



Gratz Insider, October 2014 - Story Continuation

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Professor Saul Wachs' Annual Reflections on Israel

With seven of my grandchildren living in Israel, and an eighth, Daniel, joining us by virtue of a journalistic internship, my most precious moments this past summer were spent with family at Shabbat dinners and other occasions. Particularly moving was watching my grandson Yaniv be officially inducted into the Israeli army. I was also caught up in the excitement of seeing my granddaughter Bar reach the finals in the Israeli version of the show "The Voice." As a cantor, I felt personal pride as she carried on the family's musical legacy - though in quite a different genre - on this very public stage.

In addition to being with family, I simply relished being in Israel. I love the cafes, the culture and the universal celebration of Shabbat. In Israel, I feel like I am part of history and part of the revival of a state and a language.

As is true every summer, my wife, Diane Cover, painted a number of outdoor scenes, adding to the aesthetics of our modest apartment.

But this summer, I also felt the weight of the "*matzav*," or the "situation," as the Israelis referred to the conflict in Gaza. The summer began with the brutal execution of the three Jewish students, followed by the shocking murder of the Arab teenager, and ultimately, the war.

Thankfully, Israel is cloaked in the security of the Iron Dome's anti-missile defense system. As a result, I did not feel unsafe, but I did feel the war's hovering presence in everyday life. On four occasions, Diane and I were forced to take shelter in response to air raid sirens. And with the war dominating the news, we were glued to the television every night.

As I have for the last 15 years, I held the annual *Erev Limmud* in memory of my late wife, Barbara. Even during this evening of scholarly discussion, the war was not distant: my granddaughter Neta joined us with permission from her army base, while my grandson Nadav was absent in order to attend the funeral of a friend killed in Gaza. That night, as members of eight Jerusalem congregations joined in a

community of learning, I found the symbolism striking: we stayed true to our Jewish identity as "*am ha-sefer*," "the people of the book," focusing on our love of learning, even in a time of war.

That evening was a source of pride for me - as is the very fact of Israel's existence. After dancing in the streets in celebration of Israeli independence in 1948, I still marvel at the fact that this small country is the only stable democracy in the entire Middle East. In fact, Israel's commitment to democracy is so extraordinary that there is actually an Arab party represented in the Knesset, even though its platform calls for the destruction of Israel.

As a Jewish educator, I want to share this Israel, a shining example of democracy, with my students - but I cannot tell them only half the story. I am a committed Zionist with Israeli citizenship. But I am also deeply disturbed about dangerous developments that could threaten the stability of Israel's democracy and that fly in the face of its democratic ideals.

First, there is the steep economic divide in Israel between the rich and the poor, a situation that I addressed two years ago in *The Gratz College Insider*. Unfortunately, this problem has continued to grow. Left unchecked, glaring economic inequality can lead to social unrest.

Second, and particularly disturbing to me, is the polarization of Israeli society and the increasingly strident voices, which have led to violence. For example, in Tel Aviv this summer, one group of war protestors was physically assaulted by another group, simply for holding an opposing point of view.

A more extreme example was the brutal killing of the Arab teen, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, at the beginning of the summer. This retaliatory act was widely condemned in Israel, and the Israeli perpetrators will be prosecuted. However, I am concerned about the atmosphere of vengeance and vitriol that fomented such a reaction in the first place.

Finally, there is the "price tag" campaign being waged by Israeli extremists in the settlements. Through this campaign, extremists have scorched Palestinian fields and even attacked Israeli soldiers, claiming that this violence is the "price tag" for actions they oppose.

I am saddened by all of these developments because I believe that Israel must exist, not only as a political entity, but also as a shining example of decency. However, I am also encouraged - encouraged by the universal condemnation of Khdeir's killing by leaders across the spectrum of Israeli life; encouraged by the inspiring words of Israel's new president, Reuven Rivlin, during his inauguration this summer; and

encouraged by Israel's remarkable history of human achievement. What is crucial is that we as Jews - in Israel and around the world - anchor ourselves in the values of Torah. By following these values, we will set an example of how to live in the real world while, at the same time, aspiring to *Kedushah*.