B.A. in Law and Economics and an MBA from Bar-Ilan University. Ariel was an attorney in Israel following an internship at the Supreme Court of Israel. He was born in Jerusalem, raised in Chicago and Beer Sheva, and served as a paratrooper in the IDF as part of a “Hesder” Jewish studies program at Yeshivat Kerem Beyavneh”. Ariel is married to Anat, a Ph.D student in Talmud at Bar Ilan University. They have three young daughters: Yiskah, Tzruyah and Naama. In August 2008, they relocated from Ra’anana to Riverdale as part of the company’s efforts to penetrate the North American market.

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