



## SILENCE, SOLDIERS, AND SWITCHING GEARS

Shortly after our eldest son, Ari, fell in battle in Shechem-Nablu almost 18 years ago, I went shopping for a car. The salesman was quite surprised when I told him I wanted a manual shift rather than an automatic. He told me that while in generations past, virtually every car in Israel had a standard transmission, those days were long gone. “What you’re looking for is the ‘old Israel,’” he told me, sure that I was making some kind of mistake. “No,” I corrected him, “this car exactly represents the character and condition of Israel – then and now – and that’s why I insist on it.” And still drive it.

This is a country where, if we are to survive, we must be adept at switching gears – emotional gears. We are constantly, continually confronted by highs and lows, ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, and must be prepared to ride out those extremes of daily life. Even as we, along with the rest of the world, battle the deadly Coronavirus, we trumpet the rise of our Kinneret to its highest level in two decades. Even as we continue to be threatened by incorrigible Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists on our northern and southern borders, we are buoyed by the fact that Israel’s “satisfaction level” consistently ranks among the top 10 highest in the world.

How do we jump so effortlessly between the extremes and live in two radically different worlds at the same time?

This question is most acute this week when we make the transition between the somber sirens of Yom HaZikaron and the flag-waving festivities of Yom HaAtzmaut. In just a breath, a heartbeat, we are asked to dry the tears

and shelve the painful memories of wars fought and loved ones lost, and celebrate the dream of Israel renewed and resurgent. The stick shift grinds, the gearbox smokes, but somehow we make the switch and Israel rumbles along.

For the bereaved families, every day is Memorial Day. We never blow out the candle or blot out of our mind that frozen picture of our soldier-son illuminated on the wall of Yad LaBanim on the night of Yom HaZikaron. We live and limp with that loss, as if with a limb blown away or a sense of sight impaired, and it is never more than a familiar song or deficient family picture away. And yet, we want to live, too. We don’t want to curl up and die or wallow in our grief. We still want to enjoy this wonderful world and country in which we live; we *deserve* to enjoy it.

So we grit our teeth, gather our courage and resolve to switch those gears, no matter how tough it may be. We dry the tears, embrace our kids and reach for the future, while never letting go of the past. We compartmentalize, creating a sacred space for silence and sadness but reserving another corner for laughter and lightheartedness.

We try to stay positive, our eyes on the road ahead. We, the all-too-large community of bereaved families, try to bring some good out of the catastrophe by building synagogues and schools and day-care centers. We channel all our furious energy into social causes, fighting for justice by screaming our opposition to the freeing of sadistic Palestinian prisoners or the ceding of Israeli land to the very monsters who murdered our kids. We, whom G-d has seen fit to

enter into the club that no one wants to join, try to prevent anyone else from becoming a member. And we try to put the best face on our situation, taking pride in the service and sacrifice of our sons.

Soon after I came to Israel, my sabra cousin picked me up early one March morning and said, “Today, you will learn all you need to know about this country.”

We drove to Mount Hermon, where we went sledding on a thin layer of snow. Then we caught a plane in Rosh Pina and flew to Eilat, where we went snorkeling off the sunny Coral Beach. “Israel is a land of colors and contrasts,” he told me, “a place where in the morning you can be shivering but in the afternoon you are sweating. It is a tiny country in kilometers, but a huge nation in experiences - and determination.”

But if you want to get from one end to the other, you had better learn to switch those gears.

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