

Yom HaAtzmaut 2003  
May 3, 2003

I want to read an extraordinary message to you this morning. It was written by Cheryl Mandel, the mother of Lt. Daniel Mandel, who was killed in a military operation in Shechem two weeks ago.

Fifteen and a half years ago, we brought our family to Israel from Canada, because we believed and still do believe that this is the place where Jews should live. We brought our family here because it is our homeland.

We accepted that this is a young country where there were difficulties and we were willing to stand up to the challenges before us. When our eldest son

Jonah went into the Army, we felt he was serving his country in the best way

he could, and that since his work was dangerous, there might be a price. When our son Daniel went into the Army, we knew and we accepted that there

might be a price. Unfortunately, like many other parents of soldiers, we have now paid the price for the security of our nation.

Our son Daniel was a lieutenant in an elite Army unit. He was dedicated to

his soldiers, his staff and his Army service, all of which he truly loved. Daniel served in the Army for four years, and was even thinking of staying

longer. Maybe I was naive. I was happy for Daniel when he was accepted into Palsar Nachal, an elite reconnaissance unit. I was happy for him when he was accepted to become an officer. I was so proud of him just a few weeks ago, when we attended the ceremony for the completion of his soldiers' training, and I was so proud to see how he had developed as a person, as a man, as a leader.

At the ceremony for Daniel's soldiers, the soldiers themselves and their parents spoke to us so beautifully about Daniel. They appreciated his caring

and strong leadership, his commitment to his country.

Then on April 15, thirty six hours before the Passover Seder, the impossible to believe happened to our family. Daniel and his unit were sent to Shechem to capture wanted terrorists. Their mission was a success, but Daniel, the commander of that operation, was killed. In fact, yesterday, Daniel's unit was given a Commendation of Excellence for their handling of the entire mission, even after their commander fell.

But here is the truly extraordinary part of her message. For she goes on to write:

The mission gave me a greater appreciation of our army, the Israel Defense Forces, and how they deal with the myriad of emergencies that face our nation. Soldiers know what they're doing. Soldiers know the rules of the game. Daniel had a bulletproof vest, and a bulletproof helmet. He had the right equipment, the right training for this mission. Yet, despite it all, a sniper's bullet pierced a small unprotected area above his vest and under his arm. He died a hero.

We had always thought of Daniel as lucky. He won a trip to EuroDisney, and a set of books that he donated to his yeshiva. But in Shechem before Pesach, his luck had run out.

Daniel was a wonderful son, a wonderful brother. Wherever he went, the sun shone and there was laughter.

His positive attitude teaches us that when bad things happen, you can make sure something positive comes out of the tragedy. When bad things happen, people can go up or down. We were determined to go up and make a difference for others.

Our family was determined to be strong, to build ourselves, and help others.

Daniel had wonderful friends, wonderful rabbis, wonderful soldiers and a wonderful family. They have been very supportive to our family throughout this entire tragedy. Daniel had been such an important part of their lives, and they said they would always continue in his footsteps.

We all feel that Daniel will always be here with us. And we're going to be strong for him.

Over the past two years, I have been part of a company of women, called the Raise Your Spirits Summer Stock Company - first performing in JOSEPH and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, and most recently in ESTHER and the Secrets in the King's Court. I was the show's comic relief.

Being in JOSEPH and then in ESTHER prepared me to face the challenges that I now face. Our Raise Your Spirits Company was set up so that the women of Gush Etzion could support one another, help one another, cry together and laugh together.

We have spent the past two years raising the spirits of others who have been hit by tragedy, and now we must do it for ourselves. We will.

I share this unbelievably moving passage with you this Shabbat for several reasons.

For one, when you hear that an Israeli soldier has been killed in combat, I want you to know the impact it has on the lives of his loved ones. I also want you to know the quality of the lives lost as the result of the barbaric actions of terrorist murderers.

But beyond that, I also want you to understand that Cheryl Mandel's response, devoid of bitterness and resentment is a profoundly Jewish response to tragedy and loss. It is reflected in the message inherent in the Jewish calendar at this time of year.

Just last week, we commemorated the holiday of Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day. And this coming week, we will celebrate Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel Independence Day.

We go from the depths of destruction and the darkest period in our history to the celebration of our achieving independence. Along the way, we stop to remember and honor the brave soldiers who lost their lives defending our homeland and people, with Yom HaZikaron, Israel's Memorial Day.

There are other cycles linking periods on the Jewish calendar – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Yom Kippur and Hashana Rabba, and so on – but none reflects the reality of Jewish theology as well as these two dates on the Jewish calendar introduced in the last century.

I remember a few years ago, a conversation with someone who was not Jewish, and who was resentful of what he called the Jewish obsession with the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. It bothered him that Jews seemed to constantly remind the world of their suffering.

Needless to say, I disagree with my friend. In fact, the whole point is that although we have every right to hold this over the world's head, we do not.

The juxtaposition of the two holidays, and of remembering on Yom HaShoah shows that we chose not to opt out of history. We could have easily harbored resentment for the world's indifference and complicity. Many people have turned on others and gone on a rampage prompted by rage supposedly justified by acts far less consequential than what has befallen our people.

But neither revenge nor destruction was our response. The Jewish response was to build a nation and a homeland, even in the face of continued, constant criticism.

That is the miracle that we celebrate this coming week – not just the miracle of Israel, but the miracle that we had the faith to carry on and persevere, to be crazy enough to still have hope in the future to create and build a country.

The refugees who came from Europe, with nothing; those who fled oppressive Arab regimes, with nothing, were not left to languish in squalid refugee camps. Unlike our Arab cousins who after 55 years still live in refugee camps, they were welcomed, given housing, jobs, and health care. Most important of all, they were given opportunity and hope.

The greatness of the miracle is truly appreciated when one understands how far we have come.

And the world still does not let up, or give us a break.

Just compare what has happened in recent weeks in Iraq to the reaction when Israel acts in self defense. Somehow if the United States bombs a neighborhood and civilians get killed, it is barely noticed. Yet when Israel, with no alternative, must act similarly, because terrorists hide behind children and civilians, the condemnations come flooding in. The United States is still pursuing its war on terrorists and terrorism. Yet Israel, which on a proportional basis, has lost even more lives, goes after terrorists, is told to put down its arms and accept the terms of the road map.

I was listening to and reading this week comments from some of the pundits who have called upon Israel to take actions to show the Palestinians their willingness to work for peace. How about a few actions from the guy who was just elected, who denies that the Holocaust occurred, and who helped plan some of the earlier terrorist attacks. Don't you think Israel is the one who needs a little reassurance about Palestinian intentions? Especially when the killing in Tel Aviv earlier this week was carried out by a group closely associated with the Palestinian Authority. It is not unreasonable to ask that there be some confidence building measures on the other side.

But you know, as well as I do, that the moment there is even the glimmer of hope, and the possibility of peace, our people will forget the failure of Oslo, and will take dramatic risks, because that is our nature.

And that is what we learn from Cheryl Mandel, as well as from the fact that this Sabbath is the Shabbat between Yom HaShoah and Yom HaAtzmaut. Let us continue to share with the world, and with our children, the eternal Jewish message of hope and salvation, and let us hope that one day, the world will come to appreciate the beauty of what we have done. In the meantime, let us not forget it.

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