

# Three Ceremonies for These

**This year there will be none of the normal ceremonies on Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut. It is, however, an opportunity to remember some highlights of years gone by.**

**1** One moment that particularly spoke to me was when Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi spoke to hundreds of women in Tel Aviv on Erev Yom HaZikaron: “It is no coincidence that these special days, Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut, fall out during the week of the *parshiot* Achareimot-Kedoshim. What is *acharei mot*, after the death? What does the Torah tell us to do after someone dies? Live! Enhance life! And how do we do that? Again, it is not by chance that in these *parshiot* – and in this particular week – we read *ואהבת לרעך כמוך* – And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Those holy souls are looking at us from Above and asking themselves: ‘Why were we sacrificed, if they down there are still arguing about nonsense, still hating each other?’ Why are they not respecting each other? Their wives, their husbands, their children, the elderly, teachers, soldiers, Torah students? Respect!”

And then she asked something of the crowd.

“Place one hand on the shoulder of the person next to you. Come on! Don’t be embarrassed, don’t be shy. Now put one hand on the other and say together with me: ‘I hereby take upon myself the positive mitzvah of *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*.’ Go!”

And approximately 250 women, young and old, secular and religious, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, in the middle of Tel Aviv on Erev Yom HaZikaron, put their hands on the shoulders of a complete stranger, and chanted after her word for

word, taking upon themselves to try and love a little more.

**2** Last year, Rabbi Eliyahu Merav spoke at the ceremony that opened Yom HaZikaron at Yad LaBanim in Jerusalem. He talked about his adopted son, Yossi Cohen, who had fallen in active service in the Nachal HaHaredi Unit:

“Every Jew has a connection of blood and spirit to the sanctity of the Land. And we sitting here – the bereaved families – have something else in common: we have buried part of our own flesh in the clods of this earth.

Five months ago, Adele, my wife and I lost our Yossi, a cute kid murdered by a vile creature in a terror attack at Givat Assaf. Nine years ago, on the very same date, we lost our beloved son-in-law, Rabbi Meir Chai, in a terror attack in Shavei Shomron.

In the hearts of many, Yossi left the feeling that behind all the differences between us – however clear and sharp they may be – behind all the walls, lies a much broader and meaningful foundation that unites us, whether we like it or not. Each and every one of us possesses this foundation, and when we allow ourselves the opportunity, we will excitedly reveal just how much brotherhood and sisterhood – and only that – is our most basic and common nature.

On behalf of Yossi, I allow myself to turn to you, the guides of future generations – teachers, principals, youth movements, heads of pre-military academies – and beseech you: adopt and pass on Rabbi Nachman’s concept of *nekuda tova*, of every single person having something good in them.

How do we do that?

Let us start by finding the good in ourselves. Let us highlight every good thing we do. And then, let us widen the circle and find the good in those close to us, our family, friends and neighbors.

And then let’s widen it even further and find the good and the special in those ‘invisible’ souls – the weak kid in school, the old neighbor, the person who’s a little different to us, the teenager going through crisis...

Let us get to know those people we don’t know personally, but about whom we do hold some prejudice.

...I have got to know these soldiers personally and I have to tell you that not only are they young men prepared to sacrifice their lives, but human beings for whom life is sacred. For while our enemies sanctify death, we first and foremost sanctify life. Look around you. We are an island of sanity amidst the chaos of blood, fire and brimstone. Why?

Because for us, self-sacrifice is no contradiction to life. Almost 46 years have passed since the Yom Kippur War, since my comrades and I were rushed to enemy lines to face the Arab armies. We suffered heavy losses back then, and with G-d’s help, we were victorious.

But that is not our final victory. The victory we are hoping for. That will be when the words of Isaiah are realized, “And they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore. Amen.”

**3** And from memory to independence. Miri Ehrental, Israel Prize Laureate and founder – with her husband, Chaim – of the NGO *Zichron Menachem*, a charity supporting child cancer sufferers and their families, said



# Special Days

the following on Yom HaAtzmaut last year:

“Menachem was a year old when he became ill. Chaim and I were a young couple, and our world was turned upside down in a second. Very quickly we learned to navigate the hospital corridors, become familiar with medical terms, the medical teams and we witnessed firsthand just how important their work is. We memorized the shift hours, the drug dosages, the different types of treatment and the list of severe side effects. We experienced the difficulties of running a home when a child is fighting for his life – the challenge of keeping our marriage together, the difficulty in even smiling. We had to live with the feelings of guilt, fear, loneliness.

Alongside all that, we also discovered the power of faith and soul in coping with disease. We saw that when Menachem wanted life, he fought and beat the illness even when the doctors expected the worst. Sadly, after 15 years of coping, 15 years of struggle, we saw that when our son finally gave up and asked them to stop the treatment, he didn't even last a week...

I was thrown into darkness, but the Creator of the World had other plans.

Our journey began when my husband had a dream that sparked an idea. Chaim said to me then: “Miri, it's not right that all the knowledge we've gained and stored, the experience we've accumulated over these last 15 years, should go to waste. We have been given a Divine mission to pull ourselves together and give others what we didn't have: accompaniment, support, good advice, an ear to listen and a shoulder to cry on. While they're fighting for their sick child, we must help parents to care for their healthy children too. We must sit by the sick child in the hospital so

that the parents can take a break. We can supply information on processes, both medical and bureaucratic, offer family members the chance to enjoy themselves, the space to pour out their hearts, without going to pieces.

So we began.

And what we had learned, we tried to pass on. To make life easier for others.

This year we're embarking on *Zichron Menachem's* 30th year, the name of which reminds me every day – and comforts me – why we're doing this in the first place. We have been able to provide for others everything we did not have ourselves: a warm home for the sick children who can't go to school, enrichment activities, help with studies and hot meals. The evening hours are dedicated to the parents – meetings with psychologists, support groups, mini-vacations and more.

My blessing to us all this Yom HaAtzmaut is this: proportion. I listen to the news on my way to *Zichron Menachem*. Every morning the country is collapsing, everything is gloomy and hopeless. And tomorrow we segue into the next storm, and again it's all dark. My recommendation to you is this: Come in to *Zichron Menachem* for a day, and get a lesson in proportion. You'll be grateful for what you have, for your health... you'll see how all the different sectors are working together in a remarkably diverse tapestry, and how giving is simply the best possible action strategy you can adopt.

Chaim and I are up here on stage, but *Zichron Menachem* is not just Chaim and Miri Ehrental. Thousands of volunteers are the real winners of the Israel Prize tonight. They give up their leisure time to give, or actually, their idea of leisure is giving up their time for others.

The real prizewinners are all those, young and old, who are not fazed by visiting these children in hospital. On the contrary. They can't wait to go and help.

The real prizewinners are the National Service girls who choose to serve with us in a very challenging and demanding environment, often experiencing heart-breaking situations most of us won't see in a lifetime.

The real prizewinners are those who donate their hair, something they have nurtured for years, just to bring a smile to the face of some other girl they don't even know.

The real prizewinners are the medical teams that donate their free time to us on our fun trips at home and abroad for the children, and our dear supporters and the heads of our “Friends of” organizations overseas.

Here tonight, *Zichron Menachem* represents hundreds of other great NGOs and *chesed* organizations working in Israel – innumerable initiatives of goodness, of people enlisting for others. They are the true *Am Yisrael*. That even if the spotlight doesn't pick them up, they'll still stretch out their hand to a stranger, contribute, help, with no thoughts of any reward.

Our son Menachem is not with us here this evening, but in a certain sense he very much is. Not a day goes by when I don't think about the silent legacy he left us:

Grow from the pain.

Turn bitter into sweet.

Exchange loss for meaning.

*Yom HaAtzmaut Sameach!*”

**Sivan Rahav Meir and Yedidya Meir** are popular Israeli media personalities and World Mizrahi's shlichim to North America