



February 1, 2017

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Aren't you proud that Israel developed the PillCam and invented modern drip irrigation? Did you know that Israelis invented the USB flash drive and Waze? What about cherry tomatoes and Bamba? Just search the internet and you will find hundreds of reasons to be proud of Israel, including its Nobel Prizes, technological inventions, and environmental consciousness.

For me, however, the source of pride in Israel came in a very different, albeit not exempt of controversy, way.

Last month, an Israeli military court headed by Judge, Colonel Maya Heller, convicted of manslaughter Sgt. Elor Azaria, an IDF soldier who shot and killed an incapacitated Palestinian assailant, concluding a high-profile trial. Judge Heller stated: *"The fact that the man sprawled on the ground was a terrorist, who had just sought to take the lives of IDF soldiers at the scene, does not in itself justify disproportionate action."*

The trial and subsequent conviction of Sgt. Elor Azaria divided Israel, so it seems that the United States of America is not the only country fragmented over a variety of issues. Argentina, Poland, Germany, France, and Italy, among others are nowadays deeply divided over social, economic and security issues.

Personally I wish the United States, the State of Israel, and the Jewish people were more united, more cohesive. We have a long way to work towards that goal. However, I am proud of living in a country, belonging to a people, and supporting a Jewish state, where the public is free to express their different opinions. While I like cohesiveness, I don't like the unity of Stalin, Assad, or the dictators who ruled Argentina in the late 70s.

Many of the leaders in the Israeli government, including Prime Minister Netanyahu are not happy with the conviction of Sgt. Elor Azaria. I guess that is their right in a democratic country.

The fact however, that Israel is a country where a soldier can be brought to trial for "finishing" a terrorist, who himself wanted to kill innocent people, is something that fills me with pride. The fact that the Israeli military court that convicted Sgt. Elor Azaria was headed by a woman, who herself is a Colonel, fills me with pride. The fact that Israel has an independent court system, which is not afraid to stand in opposition to a popular Prime Minister or an angry parliament, fills me with pride.

Ben Gurion famously said: "When Israel has prostitutes and thieves, we'll be a state just like any other." Today Israel has thieves, prostitutes, highways, trains, beautiful beaches and great wines. I do like cherry tomatoes, enjoy Bamba, and don't go anywhere without the help of Waze. However, these and other facts, commodities and inventions are not the ones that will assure the Jewish character of the State of Israel.

Not many Jews, and certainly not many Israelis, rejoice in the conviction of Sgt. Elor Azaria. I don't rejoice either. I wish young Israelis wouldn't have to spend three years of active service fighting ruthless terrorists.

I am proud, however, to be a strong supporter of a state where the words of Prophet Amos (Amos 5:24) "*let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream*" still resonate within its court rooms.