

## My emotional return to Israel

*By Paul Ranis*

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As I watch [Hamas](#) firing hundreds of rockets against Israel, and the violent protests in Europe about Israel, thoughts come flooding back about the first time I ever visited the country and my most recent visit last month.

My first trip to Israel in 1991 changed my life. It was on that trip, as a 22-year-old recent college graduate that I met and fell in love with the woman who would eventually become my wife. We worked side by side building houses for Ethiopian and Russian immigrants in a small village called Ma'Ale Adumim with 800 residents on the edge of a desert.

Last month, 23 years after my first visit, my wife Jane and I returned to Israel for the first time, hoping to show our children and my father, a Holocaust survivor from Germany, the country that had such an impact on our lives. For me it was also a personal mission to see if all the negative things you read about Israel had destroyed the country of which I had such fond memories.

It was overwhelming as we arrived in Tel Aviv in June with my dad, Peter, and our children, Max, 13, and Flora, 11. The city was stunning — the beach had a boardwalk that rivaled anything in South Florida. There were incredible and provocative art museums, and we felt an energy and sense of optimism everywhere we walked.

While in Tel Aviv, we visited the Palmach Museum and learned about Israel's 1948 War of Independence. The absolute bravery of those young soldiers makes me think now of the young soldiers who are risking their lives to

protect Israel against Hamas. It also harkens back to the servicemen who fought at D-Day and gave their lives for a better future. Visiting Independence Hall, where Israel was created May 14, 1948, I felt overwhelmed with a sense of history. As they played *Hatikva*, Israel's beautiful national anthem, it was hard to believe I was sitting in the same room where [David Ben-Gurion](#), announced that Israel had become a new nation.

On an archaeological dig in Southern Israel, we were fascinated to discover pottery pieces more than 2000 years old! It would be the first of many days in which we were overwhelmed by the beautiful history of Israel — from King David to King Solomon to Herod — we visited incredible ruins that were amazing.

We also saw firsthand how Israel has been transformed from a desert to a beautiful garden thanks to the planting of tens of millions of trees since 1991. Wherever we traveled, we saw lush landscapes. On multiple occasions, our guide would stop at a farm and we would eat plums or apples or pears right from the trees!

Yet, what really amazed me the most is the importance felt throughout the nation for freedom and peace. Israel has set up numerous hospitals in the Golan Heights area that are treating, at no cost, victims of Syria's Civil War. Syrians are now crossing into Israel to receive life-saving medical care. To put this in proper perspective, the Civil War in Syria is effectively Hezbollah versus Al-Qaeda, both of whom have called for the annihilation of Israel and the United States. When I asked why Israel would do this, our guide, a former air force pilot with the IDF, explained: "We know they want to kill us, but if we don't help, then we're not being humane. Israel will do the right thing even if our country is portrayed in such an unfair way."

While staying at the Sea of Galilee, we watched Jews and Arabs swimming together. We also saw the emotional tears of Christians who were baptized in the Jordan River. What fascinated me, is that on a single day, we were near the borders of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. At no time, however, did we feel unsafe or worried. Rather, we felt protected and honored to be in a country that was so small in size, yet with so much heart, pride and a true love for democracy.

We then took a jeep ride to the Golan Heights, which Israel obtained during the Six Day War in 1967. During this battle, 7,000 Israeli troops defeated

40,000 Syrians in a day and a half. When we discussed how this was accomplished, our guide said, "If we had lost, we would have been wiped off the face of the map — when defeat is truly not an option, you fight for not only yourself, but your children and for children not yet born." I think about this only a few weeks later, as I watch the news coverage of those who condemn Israel for protecting its citizens.

At the top of Masada, overlooking the hills of Jordan, we discussed why this fortress is so revered not only in Israel, but throughout the world. The answer dealt with freedom. Masada is a testament to freedom and that freedom should be truly cherished. Rather than become slaves of the Romans, a few hundred Jews made a choice — a choice to commit suicide. In doing so, they exercised, in their final act, freedom of choice and freedom of religion. Our guide said that in today's world, we too often take things like freedom for granted.

On our tour through Jerusalem, we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Western Wall, and the ancient City of David, which lies under the city. But perhaps the most impressive was our visit to Israel's 9-11 memorial, the only one in the world outside of the United States. It is clear to me that Israel is and will always be an ally of the United States.

At the Western Wall, I made a prayer while holding my son's hand — it was an emotional moment I will never forget. Later, we visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum of Israel. The final exhibit is the [Children's Memorial](#), a memorial to 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered by the [Nazis](#) for simply being Jewish. The memorial is a large, dark room in which candlelight is reflected by a series of honeycombed mirrors. The result is that one candle gives the feeling of thousands of stars in the night sky. Meanwhile, the name and age of every child murdered in the Holocaust is spoken over a loudspeaker. When you exit the Children's Memorial, you want to hug your kids and tell them how much you love them. When we exited, our guide said the following to my family, which will stay with me forever: "On my honor, and on my life, and on behalf of every citizen of Israel, I give you my word that Israel will never let this happen again."

Israel is a small nation — about the size of New Jersey — and it is surrounded by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. It is the only democracy in

the Middle East. It believes in freedom of the press and freedom of speech. It believes in equal rights. Its Supreme Court has an Arab judge, who has a permanent appointment. In addition, there are currently 12 Arabs who are members of Israel's [Knesset](#), a 120-person parliament that creates laws in Israel.

At the end of our trip, we asked if we could visit Ma'Ale Adumim, the small town that we had built houses for in 1991. We saw that Ma'Ale in 2014 was now a beautiful city of 35,000 people and that our houses were still standing. The pride that Jane and I felt seeing our houses was immeasurable. It is the same pride we felt being in Israel.

Israel is not perfect, but it truly is an oasis in the desert. Israel is a place of incredible beauty and history, which I hope is not overshadowed by its current struggle to defend its citizens. It is my sincere wish that others will be able to understand and appreciate the true Israel that my family and I witnessed.

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