

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Yom Ha'Atzmaut)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

Dedicated to the memory of those Israeli soldiers whose selfless sacrifice gave and gives us a State we can call our own, including:

My cousin Major Benji Hillman z"l of blessed memory , a Company Commander in the elite Egoz unit of Golani, killed just three weeks after his wedding, in the summer of 2006, in the second Lebanon War, while leading his men into battle.

Yosef Yitzchak Goodman z"l of blessed memory, an Israeli paratrooper who was tragically killed in 2006 while on a training mission in the elite Maglan paratrooper special forces unit.

Daniel Mandel, z"l of blessed memory who was killed in 2001, commanding a mission in Nablus to capture wanted terrorists responsible for the deaths of over thirty Israelis,

Dvir Mor Chaim, z"l of blessed memory a former student killed while in Lebanon on patrol a few short kilometers from reaching the Israeli border and safety,

Aaron (Areleh') Friedman, crushed by a tank in a tragic accident in 1986,

Dani Moshits, and David Cohen, close friends killed in an ambush in Lebanon in 1985.

Sharon Segev, my former commander, killed by accidental gunfire in 1984.

Uri Farraj, killed in a tragic training accident in 1983.

His name was Chaim; Chaim Avner, a name familiar to me for a long time, but I never really knew who he was, and I never had the chance to meet him, or to meet his very special family, until one year on Memorial day. I had seen them before, and even shared some of their most personal moments, but I never felt it was the right time and never wanted to intrude....

Chaim, you see, is close to a very close and old friend of mine, in fact, he is about as close as you can get; his grave lies next to Dani's on Mount Herzl, Israel's National Military Cemetery

Dani Moshitz of blessed memory, is still, and will always be to me, 20 years old, which is how old he was when he was killed in an ambush at the Kasmiyeh Bridge in Lebanon, in

1985. He was killed just two days after Chaim of blessed memory, who was 27 at the time. Chaim was doing a 16 day stint of reserve duty in Lebanon when a Hezbollah terrorist drove his car bomb into their safari truck, killing him, along with eleven other soldiers on patrol in Southern Lebanon.

Every year at Yeshivat Orayta on Yom HaZikaron, Israel's national Memorial Day, the thought of staying isolated in our study hall in the Old City of Jerusalem while the entire country gathers in her cemeteries and memorials to remember those who fell in defense of the State of Israel, conflicts with the equally strong desire not to allow such a holy day to pass without the study of Torah, which after all, is the reason we had a home to come back to after 2,000 years. So every year we study Torah together at the entrance of Mount Herzl Military Cemetery, after which many of the students join me at Dani's grave to pay our respects. At precisely 11:00 am a siren sounds, and the entire State of Israel grinds to a halt for a moment of silence. Radio and television broadcasts are interrupted, traffic stops and people get out of their cars, pedestrians on crowded streets all over Israel stand at attention and bow their heads, and even children stand in silence as an entire Nation takes a moment to remember what it took, and how many gave up how much that we might be privileged to have a State and a homeland to call our own. And as the moment ends, and the siren winds down, a very special Israeli Air force flight of four jets flying over Jerusalem crosses the airspace over the Old City, and one lone jet, peels off and flies up into the sky until no longer visible, representing all the lonely soldiers who will never come home to the beloved arms of waiting mothers and fathers, spouses and siblings, children and close friends....

And in that moment one year, I found myself standing over the grave once again of Dani, my old and yet forever young friend who took me under his wing and remains ingrained in my memory, as one of those who helped to transform me from an American visitor, to an Israeli.

I had a stone in my pocket I had brought back from Mila 18, the bunker which was the last stand of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and I decided to give it a home this year on Dani's grave. As I was standing there, I couldn't help noticing an older woman next to Chaim's grave who turned out to be his mother. What drew me to talk to her was the number tattooed on her arm....

Originally from Czechoslovakia, she lost her entire family in the Holocaust, and survived Auschwitz at the tender age of sixteen. So what does a sixteen year old girl, with no-one and nothing in the world do in 1945? She somehow manages to smuggle herself into Israel and builds a beautiful family that is representative not only of her decision that life has to triumph over death, and good over evil, but as well, of the indomitable spirit of an entire people, that over two thousand years of pain and suffering refused to give up their dream of one day coming home at last to the land of Israel from whence they had been so cruelly exiled so long ago....

Eventually she meets a fellow Holocaust survivor and marries him, and they Hebraicise their names to take on the family name of Avner, as her original family name was

Lichtenstein, licht, meaning candle or 'ner', and shtein, meaning stone, or 'even', hence the name Avner: Candle to father's memory....

So how does such a woman continue after receiving, years later, that awful knock on the door from three Israeli Army Officers, come to tell her she has lost her beloved son, Chaim, a word meaning life? And most incredible, how does she sit next to his grave, with her Concentration camp number tattooed on her arm, sitting just inches from the Army I.D. number engraved on her son's grave, and yet with a smile on her face? And how does she find the strength to smile and to say to me, with almost a grin, "yehiyeh Tov", it will be good...?

Indeed, this is the unasked question of the double-portion we will read this week in Israel: *Acharei-Mot – Kedoshim*, which literally means 'After the death of holy ones': How does one follow such loss? From whence do we succeed in garnering strength and even hope, after such painful losses and challenging setbacks?

I am not sure whether we are meant to answer that question in this world, but as we remember those who fell that we might have a state, and then celebrate the blessing of being the generation that almost takes it for granted, stories like the Avner family's remind me that we have more strength than we even imagine.

Shabbat Shalom, and Chag Ha'Atzmaut Sameach, (Happy Israel Independence day!)

From Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman