

We, the Living and the DeadA/7  
3 pp

Remembrance Day for the fallen of Israel is an attempt by the nation to express immeasurable sorrow and grief. Throughout the year we, the inhabitants of this land, see people dear and familiar to us die in battle. Often we feel the presence of death on our very backs, until the difference between the living and the dead becomes blurred to us. Often we wonder whether to use the present or the past tense when speaking about our friends and relatives. And in visits with friends, or sometimes when we are alone with our thoughts, we suddenly feel that life is so fragile.... It is as if we are balanced on a tightrope. Everything depends on which way the wind blows the mortar shell, and on how quick one is in dodging when the trigger is pulled.

With us the difference between life and death is very small, and people are cautious about predicting the future. It seems that every few years a huge axe comes down on us, out of nowhere. In the last war men were killed whose fathers fell in the War of Independence, or whose brothers fell in the 1967 war, or in the same war, only a day before them. There were men killed who had been wounded in previous wars, who had already touched enemy soil before, and who had returned from captivity in enemy prisons. There were also those killed who had received commendation in former wars, who fought on "Givat Hatachmoshet" (in East Jerusalem) or were in unit "101". There were those killed who had buried their friends in the last war ... or in the last battle.

One who escaped death on one occasion is not necessarily assured of escaping it again. We are all only flesh and blood, even the strongest among us. In remembering how vulnerable we are and how open our bodies are to attack and destruction, perhaps we should be kinder to one another and lighten the load that each of us carries at a time when the fate of every individual is so uncertain.

Remembrance Day is a national day of mourning rather than an individual one. On that day the men who died are remembered apart from any particular dates or hours. Sometimes they are remembered suddenly and distinctly, and sometimes they are remembered less clearly but continually. The memories are very personal, and have become parts of our souls and our associations.

Remembrance Day is a day of national catharsis on which the nation brings itself forth as a sacrifice; but in this case, not to any Higher Spirit. In the twentieth century, in a developed nation, in full daylight, every citizen of Israel stands at attention to the blast of a siren that falls upon cities and villages, pavements and dirt paths and many-storied buildings. And so we remember, for there is no escaping the Jewish fate.

In the crevices and caves of the earth we can hide from the Yiddish of our fathers and the religion of our grandfathers; we can flee to Australia or join some group of volunteers ... but never will we escape from what we are: a Jewish people and a land of Jews.

This is not abstract or ideological, but factual. In order to insure us the strength to stand up to the strike of the axe, and to help us in the loneliness that passes and returns for the survivors, we must accept the true nature of our existence. We must not live on the threshold of destruction, but must retain our taste for life and our instinct of national survival.

On Remembrance Day as on every day of national significance, many tend to use highly-emotional language. Since these words are so carefully phrased, they are naturally fewer than ordinary words in prose, and therefore many people rely on ready-made clichés. On gravestones many Biblical phrases are inscribed, such as "They were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions", or "lovely and the pleasant in their lives, even in their death they were united".

For this reason these words continue to be applied to the dead even when there is no emotional meaning or application to them. A constructive sentence such as "In their death they commanded us to live" says absolutely nothing to us. For we, the living, are no different than we, the dead,

and this is because of the very thin frail line that separates the two. He who is shot in an ambush, or wounded in a sudden spray of fire, or hurt by a shell that explodes right by his side, whether by a military post or in the supermarket, does not think, "It's good to die for our homeland." Death is not good but bad, whether it is natural or violent, and it frightens and shocks to the depths of the soul those who survive.

Indeed it is up to the living to submit to or reject this fear. It can be dealt with by living life to the fullest, and by having the courage to see life through to the end; as a people and as individuals.

Remembrance Day is a national holiday rather than an individual one. And as in all national-collective, state-designated holidays, there is no ceremony, torch or cliché that can penetrate the full spiritual consciousness of every man. We will wrestle with these matters in depth, and perhaps then we can remove some of the monotony and meaninglessness from our Remembrance Day observances, which were established on the calendar and institutionalized by the state.

*(Article in Hebrew by Doron Rosenblum, published in the Hebrew press)*