THE HILLEL SANDWICH
A Symbol for our Times

Who is like your people, Israel, a unique nation on Earth?1 What an amazing country we live in! A country and a Hebrew calendar that carries us through the highest highs and the lowest lows, that embodies the tears, tragedies and triumphs of Jewish life. I marvel at how we can take the diverse events of the next few weeks all in our stride: celebrating in song and story one moment, standing in silence the next, and then returning once again to unbridled excitement.

I call this phenomenon “the Hillel Sandwich.” The sage Hillel, as the Haggadah famously tells us, would take two pieces of matzah, a symbol of our enduring faith in G-d, and sandwich (or should I say “Hillel,” since he, and not some stuffy old Earl, originated the idea!) between them both maror/chazeret, bitter herbs, and charoset, the mortar-like mixture of wine, apples, cinnamon and nuts. This seemingly irrelevant anecdote – and the custom it engenders to this day at every Seder – is an important, indispensable part of the story, for it sends the message that Jewish life invariably contains both blessing and bitterness, grief and glory.

The “Hillel” is the perfect metaphor for the four seminal events occurring at this time of year. We begin on Pesach – the first holiday of our calendar year – with the lavish Seder meal and seven (or eight) festive days of celebration. But this upbeat time is quickly followed first by Yom HaShoah – which has its own brand of maror and charoset, as we recall the horrific slave labor and death camps of World War II – and then Yom HaZikaron, when the nation confronts the bitter reality that more than 23,000 of our finest young men and women have paid the ultimate price for our survival. In a flash though, we move on, almost seamlessly, to Yom HaAtzmaut. The yahrzeit candles are exchanged for ceremonial holiday torches, the Israeli flags that graced the fallen soldiers’ graves are waved proudly on every street, displayed in our homes and even from our cars. The emotional current of these days undulates through our bodies with hard-to-believe ease.

I am always in awe of our unparalleled skill at “changing gears,” at moving from the sad to the sublime, from maror to merriment. The Holocaust survivors and bereaved families who display unparalleled courage during these weeks, who bravely face their fears and join together with the rest of the nation, are our inspiration and our pride. They continually remind us that Israel is a country that upholds ideals worth living – and dying – for.

As I swallow a bite of the Hillel Sandwich, I am reminded of an interview I did some years ago with a well-known symphony conductor, a survivor of the Holocaust who had been in Buchenwald. When I asked him how he had managed to survive, he told me the following story:

“A group of us were taken from our barracks and ordered to dig a trench. The Germans told us they were going to time us, and we must stop digging in exactly four and a half minutes. If we stopped before or after that time, we would be shot. They gave us a signal, and we each picked up a shovel.

The moment before we began to dig, I thought of a musical piece that was exactly four and a half minutes long. And I played that music in my head as I dug. All around me, fellow Jews were stopping and were being killed. But, to the amazement of the sadistic Nazi guards, I continued and stopped exactly at the right moment, and so I was saved. And do you know what? In my head, that same music is still playing.”

The song of the Jewish people can, at times, be as bitter as maror and can break your heart with sadness, but it can also lift your spirits to exhilarating heights. But whatever piece it is playing at the moment, the music will never stop; it will always go on.

1 Shmuel II 7:23.

Rabbi Stewart Weiss is Director of the Jewish Outreach Center of Ra’anana jocmtv@netvision.net.il