

Finding Meaning Amidst Destruction: Reflections on a Recent Visit to Israel

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In early 2023, Israel was proclaimed number four in the World Happiness Report. This was just as internal conflict, with judicial review as the pretext, roiled the nation. Then came October 7, putting any idea of a happy nation to rest. How would Israel rank if observed again today, one shudders to think.

And yet, despite just returning from a trip to Israel to bear witness and provide support after its darkest hours and in the midst of the war waging in Gaza, I can't help but be optimistic about Israel's long-term prospects of being filled with "happy people" once again. Like others in the positive psychology school, Emily Esfahani Smith in her book, *The Power of Meaning*, reminds us that happiness is not about just feeling good and content, but about making meaning in what often seems like a meaningless world. While Brad Stolberg in the New York Times reminds us that "not everything has to be meaningful" I can't help but believe that all the ingredients for meaning emerging from the pain and sorrow of the now is inevitable.

Smith identifies four categories of meaning making: purpose, belonging, transcendence, and storytelling. Meeting survivors, family members, volunteers, and educational leaders, I came to realize that Israel is by



nature a country of meaning making. Its very essence is one that takes the worst experiences of humanity and from almost nothing creates a powerful fabric of a society that is resilient and relentlessly future-focused. At its core it knows how to do purpose, belonging, transcendence, and storytelling.

A Nation of Purpose

While filled with dissent and disagreement, real and undeniable frustration, one can't visit Israel today and not see that it is united by a sense of purpose. The public marketing campaign of B'yachad N'netzeach-together we will be victorious-might be a slogan, but it is also a sentiment that seems broadly felt. This is not the war cry of an angry nation but the symbol of a resolute one, dedicated to bringing its citizens home from captivity and ridding itself of the evil on its doorstep. Though there are disagreements about how to achieve these goals, one gets the impression that this is a nation with a clear-eyed sense of purpose.

A Nation of Belonging

The stories of backyard weddings of soldiers with their weary battle-worn buddies serenaded by the most famous singers in the country are not just cute anecdotes, but rather exemplify that Israel is a nation of belonging. B'yachad-together, of the aforementioned slogan, is not just a word but a motivating force, one that inspired the Brothers in Arms movement as it rallied against the judicial reform effort and now as it rallies the nation through a movement of service and volunteerism. It motivates

the nation as it houses its refugees from the south and the north in every available hotel and apartment, creating preschools in lobbies, and fabricating schools wherever it can find a nook or cranny. As we heard frequently about the ways the government is perceived to be failing, everyday Israelis are stepping up to support each other creating a fabric of mutual support and care.

A Nation of Transcendence

Stories of people reaching for the ineffable in times of war are as old as war itself. So while cliché, one can't help but see a nation that is reaching beyond itself toward something greater than itself. This was most evident for me when sitting with five heroes from one large extended Bedouin family. These courageous men not only saved their nephew, who himself was absolutely heroic on October 7, but many others along the way. The way they spoke about a sense of shared fate, understanding that their future is inextricably linked to that of their Jewish neighbors, exemplified for me the ways that Israelis will not settle for being citizens of just any nation. They understand that Israel means something, and to survive requires a shared sense of mutuality and responsibility.

A Nation of Storytelling

Human resilience is not measured by our ability to avoid difficult experiences, but by our ability to find the redemptive even within the most difficult of them. As a nation of survivors, Israel knows this more than most. Ultimately, the ways that Israel will understand

and tell the story of October 7 and its aftermath will be the true test of its capacity to find meaning in this moment. It is a period of immense and unimaginable pain. You see that and feel that everywhere you go and in every conversation you have.

While there will never be a way to make sense of the horrors of the past two months and those that are sure to follow, there will be a way to tell a story of growth through trauma. This will test Israel's ability to embrace the truly horrific, to develop new insights into its path forward. That too will require additional sacrifice and significant self-reflection. And while it's too soon to imagine Israel being "happy" again, I wouldn't bet against its capacity to return to at least number four on that list.