

**The Silver Platter Upon Which Our Freedom Rests:
Thoughts on Yom HaZikaron and Memorial Day 2020
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I experienced Yom HaZikaron only once in the land of Israel, but I never forgot it. Yom HaZikaron is the Israeli version of Memorial Day, a 24-hour period set aside for a nation to remember its fallen soldiers. At 8 p.m., sirens blast throughout the country announcing this most solemn day. The seriousness with which Israelis observe Yom HaZikaron says a great deal about the country. Rich and poor, Israelis of every political persuasion have been affected by the cruel touch of war and have lost someone dear to them. When the day comes, it is common to see people making their way on a pilgrimage of memory as they visit the cemetery, gather around the grave shed a tear, or share a laugh as they tell stories of their loved one, their friend, their neighbor.

At exactly 11 o'clock in the morning, another siren sounds. I remember walking near the *Rova*, in the middle of Jerusalem, when I heard the wail and was stunned by what was happening around me. Everything stopped. The bustling city normally filled with noises of every kind suddenly fell silent. Most shocking was the traffic. Cars stopped in their places and both driver and passenger stood in silent attention. I was witness to an extraordinary moment of national unity, bound up in an act of remembrance.

Observing the scene, I remembered the poem of the great Israeli poet Natan Alterman, entitled: "Magash Hakesef", or "The Silver Platter". Written in 1947, before the State of Israel was even declared, this poem was written in response to Chaim Weizmann's words in December 1947, after the adoption of the UN Partition Plan for Palestine: "No state not give the Jews but an opportunity".

In the poem, Alterman imagines two soldiers, a man and a woman. They appear walking forward through the mist. Their uniforms are soiled, reflecting a hard-fought battle.

Natan Alterman continues,

Unwashed, weary unto death, not knowing rest,

But wearing youth like dewdrops in their hair. — Silently the two approach And stand.

Are they of the quick or of the dead?

Through wondering tears, the people stare. “Who are you, the silent two?”

And they reply: “We are the silver platter

Upon which the Jewish State was served to you.”

Alterman’s searing words pulsed in my mind. The scene taking place before me was a nation honoring those who lost their lives serving as the silver platter, those whose sacrifice made the State of Israel possible. That point is made crystal clear every year without the artistry of Natan Alterman, simply by structure of the Israeli civil calendar. You see as day leads into night how Yom Hazikaron gives way to Yom Ha-Atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. The rush of emotions, from the depths of sadness to unbridled joy, is dizzying. In that moment of transition, Alterman’s words are suspended in the air: *We are the silver platter Upon which the Jewish State was served to you.* My one and only Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha-Atzmaut in Israel took place more than 40 years ago, but I remember the power of that experience as if it were yesterday.

This Monday is Memorial Day in America.

The pain of loss that families suffer is no less in America than in Israel. The sadness of growing up without a parent weighs no less heavily on children; the specter of losing a child or a spouse is no less excruciating in America than in Israel.

But I need not tell you that Memorial Day is a very different national experience here in the United States.

For too many of us, the focus of Memorial Day has more to do with the official beginning of summer than the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice so that we could enjoy our freedoms.

Maybe Israelis approach Yom HaZikaron so seriously because serving in the IDF is an expectation of citizenship, whereas in America, the last year there was a national draft lottery was 1975.

Maybe the difference is that because Israel is such a small country, the degrees of separation feel much closer between those who died and the general population.

But truth be told, this day that we refer to as Memorial Day in America was born in controversy in the days following the Civil War.

Even before the war was over, families of fallen Confederate soldiers were visiting the graves of their loved ones and took to decorating them in their honor.

By the end of the war in 1865, it was a recognized practice in the South and won the name of Decoration Day. Meanwhile, the practice was also taking hold in the North as families on both sides of the Mason Dixon line tried to find ways to remember the lives of 600,000 fallen soldiers. Rather than coming together in their grief, Southerners felt resentful that the Northerners were usurping their day and changed the date of their commemoration to coincide with the birthday of Jefferson David, the President of the Confederacy.

This lasted until the conclusion of the First World War, when the entire nation could come together to remember more than 116,000 servicemen that came from the North, the South, the East and the West. The name "Memorial Day", which was first attested in 1882, gradually became more common than "Decoration Day" after World War Two but was not declared the official name by federal law until 1967. On June 28, 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act. After some initial confusion and unwillingness to comply, all 50 states adopted Congress' change within a few years. All of this came to pass during the most intense anti-war years in American History. The shooting of students at Kent State took place in 1970.

Our nation's ambivalence with Memorial Day was ignited again this past week as President Trump ordered flags to fly at half-mast during this 3 day Memorial Day weekend to pay homage to those who died from Coronavirus. This notion of our nation remembering those who died of this dread virus is a perfectly appropriate

idea, but why this weekend? Why did we not do it weeks ago? Why on Memorial Day? Does it not detract from those who are remembering their loved ones? Don't they deserve the singular focus of our nation on those who made the ultimate sacrifice to keep our country free? Memorial Day has remained a day that has more often shown the division in our country and our ambivalence with war, more than our unity in mourning those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Those who died defending this country are no different than the two young Israelis Natan Alterman pictured in his poem. They are the silver platter of our country.

Our Torah reading this morning speaks to how best to honor those who fight for our country. As we begin the book of Numbers, we read of a detailed census of the Tribes in order to determine how many soldiers they had to send into battle. However, the Torah uses an unusual word for counting, *Nasu et rosh*: literally, "lift up the head" of every person being counted. One does that in order to see their faces, to see their humanity. The Torah uses the same verb a few chapters later when Aaron is commanded to bless the people with these words: *Yisah Adonai Panav Elecha*, May God lift the Divine face to you. In other words, to lift up a human being's head is to see the Divine spark in each of us.

Memorial Day in America should be a national moment when we remind ourselves, by opening our eyes, to see the faces of those lost. Let us pause to reflect on the human being that was lost, the laughter, the joy and the potential that their life represented, and the pain that their death left in their wake as they defended us. I wonder how different it would be if we changed the date of Memorial Day to July 3 and commemorated our war dead with the reminder that freedom is not free, that nations are not delivered to the next generation on a *Magash Hakesef*, a silver platter.

Did you know that America has a National Moment of Remembrance, just as Israel does? Americans are asked, wherever they are at **3:00 p.m.** local time on **Memorial Day**, to pause for the duration of one minute to remember those who have died in military service to the United States. We don't need sirens blasting across America for citizens to express the thanks a grateful nation. A moment when every American takes an accounting of more than 1.1 million Americans who have died for our country. A moment when we lift up their heads to see their faces, to see the Divine spark that illuminated their countenance, and ensure that their contribution to protect our freedom is not being forgotten or taken for granted. If our very divided country cannot come together for that, then what will unite us?

They are our silver platter, will we not acknowledge it?!

Let us offer a prayer for this Memorial Day:

Our God, God of our ancestors, we thank you for the numerous blessings you have bestowed upon our nation. Out of the many nations of the world, our country has been blessed with a singular opportunity - to demonstrate how peoples of many faiths and heritages can live side by side and enrich one another's lives through friendship and the sharing of our unique traditions.

We are united this day in a solemn act of gratitude: to those who have served in our nation's defense, to those who have risked their personal safety to save the lives of others, and above all to those who have died serving this country. Their sacrifices are forever remembered by us and by our children for generations to come. We do not forget.

Our hearts go out to those serving today in our armed forces, and to their families. Those of us who are veterans of previous wars know best of all what they must be feeling, what their spouses and children are feeling, what they pray for. In all our many faiths, we are united in this: our prayers are with those who serve our country today. We ask God that they may return speedily and in good health and safety to their loved ones.

And may God grant each of us the wisdom to uphold this nation's virtues, that it may continue to serve as a beacon of liberty and harmony between peoples, for all the world to see. Amen. (Rabbi Laurence Milder)