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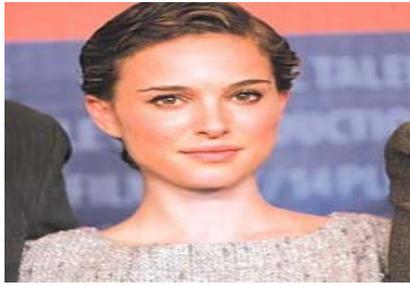


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Getting the kids back to Israel

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Less talk about its politics and more about what it offers the world.

Although I grew up in a very Jewish household, I was only connected to Israel through the work my father did as a Jewish newspaper journalist, associated with the AJPA, the *Jewish Press* and, in the Eighties, as the executive editor of the *New York Jewish Week*. I knew the names, the events and the struggle, but it wasn't something I internalized. Israel was 6,000 miles away, and I was a poor kid in a dysfunctional family on New York's Lower East Side, something of a common combination. The issue of Israel's fate wasn't very high on my list of priorities, and certainly far below my own immediate need for satisfying personal aspirations and indulgences. Opportunity knocked, though. It was 1988; I was 19 and headed to Israel for the first time. This wasn't a high-minded trip to seek out Zion and the Holy Land, but a decidedly personal trek, to be with the woman I would marry a year-and-a-half later. My girlfriend's father had developed into an uncompromisingly hawkish American Religious Zionist. Upon her graduation from high school, his daughter was promptly dispatched to an Israeli yeshiva, essentially for ideological guidance, but actually to keep her away from me. While he happily failed in the pursuit of the latter, it isn't as if he achieved wild success in the former. My wife cares for Israel, true, but she never developed that deeper sense of longing for the country that I would. IT HAD been four months since we had seen each other last. Unbeknownst to her, I got a ticket on an El Al flight and landed the day after Pan Am flight 103 was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland. The ecstatic expression on her face made my efforts worthwhile. Yet it was soon chilled when we walked that night through Jerusalem and saw the remnants of a group of students from Syracuse University scheduled for that ill-fated flight. These students had been fortunate enough to choose to divert to Israel for a few days after their school trip to London. They were crying in the middle at Zion Square over what we learned was the death of their friends and classmates and the eerie sense that it just as easily could have been them. The initial hints of connections to Abu Nidal, Islamic Jihad, Abdel Basset Ali and Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi made it clear that Israel was going to be blamed as the catalyst for this mass murder. Suddenly, being a Jew and being a Zionist hit me hard - it wasn't just a moniker, it was a cause some view as worth killing for, while my own yearnings told me it was a cause worth fighting for; and one we would fight for for a long time to come. I took my love out of the yeshiva; she stayed with me at my stepmother's flat in Jerusalem's Nahlaot neighborhood, right across from the Pargod Jazz Club. We traveled the country and hung out at clubs and bars - not the Americanized ones, but real sabra hangouts. The true miracle here was that I fell in love with Israel; its breathtaking sunsets, its deep warmth, its glorious history and innumerable contributions to humankind, its troublesome narrative and its bizarre internal religious identity crisis; and, mostly, its people. My people! I LONG for Israel, shed tears while I sing or hear Hatikva, and walked down my wedding aisle to Naomi Shemer's evocative *Al Kol Eleh* (For All these Things). I have been there as many times as I can, and through my career and my personal activities have always been close to Israel, have fought for it and will defend it forever. A few years ago, on my children's first trip to Israel, my son's great joy was sitting alone with me at a small outdoor grill off Rehov Azza in Jerusalem, eating schnitzel in pita stuffed with pickles and humus. He didn't need to do

anything more but take in the city sun, absorb the tones of Jerusalem stone adorning every building and watch the cars and the people pass by. I felt proud and content, for the moment. For the moment only - because I know there is so much to do. If it were so easy to create new Zionists and defenders of Israel through outdoor grills and Mediterranean air, I suspect Israel's future would seem immutable, rendering the politics of whoever American Zionists choose as the 44th president immaterial. Yet my son's attachment comes from what he sees in my heart and eyes as much as from the school he attends. His being there only brought it to the surface. For so many, attachment is lacking, and that is where the work needs to begin. WHAT ISRAEL needs is a new approach. One that will keep it important - central - to the lives and hearts of people around the world, living in an evermore secularized and assimilated society. Many young Israelis themselves, tired of living in a perpetual state of war and with internal religious struggles, no longer feel the Zionism of their elders. Daunting questions stemming from as far back as Sabra and Shatila haunt Israelis. They continue with failed terrorist assassination attempts, bad press in Jenin, as well as in Gaza and Amona, the Second Lebanon War fiasco, and then the countless, pointless and absolutely heartbreaking collection of corruption stories on every level of Israel's government and of every variety, from money to sex. Israel was supposed to be the savior of the Jewish people and the return to Zion that God promised in the Bible. Yet Jews are debating whether Israel today is that redemption from Diaspora. How to improve Israel's image? The simple solution for now is better public relations. We're all about cell phones and fancy cars, trendy clothes and *American Idol*, Facebook and JDate. What Israel can use is less talk about politics, less news about internal and external troubles and more about what Israel offers the world today. Just about all that we are today, from Asia to the Americas, developed, underdeveloped and undeveloped, stems from some iconic trend, personality or technology; and Israel, as small as it may seem, has enough of all to offer. Israel can and should be known for harnessing the sun to replace oil as an energy resource; for innovative Internet applications; for medicine, biomedicine and stem cell advances far beyond that of most other countries; for music and art and some of today's mainstream celebrities like the Apple songstress Yael Na'ama, American Idol Elliot Yamin, Natalie Portman, and the infamous Gene Simmons. That is the Israel our children will look to, and that is the Israel that will survive the daily news and routine thrashing from her mendacious opponents. If Israel can learn to deal with its own internal strife and make an organized effort to promote what's good and relevant to today's generation, then my fond memories of debating in Israel's pubs and watching the sunrise over Masada as I escaped New York to chase a dream can be succeeded by my own child's memory of eating schnitzel and humus at a sidewalk cafe, and maybe one day infusing his longing for Israel into his own children. *The writer is a New York-based public relations lawyer.*



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