

I just returned from the Gush Etzion cemetery having attended a very unusual Yom Hazikaron ceremony. It was a discouraging but also a triumphant experience. Let me explain.

My family often refers to me as a crybaby- and they are right. When I witness an emotionally poignant situation, I find it difficult to suppress my tears. Fortunately for them, I quickly regain my composure and dry my tears. There are three days a year I can't stop crying: On Yom Kippur I sense the overwhelming awe of G-d's presence and His offer to forgive my many failures. On Tisha B'av I sense the frustrating tragedy of wasted opportunities throughout Jewish history. On Yom Hazikaron- Israel Memorial Day- I sense the great sacrifice of Jews in returning to our homeland and facing our enemies. It is an intensely sad day but also a deeply soulful and cathartic experience- I emerge feeling altered or changed. The day opens our hearts to bereaved families who have paid the ultimate price for our return to our homeland. Divisions between religious and secular, between Ashkenazi and Separdi and even between Jews and non-Jews fade, as we stand unified before the immense heroism of our soldiers and the enormity of our common mission. The day reminds us of everything which is right and noble about life in our State of the Jews – even if this State fails to live up to our heady expectations.

In addition to remembering our soldiers and terror victims, my imagination races back to our long and challenging historical journey. As we stand in reverence before the graves of our modern heroes, it is difficult not to remember so many Jews who suffered during our long Exile and whose eyes didn't witness the miracles which we have gazed upon. So many Jews lost their lives as Jews but weren't buried in Israel and in some cases weren't even properly properly. We are 'fortunate' that at least we can

identify the purpose for this heroism: without our courage and commitment, our State would fall. The price is steep but the achievements historic. On this day, I think of all the Jews who died silently while “lost in history”.

This day of national memory has so many powerful images: the moments of silence, the flags at half-mast, the videos honoring the fallen. However, the cemetery ceremonies are the most overwhelming, and emotionally riveting. Thousands inundate cemeteries to visit graves, listen to sorrowful songs, and chant Ani Ma’amin and Hatikvah. Today I attended a ceremony in an empty cemetery. I attended the Gush Etzion ceremony (held a day earlier in accordance with police restrictions) with about 25 people- basically all those directly involved in the actual ceremony. As my eyes scanned the bare cemetery, my imagination reminisced about past gatherings in this cemetery. I longed for the past Yom Hazikaron ceremonies with thousands in attendance. I couldn't forget that autumn midnight when the entire Gush-it seemed-came to honor Ari Fuld HY”d. It was upsetting to stand in an empty quiet cemetery; the silence and the absence were each deafening.

Yet, it was specifically this corona-virus edition of Yom Hazikaron which deepened my appreciation of, and love for, my Jewish State. For the first time in history, we are facing a pandemic “at home”. During past pandemics, Jews were always “outsiders” living on the margins of society. At best, Jewish needs were secondary to the overarching needs of the local population. Pandemics create financial and social pressures and, as society at large was convulsing, Jewish needs could hardly be prioritized. Of course, in so many instances, Jews were scapegoated for epidemics and inevitably faced terrible pogroms which erupted in

the aftermath of these epidemics. We have all learned to appreciate the comfort which our homes have provided during this fearful epidemic. During previous medical crisis's Jews were never "at home.

The corona crisis of 2020 marks the first epidemic we are facing as a people in our homeland. The restrictions which banned most of my neighbors from the ceremonies were installed by our own Ministry of Health and enforced by our own police. The quiet in the cemetery on this day reflected the triumph of Jewish sovereignty. We are finally home and are finally managing our own affairs -and our own medical crisis.

Our return to our homeland is the start of some larger historical process. The wheels of history have begun to advance and we are progressing toward the final stages of history. However, before we consider these heady dreams and expectations, we must appreciate the State of Israel in a more simple or even minimal fashion- it has afforded Jews a home, safety and self- definition. My quiet and empty Yom Hazikaron reinforced the meaning of sovereignty, the value of living at home, and the privilege of adhering to policies which my own people were adopting on behalf of my own people.

In Israel, there were several Orthodox communities which suffered disproportionately higher rates of corona-virus. In many instances, this higher rate of infection was triggered by delayed adaptation of health guidelines. The Army quickly mobilized to both isolate the ill and provide food boxes for needy and elderly- even supplying Mehadrin kashrut (at extra expense) knowing that residents of these quarantined communities would not consider

eating less. The outpouring of love from the general society was inspirational. What treatment would these unfortunate corona victims received in non-Jewish settings? Would they have been blamed and scapegoated? Would they have been ignored and left to suffer the consequences of their decisions? The love and care extended to them, once again reminded me of the great gift of living at home as one as one large (dysfunctional family); family takes care of each other – even when a family member commits a mistake.

Today's empty cemetery reinforced my appreciation of Jewish sovereignty and homeland.