

Rabbi's Reflections:            A Lesson in Life

On 27 *Nisan* (Monday night April 24 and Tuesday April 25), we mark *Yom Ha-Sho'ah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day). On 4 *Iyyar* (Monday night May 1 and Tuesday May 2), we observe *Yom Ha-Zikkaron* (Israel's Remembrance Day), and on 5 *Iyyar* (that night and Wednesday May 3), we celebrate *Yom Ha-Atzma'ut* (Israel's Independence Day). In the USA, we commemorate Memorial Day on May 29, and Independence Day over a month later on July 4.

On *Yom Ha-Zikkaron*, places of entertainment close. A siren sounds for two minutes in the morning, and everybody stops what s/he is doing and stands still, even if one is in a car. I suspect it still is marked so solemnly because almost everyone has lost someone in at least one of the wars over the last fifty-eight years. Of course, everything changes at night and people party on *Yom Ha-Atzma'ut*. I think we miss something in the USA when we make Memorial Day a day for a long weekend and for a famous sporting event, and then celebrate Independence Day so unconnected to it.

I will not belabor the obvious—neither Israel nor the USA would exist without fallen soldiers. We should learn lessons about how to live life in the juxtaposition of death and rebirth (Israel), or death and birth (USA). At least, pondering death forces us to confront our mortality and how we face it, and in looking death in the eye, live life.

Some of Judaism's ideas about death react to ancient Egypt and its cult of death. We know about the pyramids, and a number of our rules keep us from emulating their death practices. In addition, their concept of death also includes a hedonistic attitude to life. Herodotus wrote that a person at Egyptian joyous events either showed an image of a dead person, or presented a coffin containing the embalmed remains of an ancestor to all present and said, "Look upon this and be merry, for you will be like this when dead." Similarly, the Romans exhibited a skeleton and said, "Let us enjoy life while we may." The prophet Isaiah mentions a similar attitude, "Eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (22:13), which he, of course, criticizes. Philosophies like this bring despair and show a failure of nerve. Living like this should result in an attitude like *Qohelet*, Ecclesiastes, "Utter futility! Utter futility! All is futile!" (1:1). I have said while discussing happiness, that life is full of pain, and to avoid sorrow misses out on life.

Death can teach one to indulge or despair, but not in Judaism. We look to God to "teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart" (Psalm 90:12). We live with our limitations: help the less fortunate; comfort the bereaved; lighten the sufferer's sorrows; strengthen those of failing courage; cheerfully and smilingly greet those who cross, or join us on, our path through life; and at our end, we leave this a better world. Life may be brief, but we determine its quality. In fact, life's very brevity teaches us to discriminate what we put into it. Seen in this perspective, *Yom Ha-Sho'ah* and *Yom Ha-Zikkaron* followed immediately by *Yom Ha-Atzma'ut* very well may teach us how to live life.