



April 13, 2002

## Needing Israel

By DANIEL GORDIS

### JERUSALEM

Tuesday was Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, an agonizing day. In the afternoon, at work, we gathered in a circle while some colleagues quietly read the names of relatives who had been exterminated by the Nazis. Some had long lists; one even brought pictures. During the ceremony, word spread that a group of Israeli Defense Force soldiers — 13, it would turn out — had been killed in an ambush in Jenin. Another, in Nablus, fell to friendly fire.

It is hard to describe what 14 soldiers means in this small country. People make frantic calls to find out where their husbands and fathers are. Then the hourly news announces to the entire country the location and time of each funeral. At such moments it feels that living here makes one part of an extended family.

No one in that family wants this war. But very few people here think we can do without it. Israelis understand why we're fighting. We also know why our soldiers are dying. There are significant pockets of armed resistance in the Jenin camp, but there are also lots of civilians. So we can't just bomb from the skies. We send soldiers house to house, only to watch as Hamas fighters use those same civilians as shields. On Tuesday we paid a heavy price.

We had 14 funerals because we won't fight this war the way the Russians fought in Grozny or the way the United States fought in Afghanistan — from the safety of the skies. Hardly a building in Grozny was spared in the bombing; the Russians knew the price they'd pay if they tried to fight on the street. If Israel hit a hospital from the skies the way that the Americans did not too long ago in Afghanistan, just imagine the world's reaction.

Palestinians say we won't let their ambulances in Jenin. Yet two weeks ago Israeli soldiers stopped a Palestinian ambulance with a child in the back on a stretcher, and under him soldiers found an

explosive belt. Palestinians say that we're not letting them clear their dead from the streets. The Israeli Army claims that's a lie, that the Palestinians are leaving the bodies there intentionally for good footage on CNN. Who's telling the truth? I don't know.

Last week, when the siege around the Church of the Nativity began, many Israelis understood why we couldn't just shoot our way in, but the frustration was palpable. If it had been Israelis in a church, or a synagogue, and Palestinians on the outside, how long would the siege have lasted? Everyone here knows the answer. When the Palestinians burned down the synagogue at Joseph's tomb in October 2000, the Vatican didn't speak up. When they later destroyed an ancient synagogue near Jericho, European liberals didn't lose sleep.

The siege outside the church began in foul weather. According to reports on Israeli radio, some soldiers stood for hours in the driving rain, making sure that none of the armed Palestinians inside would escape. All that afternoon, the residents of Bethlehem pointed at the rain and shouted: "Get out of here. We hate you. The world hates you. And look, even the heavens hate you."

Maybe the world does hate us for having the audacity to protect ourselves, for meaning it when we say "never again." Maybe the world is secretly delighted that no war can be made to look civilized, so the Europeans and the Palestinians can point their fingers at us and say, "See, they do it, too." Then maybe what they did won't seem so horrific, so unforgivable.

One thing important to Jews is remembering. We won't forget the 20th century and the world's complicity, and when we recall this week, in which we buried 14 of our sons, brothers, husbands and fathers who didn't have to die except for our decision to do this fighting the hard way, we'll remember the world's double standard.

On Tuesday night, my 12-year-old son, Avi, told me about a Yom Hashoah class discussion about whether the Holocaust could happen again — a session he said he found "stupid." Why? I asked. "Because we have a strong army," he answered, "America is our friend, and look out there now — we take care of ourselves."

The next morning I watched him head off on his bike to school, with pride, security and confidence. That's a lot more than Jewish kids in Europe had a few decades ago. It's a lot more than some

Jewish kids have in Europe this week. It's why we need this country. And it's why we'll fight to keep it.

*Daniel Gordis is director of the Jerusalem Fellows Program at the Mandel School for Educational and Social Leadership in Jerusalem. He is the author of the forthcoming, "If a Place Can Make You Cry: Dispatches from an Anxious State."*

[Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Information](#)