

## **Reflections on Memorial Day in Israel**

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Today, Israel marks Memorial Day for our 23,816 fallen soldiers and victims of terror. I would like to share some of my thoughts with you, my JUF family.

As you know, David Ben Gurion and our founding fathers chose to commemorate our fallen soldiers on the day prior to our Independence Day. They made this decision so that as we celebrate our independence and the rebirth of our nation in its historic homeland, we shall always remember that freedom came at a terrible cost. Just like the custom to break a glass under the chuppah at a Jewish wedding, to remember on our happiest day the destruction of two temples, so the joy of independence cannot be celebrated without paying homage to those who gave everything so that we may live in modern-day Israel.

This year, Memorial Day was different from all such days in the past 72 years of independence. The corona outbreak has led to an unprecedented measure, the closing of all cemeteries on what to many is a sacred day. There was a fierce debate about the closure – Would the police enforce closure? Would policemen clash with bereaved families who come to visit their loved ones? Can protection against the covid-19 virus be more important than remembering our fallen? At the end, the decision was a hybrid solution: access roads to military cemeteries would be closed, police would be at the entrance to all cemeteries and would ask mourners politely to stay out, but mourners would not be stopped. The last thing this country needs is a physical confrontation between the police and the family of a fallen soldier. And so, hundreds did turn out to visit the cemeteries but not the tens of thousands who visit the graves in other years. They wore protective masks and kept social distance to the best of their abilities. The saddest day of the year has just become a little bit sadder.

As one of the parents of a fallen soldier said to a television interviewer: we mourn every day, but on this day we will not endanger other people with possible infection of the corona virus. We understand the need to protect the living at the same time as we honor our dead.

In “normal” years, the ceremony at the military cemeteries is always the same: friends and families gather around the tombstone at 9 or 10 in the morning, we light a candle and stand together, and we bow our heads at exactly 11am as a shrieking siren wails throughout the country for a minute of silence and private prayer. Then there is a kaddish read by the chief military chazzan, and speeches are read by the Prime Minister and the General Chief of Staff of the IDF. At the end of the ceremony, we sing Ha-Tikvah, “The Hope”, our national anthem. We stand together and we sing together, and for 24 hours we forget about our differences.

This year, we are staying at home and we hear the siren through the open windows. At the cemeteries, the IDF has placed a small flag on each and every one of the 23,816 tombstones, each flag with a small black ribbon. In every cemetery and at every memorial site, a kaddish will

be read for the dead. No tomb will be alone, no soldier will be abandoned today as IDF personnel replace the families and friends of our fallen brothers and sisters. And promptly at 8pm, in a crazy emotional rollercoaster, we will switch from sadness and tragedy to a celebration of independence. But that ceremony, too, will be celebrated from our homes, with open windows so that we can hear the joy of our neighbors.

On a personal note, as many of you know, this is for me the saddest day of the year. I remember my paratrooper uncle, killed in the Six-Day War, whom I hardly knew, and I remember my best friend Omri, after whom I named my first born. Omri who will forever be 20, whose hair will never turn to gray, who will never be the fantastic artist he could have been, who will never marry and will never bring grandchildren to his parents Gideon and Batya, who are still alive and whose own hair turned prematurely gray almost overnight, almost exactly 35 years ago. With the exception of my years of service overseas, I have visited Omri's grave on Memorial Day every year since we were 20. This year, because of the closure, I visited him two days ago instead of on Memorial Day. I placed flowers on his tombstone and I watered the plants that are always lush at this time of year. But this year I was alone, and all I saw were hundreds of similar tombstones, all of the same size, same shape and same font of letters, as far as the eye could see, unobstructed as they always are by thousands of other mourners. I looked at the ages of the soldiers laying nearby. 18 and 19 and 20, occasionally a 21 year old. And all I could think of was the potential that all these young men and women represented, taken as they were at such a young age. Each one, an unfulfilled life, each one a whole world in and of themselves. Each one leaving behind parents and brothers and sisters, girlfriends and just friends. So many reserve soldiers who left behind them wives and children.

And I thought to myself: such a terrible price to pay for the fact that our nation, the Jewish people, wants nothing other than to have a small homeland of our own, for which we still need to fight, one which we still need to defend, even after 2,000 years of exile, even after the Holocaust, even after 72 years of independence, even after we gave 23,816 lives of 18 year olds who will never grow old.