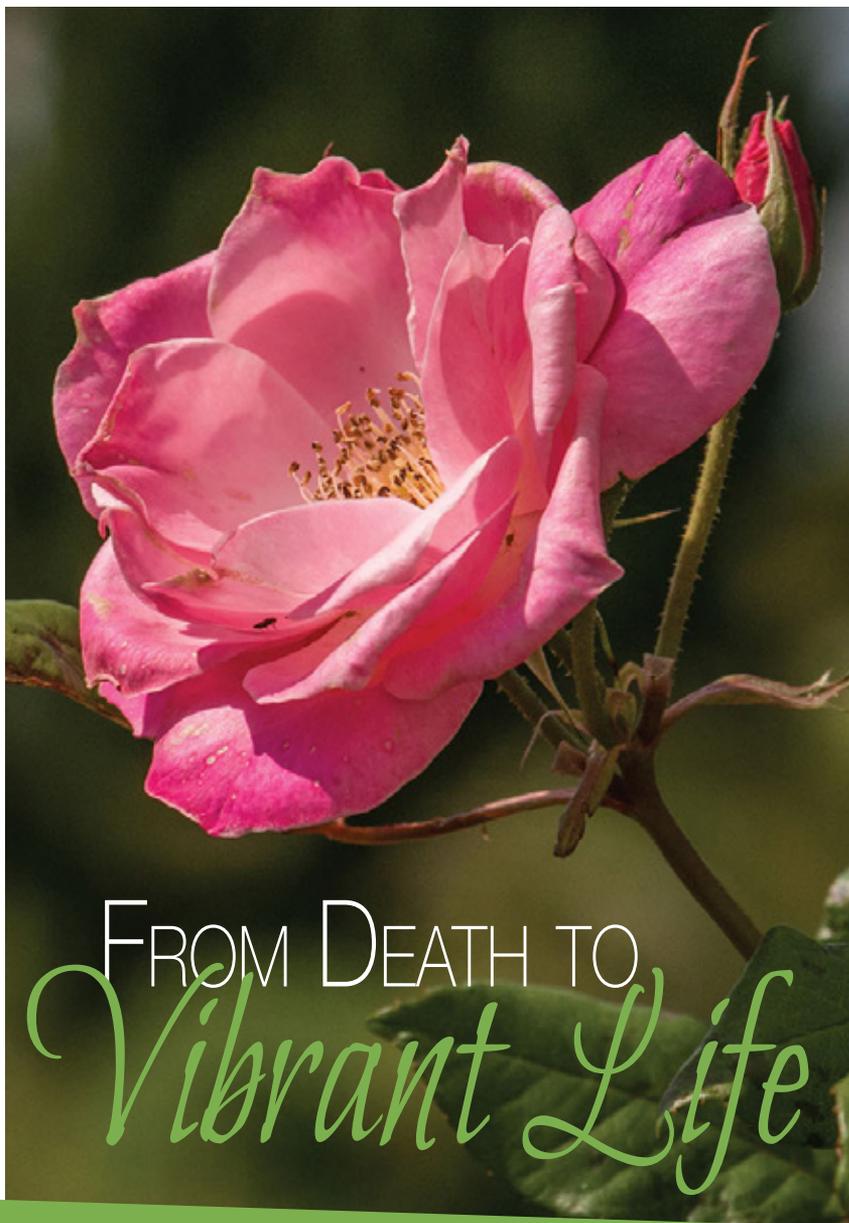


ISRAEL Teaching Letter

www.bridgesforpeace.com

Vol. # 770516 ✦ May 2016



FROM DEATH TO *Vibrant Life*

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Bridges for Peace...Your Israel Connection®



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Spring is my favorite time of year. In the space of just a few weeks we can go from a barren wintry landscape to vibrant life. The hills of Israel are carpeted with a wide variety of wild flowers, birds are singing and the trees sprout with fresh new green leaves. It is also in the spring that we remember some significant events in the history of the Jewish people. It starts with *Yom HaShoah*, the day when we mourn for the six million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust; then just six days later we remember the soldiers who fell in battle and victims of terrorism; and finally on the next day we commemorate the establishment of the State of Israel. As Christians called to bless the people of Israel, it is vitally important that we understand the significance of these events to the Jewish people around the world, and to all Israelis.

The Second World War

During the six years between 1939 and 1945, evil was unleashed in our world. At its foundation was the belief put forth by various European philosophers that there existed an *ubermensch*, or over-man, a kind of super human being. This anti-God philosophy was enthusiastically adopted by Hitler and his Nazi henchmen, who viewed the Germanic people as the most advanced race—the *ubermenschen*. This was superimposed against the *untermenschen* (those considered to be subhuman). Once adopted, this humanistic ideology resulted in the deaths of 60 million people. Twenty to twenty five million were military deaths. The remaining deaths were civilians including gypsies, Jews, Poles, the handicapped, religious minorities, blacks, homosexuals and more. The Jewish people, however, were singled out with a ferocious intensity. Hitler's desire was simple; to completely annihilate them. Six million were killed in six years just because they were Jews. The Jewish world was robbed of one third of all its people.

It is impossible to fathom the depth of pain that the Holocaust has caused the Jewish people. I have met many Holocaust survivors and many second generation Holocaust victims (the children of Holocaust survivors). Every Jewish home was impacted directly or indirectly. When I recently met with the mayor of one of Israel's towns, we shared our life stories with one another. His parents had survived the Holocaust. I listened with sorrow in my heart to the horrific events of his family history. It is so hard to imagine the depth of pain that his family had endured. In my response, I referred to it as a horrific tragedy. I'll never forget his response, "No, it's normal. Everyone has such a story."

Every year Israel memorializes the Holocaust victims on *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day). The date on the Hebrew calendar is Nisan 27, which this year occurs on May 5th.

It is a solemn day. Places of entertainment and restaurants are closed. The prime minister and president of Israel gather with other dignitaries at Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust Remembrance Exhibit. In every corner of the land the lost sons and daughters of Abraham are remembered. A siren is sounded for two minutes, and the entire nation stops to remember those who were stolen from their people.



The shoes of thousands who were murdered in concentration camps

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Two of Israel's Prophets Told of Times Like This

"We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear and not of peace. Ask now, and see, whether a man is ever in labor with child? So why do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor, and all faces turned pale? Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it" (Jer. 30:5–7). Thank God, a remnant of Israel was saved from the systematic attempt to annihilate the Jewish people by the hellish Nazi regime.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a valley filled with dry bones; a valley filled with dead people and the Lord told him to prophesy life to the dry bones. *"Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD"'"...Then He said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!"'" (Ezek. 37:4–6, 11).*



"O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!
Thus says the Lord God to these bones: 'Surely I
will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live.'"

In the midst of intense suffering, the Jewish people never lost sight of the scriptural promises of a return of the people of Israel to their ancestral homeland, Israel. The psalmist said, *"When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad. Bring back our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South. **Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him"** (Ps. 126 emphasis added).*

Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day)

Israel's Memorial Day occurs just six days after *Yom HaShoah*. On the 4th of Iyar (this year the 11th of May) Israelis mourn over all who have fallen in Israel's wars, or were felled by acts of terror. Sadly this number increases every year.

During my first year in Israel, my husband and I were volunteers on a *kibbutz*, (Israeli collective settlement). Kibbutz Ginegar is a small community with only 500 inhabitants. It was a time of immersion in Israeli society. We quickly learned that the cycle of life in Israel is governed by holidays, most of which are biblical, as we celebrated them together with our Israeli friends.

The event that had the most impact on me that first year was *Yom HaZikaron*. This is Memorial Day, the day when Israelis remember the men and women who lost their lives defending the country. In the United States, Memorial Day had little meaning for me. I hadn't lost someone close to me in war, and death really hadn't touched me significantly. I would read that US soldiers died somewhere, but I never knew any of them. But, in Israel, *Yom HaZikaron* is a universally observed day of remembrance.

Why is Memorial Day So Different Here?

For Israelis, danger is a way of life, either from war or terror, or other considerable tensions. They know no other reality. At the age of 18 virtually every Israeli male and most females are inducted into the military. The men serve three years of active duty and then are in the reserves (*miloim*) until somewhere between the ages of 40 and 50 (depending on the branch of service). Women serve for two years.

In a land where hostilities have never totally abated, this is a time of fear. Parents dread the day their children enter the army. Many have shared with me that for the entire time their sons or daughters are in military service, they don't sleep well at night. Any phone call can bring news of tragedy. The people of Israel live with the dread of losing their sons, husbands, nephews, grandsons and brothers. Many grew up without fathers.

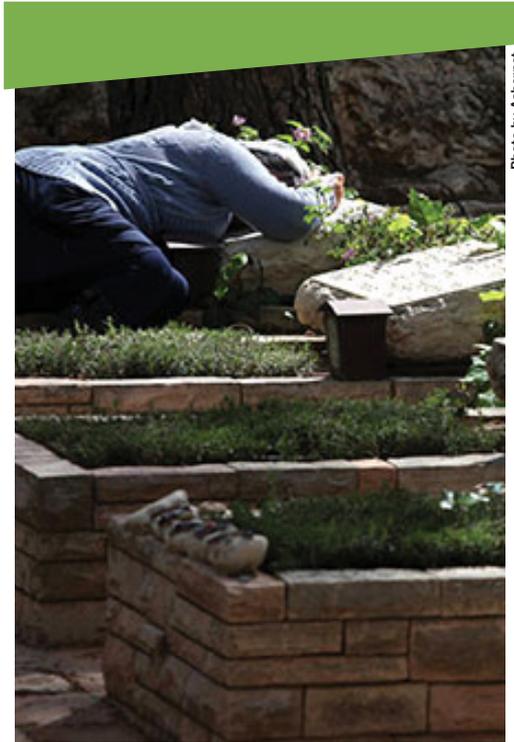


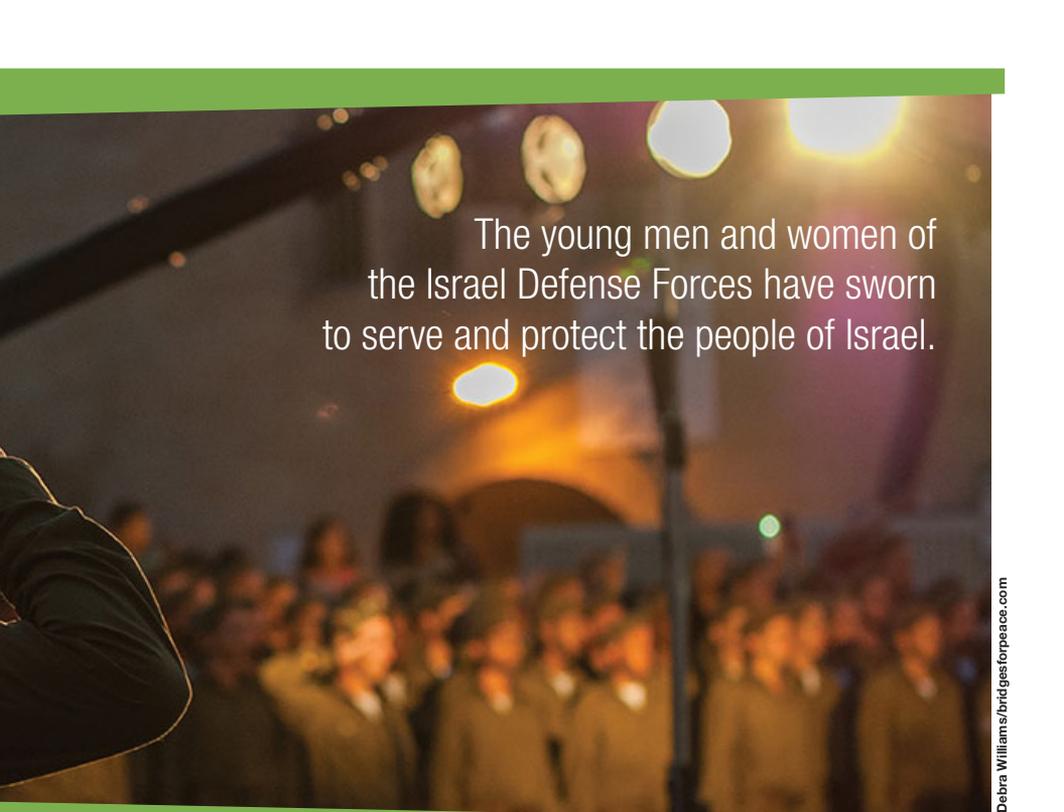
Photo by Ashernet



This is poignantly felt as we read the following quote found in the memoirs of Moshe Shamir, which he wrote in 1968. “My son is named after my brother who fell in the War of Independence. This was exactly 20 years ago, when the almonds of 1948 were in full bloom. I am named after my father’s brother, who fell in the ranks of the Red Army at the gates of Warsaw. This happened in 1920. My father was named after the brother of his father, who was murdered in the Ukraine during a pogrom by rampaging peasants. This was in 1891. ...Are we now still at the beginning of the road? At the middle? At the end? I only know this: in this half-century in which I live and breathe, the fear of death has never left our home...”

As of April 2015, 23,320 soldiers and victims of terror have died, most in the defense of this country during five major wars (Independence, Sinai Campaign, Six Day War, *Yom Kippur* War, and Operation Peace for Galilee, not to mention the ongoing war of attrition with some neighboring states and ever-present terrorism). In relation to Israel’s total population this is a huge number of people.

At Kibbutz Ginegar, I quickly realized how small Israel is and how connected everyone is. The reality of living in a nation with only eight million inhabitants is entirely different than living in the US with its 319 million citizens. Each time I read in the paper of the death of a soldier, I would go to work and find people crying—nearly always someone on the *kibbutz* had a connection to the person who had died.



The young men and women of
the Israel Defense Forces have sworn
to serve and protect the people of Israel.

Debra Williams/bridgesforpeace.com

It seems that much of the lives of Israelis are defined by their losses. One of the first stories told to me by my new Israeli friends was unique to Kibbutz Ginegar. On *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) in 1948, four sons were born in the *kibbutz*. For such a small community, this was an outstanding event. Tragically, 25 years later on *Yom Kippur*, during the *Yom Kippur War*, two of them were killed.

On the evening of *Yom HaZikaron*, a siren will sound throughout the country. The entire nation will stop their activities and stand still in memory of the courageous soldiers who gave their lives for their country. Again at 11 a.m. the following morning, the siren will sound. Cars will stop on the highways while their drivers stand beside them in silent thought. Many will be remembering a family member or friend who died.

That first year on the *kibbutz*, the entire community gathered for a memorial service. The dim lights of the memorial candles illuminated the pictures of seven men from Kibbutz Ginegar who had fallen in the defense of Israel. Families were comforted by their friends; memories were shared of the seven in a solemn time which is engraved on my memory. Even though I didn't understand the words spoken in Hebrew, I could feel the deep emotions and the pain of the people I had come to care about. This scene is repeated in every corner of the land as the people recognize the great human sacrifice statehood has required.

“Thus says the Lord God: ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

(Ezek. 37:9–10)

On *Yom HaZikaron*, we at Bridges for Peace will also join in the time of remembering as we identify with the Jewish people. There is no greater gift God could give this nation than peace. The people cry out from the depths of their being for peace. I will continue to “*pray for the peace of Jerusalem*” and for the comfort of God’s chosen people.

Ezekiel prophesied, “*Thus says the Lord God: ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army*” (Ezek. 37:9–10).

Celebrating Israel’s Statehood

“*Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,*” says the LORD” (Ezek. 37:12–14).

The history of the Jewish people preceding the declaration of statehood was incredibly painful. They were cut down in Europe—men, women and children. Surely they did seem without hope—as the prophet describes—like a valley of dry bones. Yet, God had a plan to resurrect them, to breathe new life into them, and to restore them to their ancient homeland. It is a process that isn’t completed. Many of Israel’s scholars refer to the birth of the state as “the flowering of our redemption.”

The flowering of
Israel's redemption



Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a beautiful book called *Israel, an Echo of Eternity*. He eloquently said, “The wonder of the risen Israel and the gratitude to Him who has raised martyred Israel from the dead belong together. We are witnesses of the resurrection. And being a witness is a transformation. The return to the land is a profound indication of the possibility of redemption for all men. Stand still and behold! The unbelievable has come about. The vision was a divine promise, and the way was paved with sacrifices... The State of Israel is not the fulfillment of the Messianic promise, but it makes the Messianic promise plausible.”

We celebrate Israel’s statehood on the day after *Yom HaZikaron*. In Hebrew it is *Yom HaAtzmaut*, and it is a day of unabashed celebration. At first it seemed incongruous to celebrate with flags, parades and fireworks so quickly after the wrenching sadness of *Yom HaZikaron*. It seems that Israelis have recognized a truth that sorrow often precedes joy. Without the sacrifice of the many there never would have been a reason to celebrate the state. We see this truth in other ways. Before a child is born, a woman goes through the pain of childbirth—first the sorrow, then the joy. The psalmist said: “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy” (Ps. 126:5). Here every joyous event also carries the memory of pain. At Jewish weddings, a glass is crushed under the foot of the bridegroom so that all present will remember the destruction of the Temple.



Photo by Ashernet



Andrew Pilcher/bridgesforpeace.com



Photo by Ashernet

Israel's independence was purchased with the shed blood of the courageous men and women who died to secure her freedom. I suppose this is true of every nation on earth. But, in a nation only 68 years old, which rose from the ashes of the Holocaust, it is close...too close. Perhaps that is why Israel honors her war heroes before celebrating her statehood.

Suddenly, in a heartbeat the nation goes from deep mourning to joyous celebration. It is Independence Day! The day is a cacophony of celebration filled with picnics, air shows, fireworks, dancing and parades. Just as the nation mourned with all their heart, they now rejoice with everything in them.

Many in Israel will also gather in the synagogues to thank God for the miracle of Israel. This year a number of us from Bridges for Peace will join Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and others in Efrat for a special thanksgiving service, followed of course by a barbecue! We will recite the Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120–134), hear inspiring messages from a number of learned rabbis and sing songs of praise. It is a marvelous event, as Jews and Christians join together to thank God for bringing the Jewish people home and establishing their state.



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In many synagogues a special prayer for the State of Israel is prayed. In the *Koren Siddur* this prayer is explained, “The Prayer for the State of Israel: Introduced after the birth of the modern State of Israel in 1948. A key element of the prayer is the phrase ‘the first flowering of our redemption.’ It means that the restoration of Israel as a sovereign nation in its own land was not merely an event in secular history. It was the fulfillment of the prophetic vision—first stated by Moses in the quoted verse from Deuteronomy—that Israel would one day be gathered from ‘the furthestmost lands under the heavens,’ an astonishingly precise prediction of what actually happened. According to the third-century Babylonian teacher Shmuel, ‘The only difference between this world and the messianic age is subjection to foreign powers’ (Berakhot 34b). In this view, Israel’s independence was in itself a redemptive moment, a return to Jewish self-determination, self government and self-defense under the sovereignty of God alone.” It is a beautiful prayer.

Prayer for the State of Israel

“Heavenly Father, Israel’s rock and redeemer, bless the State of Israel, the first flowering of our redemption. Shield it under the wings of Your loving-kindness and spread over it the Tabernacle of Your peace. Send Your light and truth to its leaders, ministers and counselors, and direct them with good counsel before You.

“Strengthen the hands of the defenders of our Holy Land; grant them deliverance, our God and crown them with the crown of victory. Grant peace in our land and everlasting joy to its inhabitants.

“As for our brothers, the whole house of Israel, remember them in all the lands of their dispersion, and swiftly lead them upright to Zion your city, and Jerusalem Your dwelling place, as it is written in the *Torah* of Moses Your servant: ‘Even if you

are scattered to the furthest lands under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and take you back. The LORD your God will bring you to the land your ancestors possessed and you will possess it; and He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. Then the LORD your God will open up your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live’ (Deut. 30).

“Unite our hearts to love and revere Your name and observe all the words of Your *Torah*, and swiftly send us Your righteous anointed one of the house of David, to redeem those who long for Your salvation.

“Appear in your glorious majesty over all the dwellers on earth and let all who breathe declare: ‘The LORD God of Israel is King and His kingship has dominion over all. Amen, Selah’”



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On *Yom HaShoah*, we will join all of Israel in mourning the unspeakable loss of over six million Jewish people during the Holocaust. A few days later on *Yom HaZikaron* we will stand in silent memory of the more than 23,000 who have died in defense of the State of Israel and her people (including me) and on *Yom HaAtzmaut*, we will join this nation in celebration. We will read psalms in the synagogue, picnic, ooh and aah over the air show, play games and have a great time.

I once heard a Jewish comedian who summarized Jewish holidays by saying: “They tried to kill us; we won; let’s eat.” I think that’s what we’ll do! We will remember the past, sorrows and victories, and then we’ll begin to seriously rejoice in the living, rejoice in the miracle of the State of Israel! I hope that you will join us in these special times for the people of Israel. Pray that God will comfort (Isa. 40:1), and protect them as they continue to fight the enemy forces arrayed against them on many levels. Pray that He will give wisdom to Israel’s leaders as they work to make sure that this nation He has resurrected goes forward in

His strength, fulfilling His word to the honor and glory of His name.



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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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