

**I don't want to talk about Israel**  
**RH Morning**  
**- 2014**

I don't know where to begin. I don't want to talk about Israel. Whenever this comes up, I feel like I need to take a deep breath. This is because emotions can run high and I find it painful to give a sermon on Israel because there aren't easy solutions, the cycle of violence seems destined to continue, and it's hard to have hope. The complexities underlying the conflict in Israel, our feelings as American Jews, and even the role of the world community makes this an awful topic for me to deal with. However, I feel a sense of obligation because I know that Israel has been on your minds over the course of this past summer and there is much uncertainty as to what this New Year will bring for Israel.

We are aware that this latest conflict began middle of June with the abduction of Gilad Shaer, Eyal Yifrah, and Naftali Fraenkel while they were hitchhiking at night. We prayed for their safe return and we were appalled to learn that they were murdered. It was upsetting. But the conflict didn't end there. Tragically, weeks later, a 16 year old Palestinian teenager was abducted by 3 Israelis and murdered as an act of retaliation. This teenager had nothing to do with the neither the kidnapping nor murder of the three Israelis and yet he was targeted as a blatant act of vengeance.

This reminds me of the terrible role hatred can play in the Middle East but also in many human interactions. Joseph Telushkin in his book, Jewish Wisdom, speaks about a Jewish legend that says "An angel appeared to a man and told him that he would return in thirty days. At that time, the man could express one wish, which would be granted. "But," the angel added, "whatever you choose to receive, your next-door neighbor will receive double." The man hated his neighbor, and the thought that the neighbor would receive a double portion frustrated and infuriated him. When the angel returned after thirty days and asked what he wished, the man answered, "I want you to put out one of my eyes."<sup>1</sup>

This hatred for one's neighbor grew and in the aftermath of the killing of the teenagers, Hamas, the terrorist group in Gaza, dramatically increased rocket fire out of Gaza. Some of you may not be aware but there has been close to 8000 rockets fired from Gaza since 2000 into southern Israel. This was the cause of the Israeli campaigns into Gaza back in 2008-2009 and in 2012. When rockets are fired from Gaza, they terrorize the Israeli towns of Sedorot, Ashkelon, and other communities. Back in 2009 year, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the reform rabbis, resolution stated: "In the city of Sderot, nearly three-quarters of children exhibit signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the town's bus stops have all been converted to reinforced bomb shelters. Children have grown up under the constant threat of Hamas rockets;

and families sleep in small bunkers, knowing that 15 seconds, the amount of time from the warning siren to the bomb strike, is not enough time to rouse everyone.”<sup>2</sup> This was back in 2009, can you imagine now how many more Israeli children and families have been traumatized?

The Gaza strip has changed hands over the decades. Prior to WWI, it was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. After the First World War, Gaza became part of the British Mandate of Palestine. Three decades later, after WWII, it was then occupied by Egypt. However as a result of the Six Day war where Egypt and its allies attempted to destroy Israel, the Gaza strip came under the control of Israel as a buffer against future aggression. In the late 1970s, there was a stunning break through at the Camp David Accords. In the context of a negotiated peace treaty, Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Israel wished to return the Gaza Strip to Egypt as well, but Egypt declined.(CCAR)<sup>3</sup> Years went by and in 2005, Israel unilaterally ended its occupation of the Gaza Strip, removing its entire military presence as well as relocating a civilian Israeli population which had settled there. In 2007, Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip. One of Hamas’ primary goals as stated in its charter, “is the obliteration of Israel.”<sup>4</sup>

Well, this summer Hamas fired off many more rockets with a longer range that even had the potential to hit Tel Aviv. Israel had to respond. Israel had to do something to stop the rockets before one of them hit a hospital, an elementary school and killed hundreds or thousands of Israeli civilians.

And so on July 7, Israel began its military campaign. Israel fired at the rocket launchers in an attempt to destroy them. However, as many of you are aware, Hamas fires rockets from civilian areas. Even though Hamas vehemently denies this, Reenivasan Jain, India’s NDTV reporter, captured such an act on tape on August 7. On the recording, Hamas operatives are seen assembling just overnight a rocket launcher in a densely packed residential area. Surrounding the launch site, you can see high rises full of people’s apartments. Then the operatives shot a rocket into Israel and then quickly scampered to dismantle it. In response to a question of whether Hamas has a choice as to where to launch these rockets, the reporter says that there are plenty of open areas where no one lives that Hamas could launch a rocket. In addition, he had to flee Gaza after the filming because he was afraid of Hamas retribution against him.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Bibi Netanyahu, “Israel uses its missiles to protect our civilians, Hamas uses their civilians to protect their missiles.”

In an attempt to protect its citizens, Israel has tried to destroy the rocket launchers. In addition, Israel’s Iron Dome shot down many rockets before they could kill. When Israeli soldiers entered the Gaza strip, to their shock, they discovered an intricate tunnel system leading into Israel. Now, you should know that these tunnels are not to smuggle food or medicine or supplies. These tunnels that were dug into the Israeli kibbutzim and towns have only one purpose that of kidnapping and murdering Israelis. The Washington Post reported in July that

“Analysts said the tunnels are a major prong of Hamas’s military strategy against Israel. ... While the Gaza Strip remains mired in poverty — the 2011 per capita income was \$1,165 — Hamas is thought to have sunk more than \$1 million into the excavation and maintenance of every tunnel.<sup>6</sup>

This is such a shame because the Gaza strip could be a place of opportunity. It sits right on the Mediterranean Sea. It could be a primary tourist destination, there could be commerce and trade, and the lives of the Palestinians could steadily rise. I hold the corrupt leadership of Hamas first and foremost responsible for their condition. Instead of using resources to care for their people such as building schools, hospitals, homes, and roads, they build tunnels into Israel. Hamas would rather invest in terrorism and war than take care of their own people.

I not only hold Hamas responsible but there are nations around the world that have a vested interest in the continuing the conflict with Israel. Egypt, Syria, and Saudia Arabia have in the past found Israel to be a convenient scape goat for their people’s woes. It’s easier to blame the evil Zionist entity than to look at the lack of freedoms for their people and to scrutinize their own dictatorial governmental regimes.

None though come close to the role Iran plays in this conflict. Iran finances the terrorist group known as Hezbollah in the north as well as Hamas in Gaza. On Aug. 4, 2014, there was news story in the LA times where two Iranian government officials on an Arabic language television channel were bragging about giving Hamas their missile technology and how they have used the weapons well against Israel.<sup>7</sup> As long as countries such as Iran finance Hamas and Hezbollah, peace will be difficult.

In Judaism, we recognize as Ecclesiastes in the Bible did, that “There is a time for war and time for peace.” In our Talmud and Mishneh Torah, we are told that some wars are permissible and even obligatory. Maimonides, in the Middle Ages, taught that there is a ‘commanded war’ (milchemet mitzvah) that includes war against the seven Canaanite nations, war against Amalek, and wars fought “to assist the Jews against enemies who have attacked them.” Now we don’t have to worry about the seven Canaanite nations anymore because they don’t exist. Amalek is more a symbol of evil than an actual adversary today. However, a war “to assist the Jews against enemies who have attacked them.” This is sadly very relevant today especially in dealing with Hamas.

CCAR says “The Torah does not expect us to submit to armed aggression, to stand silently and passively when others seek to conquer and dominate us. The people of Israel have the right to defend themselves from attack. Indeed, we are commanded to do so: the obligation to defend and preserve our lives overrides virtually every other religious duty.”<sup>8</sup>

Even as I make the case for Israel’s right to self defense and the role of Hamas and notorious nations of our world, I believe we still have to look at the consequences of this war. I think we

have to look squarely in the eye of suffering even and especially for the Palestinian civilians in Gaza. Over a thousand people have been killed and wounded. How many families in Gaza are now bereft of their father, mother, sons, and daughters? Schools, mosques, and hospitals have been destroyed. The infrastructure has collapsed in the Gaza strip. People are without sanitation, access to food, and medicine. Nearly a third of Gaza's 1.8 million people have been forced to flee their houses, and many are now homeless. Tens of thousands of Palestinians children are believed to be suffering from psychological trauma.<sup>9</sup>

Now, I hear arguments in defense of Israel such as, "Look at the nations surrounding Israel. See how Assad gases his own people. See the brutal suppression of dissent in Egypt. Look at what is happening in Libya. Israel by comparison is so much better." I think this argument has merit when confronting the international community who routinely singles out Israel. It is also a good reminder to those who foster anti-Semitic sentiments.

However, since you are my audience today, I would like to suggest that this is a terrible argument for us. For example, I don't compare my parenting to those who abuse children. I don't say "yelling at my children is okay because I'm not like the Minnesota Vikings' running back, Adrian Peterson, who beat his four year old son with a tree branch." No, instead I compare my parenting to the good parents out there not to the worse. I think it is the same with Israel. We should be comparing Israel to the nations who value human rights and life. This is the standard by which we should measure Israel's behavior.

I believe that those of us who love Israel can also disagree with the policies of the government. Did Israel use excessive force? Were there other options not explored? Could Israel have done more to protect civilian lives in Gaza? Can Israel do more to help the humanitarian crisis there? These are valid questions to ask. I don't think that all Jews have to agree with everything Israel does. For those of us who struggle with Israeli's actions, we can remind ourselves that Israel is not acting on behalf of world Jewry, Israel is instead acting on behalf of her citizens and her security concerns.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, in the recent Reform Judaism magazine, goes further in defense of those who care enough to criticize Israel. He says that those who feel that Diaspora Jews should not condemn Israel's government for wrongdoing fundamentally misunderstand the nature of Zionism. He asserts that Zionism bestows on all Jews a role in determining the character of the Jewish state. He says, "Expressing criticism, even harsh criticism, requires no special permission from Israeli or Diaspora leaders; the right to do so is inherent in the Zionist mission."<sup>10</sup>

My assessment of Israel is multi faceted. I don't believe that I must agree or applaud everything that Israel does. However, during times when I'm unsure of whether Israel is doing the right thing, I find myself giving Israel the benefit of the doubt. This is because I recognize that I have the luxury of pondering all of this in the safety of California. I don't live with the fear that a Hamas rocket will take out my son when he is at elementary school. I'm not worried about my brother being drafted and sent into Gaza. I'm not worried about a tunnel opening up with terrorists outside my home. You see, I don't live with imminent fear like many Israelis do. This thought tempers my judgment of Israel.

The one thing I don't doubt though is the importance of not giving up on peace. I believe that we have a responsibility to defend Israel but also have compassion for the Palestinians. We must support humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians to rebuild so they can have hope of a better future. In the words of the psalmist<sup>11</sup>, we are commanded to **בְּקֵשׁ שְׁלוֹם וְרַדְּפֵהוּ** seek peace and pursue it, even when it's difficult and even when the odds seem against us. We are people of optimism, faith, and hope. We know that the blessings of peace are equal to all the other blessings.

And so if an angel were to come to Israel with an offer that whatever we have, our neighbor will get double. I'm sure we and Israel would respond that we would like security, prosperity, and peace for Israel. And we would take great joy in seeing the Palestinians have double of this. May they be able to live in a society that has ample jobs, tourism, and a better life for their children. We would ask the angel of God for a shanah tovah, a healthy and happy new year for us and rejoice if it could be a better one for the Palestinians.

### **Notes:**

1 Joseph Teluskin, Jewish Wisdom, pg. 198

2 CCAR 2009 <http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/resolutions/all/crisis-in-gaza-and-the-negev/>

3 CCAR

4 <http://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/880818a.htm>

5 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/reporter-tells-backstory-of-hamas-rocket-fire-footage/>

6 Gaza," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/07/21/how-hamas-uses-its-tunnels-to-kill-and-capture-israeli-soldiers/>

7 <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-israel-gaza-hamas-iran-20140804-story.html>

8 <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/nyp-no-5762-8/>

9 [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt\\_74620.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt_74620.html)

10 Reform Judaism, Fall 2014, page 65 & 66

11 Ps. 34:15