

Voices from Israel

Dear Division 3!

I would have wished to speak personally with all of you together in one room, but the special circumstances do not permit me to do so. Therefore, I will try to express myself in writing.

Firstly, I will open with the dry facts. After several weeks of fighting in Lebanon, we returned for rest and recuperation. We remained in Malcia as a reserve force. On Wednesday, Tu Beav (Aug. 9,06), wereceived orders to deliver supplies to the brigade troops in Bint Jebel. We went out in the afternoon, from line 252, in a column of vehicles including tanks and armored vehicles ("brutalities"). In my armored vehicle, we were three soldiers. Uri the driver, Ohad the gunner, and me the "ship's" officer. I was third in line after a supply tank and the commanding officer's vehicle. After traveling a few kilometers I noticed suddenly the distant lightning flash and immediately afterward we were hit directly. The missile hit the officer's cabin directly. I was, however, during those same moments, standing erect with the lid open, so that my lower body took the hit instead of my upper body. Uri, who was in the driver's seat, communicated with me that he was OK. Ohad, who was in the gunner's seat, said he was a little stunned, but functioning. I attempted to raise a signal without success. Still, Ahikam arrived quickly from the vehicle behind us with an evacuation crew. They removed us from the vehicle quickly and efficiently. At first they tried to open the lift door and evacuate from behind but the vehicle was weighed down by equipment. I called to them to say that it would be preferable to evacuate from the manhole above. We were evacuated from the vehicle to a tank and to the commander's vehicle, Ohad and myself respectively, while Uri was driven in one of the other vehicles.. We arrived at the border where a skilled medical staff awaited us and administered first-aid and lifted us on a direct transport to Rambam Hospital. During the entire evacuation, I remained completely conscious. Additional details concerning the evacuation can be heard also from the others who were saved with me.

Uri was injured lightly; he broke a ring finger. Ohad received facial burns and some shrapnel. To my knowledge, he was also classified as lightly injured. Both were moved to Siroka Hospital the next day and released a few days later.

My condition was classified as gravely injured, at risk of losing my right leg, an open fracture of the left leg, shrapnel to the body, burns to the hands and face, and, of course, blood loss. I underwent emergency surgery after which, for the next 48 hours, I was sedated and in critical care. I first awoke erev Shabbat, Parshat Ekev, to the sight of my family sitting on my bed for Kabbalat Shabbat. Their sense of good fortune knew no bounds. I also had a pleasant surprise; I had seen the condition of my leg during the evacuation and was convinced that it would be amputated. However, it appeared that a decision was made to do whatever necessary to save it.

I will not bore you with medical details, but,, the broad picture

Voices from Israel

includes a series of orthopedic and plastic operations aimed at saving the right leg. After those, I will be transferred to a rehabilitation hospital in order--at the end of the process-- to walk again on two legs. The road is long and hard, but I am confident that I am headed in the right direction.

We have dealt at length with a description of the actual events. However, it is most important for me to speak to the significance of it all. All along the way, we have spoken about the importance of being a soldier, to understand the value of the comradeship, of defending the country, of loving this Land and protecting it. These values, which occasionally during training and the conditions at the base, seem distant and hazy, suddenly, when we are called to battle, come alive with renewed meaning.

Throughout my term as commander, I have tried hard to inculcate the principle of loving the land in your midst by way of geography lessons, stories, and nature hikes with their spectacular views and scenery. I am accustomed to saying that there are several complementary ways to love this Land. One way is getting to know it by opening a map, recognizing each settlement, every wadi and every hilltop. That is how we establish a connection with places and a sense of ownership. A second way is to feel your way without a vehicle, to walk on foot, to wander, to cross ridges and step in the streams, to be perfumed by the landscape this land offers, to experience the views and the nature spread before us.

There is, nevertheless, an additional way to love this Land--to fight for it. A land which one fights for and dies for is transformed into an integral part of ourselves. Whoever has gone to battle for his land, whose sweat and blood has been absorbed by the land, will love his land. She is his own and belongs to no other.

We did not choose to go to war. Although we are soldiers, we do not seek to fight and we are not bellicose. Nevertheless, when the orders come, we know well why we are fighting. We are fighting for the People of Israel, in order to protect the inhabitants of the land and to defend our country. "Be strong and be strengthened for our people and for the cities of our God.." This is not a figure of speech; we went to the war in Lebanon while the citizens of the North lived under incessant rocket fire. We did not go to battle with a sense of enthusiastic militancy but rather with a sense of devotion to our brethren sitting in shelters in the North. We desired to bring quiet and security to Northern Israel. Deep feelings of brotherhood and friendship shaped our relationships during the course of the fighting, "brothers-in-arms," in the deepest meaning of the phrase. We revealed to each other amazing things about ourselves. We became very close and prepared to risk our lives for each other.

War demands a heavy price. We paid heavily as a collective and individually. Yet we went to war with a clear goal and with the strength to absorb these losses. We understood that we might pay with our lives or be injured, but we knew that we were fighting to defend our countrymen. Here, by the way, is another source for loving this land. The sight of partially destroyed settlements and towns creates

Voices from Israel

a desire to return after they are restored, blooming and prosperous.

I also personally have paid a certain price, but I am thankful that God was merciful with me and my family. There is no purpose to speculate--what if--but more than enough miracles were granted me. Thank God, my head was spared, my mind is clear, and my upper body is intact. Although I am compelled to undergo a long and complicated period of rehabilitation, in the end, with God's help, I will walk. Countless bodily functions were spared including my sight, hearing, sensation, internal organs and more. Now I know to value everything ten times over. Simple daily tasks cannot be taken for granted and I am learning to give thanks for the opportunity to carry them out.

Beyond all the small details, the fact that I am alive is the greatest gift given to me and my family. With this awareness, I am confident that I will endure all the surgeries and treatments. The enormity of these events grants a renewed significance to my life, however, this is not the place to elaborate.

My dear soldiers, I have already gone on too long. Ordinarily it would be your turn to ask and to comment. This time, the conversation ends as a monologue but you, of course, can be in touch by phone or in person. It is important to me that you take with you these messages. Be strong as you go forward, and know that I am always available to you. It might surprise you to know that I am confident in your abilities to achieve great accomplishments and I believe it with all my heart.

In admiration and thinking about all of you,

Asael Lubotzky

(057)813-8522 or (0545)285542