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Israel – Disengagement

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This past August, the State of Israel undertook an exercise called Disengagement. For the first time in history, a sovereign country turned over territory it acquired in a war of self-defense, to the very people who started the war. What made this act truly historic was that in exchange for the land, Israel received nothing: no pledges, no promises, no agreements, not even a hint or a suggestion that this action would bring peace even one day closer.

So why did Israel do it? Israel decided to move ahead with Disengagement not because it would get something in return. Rather, Israel “disengaged” because its leaders believed that it was the right thing to do; right for the 1.3 million Palestinians who live in Gaza, and right for the State and citizens of Israel as well.

But just because something is right, does not make it easy to do. And indeed, as Israel began to consider what it would take to disengage from Gaza, it found itself facing a daunting task. Consider what it would take to remove the 8,000 Israelis who lived in Gaza. What did it mean to the men, women, and children who had settled there, at the request of their government; who built homes, worked the land, and made the desert blossom with flowers that filled the tulip markets in Holland? What did it mean to those who went to school, who worked and prayed, who lived and died; to those whose parents and children were buried in cemeteries there? What did Disengagement mean to all of these people?

More than just uprooting their life’s work, Disengagement meant blotting out 38 years of love and life; it meant making the land they lived on appear as if it had never been settled before. It meant making people feel as if their entire life’s work was worthless – nothing more than a dream.

So it comes as no surprise that, even though the political decision was made months in advance, and the settlers had time to get used to the idea of leaving, as the deadline grew closer, tensions grew deeper. The settlers decided to use the color orange as a symbol of resistance. And if you visited Israel this summer, as many of us did, you would have seen cars everywhere, covered with orange flags and bumper stickers. You would have seen orange banners hanging in apartment windows from Jerusalem to Sefat. You would have found people wearing orange t-shirts, not as a fashion statement, but as a political protest.

And yet, all of this was just the beginning. Across the land, there were protest rallies and acts of civil disobedience. Rabbis were comparing Israeli government policies to those made by Nazi Germany, and telling their communities that it was a violation of the Law, a violation of the Torah, for a Jewish soldier to obey orders to remove the settlers. Security was tight everywhere due to credible threats of an assassination against Prime Minister Sharon. And some analysts even feared the outbreak of a civil war. That is what Disengagement meant to Israel. It was a heart-wrenching, gut-checking time. And no one was completely certain what would happen on the day when the troops finally entered Gaza. It was anybody’s guess.

Well as we know, the day came and Israel's Defense Forces entered Gaza and removed the settlers and the settlements. We know because it was a big story, covered by TV stations from all over the world. News crews were positioned and ready for anything. The stage was set for a good story, a tale of the battle-tested Israeli army facing off against its own people: fanatic, religious settlers.

I'm sure that news producers were looking forward to showing gripping footage of Jews battling against other Jews. But in the end, what the cameras recorded, what the world witnessed when Disengagement finally began, was something completely unexpected. It was totally different than anything anyone imagined. For instead of sending home pictures of people shooting, video cameras recorded people shouting. Instead of scenes of armed battles, news crews filmed acts of compassion. Instead of witnessing violence, we saw understanding.

Although these events took place just two months ago, so much has happened in our world since then, that I want to remind you of what actually took place in Gaza. Here's a report of an encounter in the town of Netzer Hazani, written by Fiamma Nirenstein, an Italian journalist, for the World Jewish Digest.

Nirenstein describes a situation in which a group of settlers had barricaded themselves inside of a home, when a young army commander named Udi Lav approached their door. She writes:

The officer, Udi, called into the home and invited the settlers to come outside to discuss the situation. Udi said: "You have to come out now. I have the order to operate the disengagement, and sooner or later, today, I have to fulfill the order."

A settler came out and replied: "This is the home we built with our own hands. Our forefathers were here. What will you tell your sons? Will you tell them the story of how you dragged your Jewish brothers out of the land that they sacrificed so many lives for?"

Udi, who was standing in the hot sun, put his hand on the other man's shoulder. He answered: "Brother, I understand you, but you have to come out of here. I'm so sorry. I cry with you. But now it's time to go."

Udi looked tired but he kept his hand on the other man's shoulder.

The settler responded to him: "You know I won't leave, because I'm right, and I obey the Law" (by which he meant: I live by the Law of the Torah).

A small smile crept onto Udi's face, as he put his hand on the Israeli flag embroidered on his shirt and in a soft voice, he replied: "You know that I'm right. I'm simply right, because it's me actually, who's obeying the law. I represent law and order. I represent a decision of the Knesset of the State of Israel. You cannot mix politics and religion."

The settler stood there in silence. He had no words to reply. For even though he believed that the Torah takes precedence over everything, he was still an Israeli, just like Udi. And Udi, with his respectful attitude, acknowledged that he understood the settlers' point of view, that without the Torah – neither the Jewish State nor the Jewish people would exist. Both men recognized that there were very good reasons for them to continue their conversation. So they remained there, talking together for quite some time.

As time passed, other soldiers came and engaged in discussions with the settlers who remained inside the home. These conversations went on for hours, until finally, the soldiers were able to help the settlers carry their bags out of their home, and place them onto a bus.

The scene which Nirenstein described here was not unique. It was repeated literally hundreds of times in just a few short days. Brothers and sisters, neighbors, and acquaintances faced off against each other. Each held an opposing point of view on a grave and vital matter. Because of this, the world expected Disengagement to bring bloodshed. But there was no bloodshed, because the soldiers who were sent in to enforce the order, made sure to listen.

Even though everyone knew from the start, that no amount of reasoning or pleading could change the soldiers' orders, the reason that Gaza's settlers left their homes peacefully is because the soldiers proved they cared. They acknowledged the other; they listened to a different point of view. Not only did they listen; the soldiers even understood it. And that simple act of hearing another person's voice, of listening to what they're saying, of crying with them, even when it's beyond one's ability to change anything, this made all the difference in the world.

Here was a conflict which could only end with one party enforcing their will upon the other's heartfelt and sacred beliefs; and yet, the willingness to listen, to share, to open up one's heart to another human being was able to bring people together. This is what Israel's army accomplished. They brought people together even when they were being torn apart on the inside. Don't underestimate what took place in Gaza, because what happened there deserves to be remembered as a brand new miracle in the desert.

Since late August, there have been many times that I've thought about the care and concern that Israel's soldiers showed for the settlers who stood before and against them. And I've often wondered why it is that we can't offer that same love and care to our own brothers and sisters and neighbors and friends. Why is it that so many of us no longer speak to a brother or a sister, to a parent or a child? Why is it that so many of us have stopped listening to a loved one, or a spouse? That we've turned our heads, closed our eyes, and ignored the breaks that have been torn in another's heart?

In Israel, there is an army which acknowledges the pain of those it must oppose. There is an army which acknowledges that the other side has a valid point of view. There is an army that listens to the other. Tell me, why is it that we "civilians" can't act as humanely as that army?

In her article, Nirenstein describes an encounter, which took place in Gush Katif, where a young woman was confronting a young soldier, shouting at him for over an hour that "a Jew doesn't deport a Jew."

And yet, even though he heard this cry over a thousand times, the soldier continued to stand there, waiting for her to finish speaking.

When she saw that her words were not having any effect, the young woman tried a different tactic. She began shouting: "Look into my eyes," daring the young soldier to acknowledge her humanity; daring the young soldier to acknowledge her loss; daring the young man to see the pain that he was causing her.

The young woman shouted this slogan at the soldier for another thousand times, while he patiently watched her. Finally, when he could no longer stand it, the soldier spoke back. He said to her: "Don't you see? I'm standing here, and the only thing that I'm doing is looking into your eyes, your bright, blue eyes. But don't you think that you should have to look at me, too?"

The girl, a modest, pretty, religious girl, who probably had very little experience looking into the face of a young man, slowly lifted her eyes. Suddenly she saw the soldier. She saw his 18-year-old face. She saw his different culture, his embarrassed, sad expression, and the Israeli flag on his breast, reminding her that they are, at heart, part of the same country, members of the same family.

After shouting for what seemed like hours, the young woman finally lifted up her head and looked into the soldier's eyes. "Wow," she said, with simple honesty, "it's true. You are looking into my eyes. We see each other."

This girl, who was so wrapped up in her own narrative, her own story, had never taken the time to see the person standing right in front of her; to look into his eyes, to feel his heart. When she finally did, she saw that his eyes were sad, because making someone leave their home is tragic. But his eyes were open to her. They communicated with her. They told her that he could feel her pain, even if he couldn't make it stop. And somehow, that was enough. Simply knowing that someone else can understand who you are

and what you feel can be enough to save a relationship, to build a connection, enough to overcome anger and sadness.

As it turned out, the process of Disengagement was about more than leaving a strip of land in the desert. In the end, disengaging from the land created an opportunity to engage in dialogue, to build respect, to open hearts, to listen to those who are different than us, but are still members of our own family.

Yom Kippur is described in the Torah as a very special day. As we will read tomorrow afternoon, it was the one time a year when people gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem to have a sacrifice presented on their behalf, to cleanse them of their sins and to give them an opportunity to start a new year clean.

When the year 70 came, and Jerusalem was destroyed, it was more than a matter of losing a capitol city. Our people also mourned because they lost their connection to God. For without the Temple, sacrifices could no longer be brought, and the Jewish people had no way to make atonement.

In the aftermath of that disaster, one of our rabbis, Rabbi Yose, went to the Temple mount to mourn its destruction. As he prayed there, he saw another person walking through the ruins. It was Elijah. Rabbi Yose went over to Elijah and began to weep for our people, who no longer had a way to reach out to God. But Elijah stopped him. He said: "The destruction of the Temple did not remove God from our people." "We can still atone for our mistakes," he said, "because the only sacrifice which God truly desires is a broken heart."

It was with a broken heart and a contrite spirit that our Jewish army stood before the settlers of Gaza. And instead of war or bloodshed, this army brought a sense of consolation and peace to a nation.

Even as they carried out their task of removing people from their homes, they helped to build a bridge. This is the power of a forgiving heart and a loving spirit. It is the same power that each of us has within ourselves.

We have the power to hurt or to heal, the power to condemn or release, to shatter or nurture. We have the power to create – to create a new heart, to create a new chance, to create a new beginning.

So what are we waiting for? There is no better time than now; no better night than tonight, to go back home and open your heart to someone you love, someone you still love despite the pain that was caused or the tears that were shed. Find a way to reach out in love. Hear his hurt, acknowledge his pain; listen with an open heart. For this is the night of forgiveness, the night of atonement, the night of new beginnings.

Dear God, On this night, help us to feel again, to feel our own heartache, so that we might reach out in love to those who can heal us. On this night of atonement, set us on a path of forgiveness; that we might re-engage with those we cannot forget. Be with us on this journey, God. We reach out with broken hearts. Help us to bring wholeness and peace into the lives of those we love as well as into our own. Baruch Atah Adonai, Shomeyah Tefilah. Praised are You, O God, who hearkens to prayer. And let us say: Amen.