

Responding to Rockets with Radical Hospitality

Parashat Vayera

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I woke up at the crack of dawn this past Tuesday morning, and typed out an urgent WhatsApp message to my daughter, who is currently spending a gap year in Israel. On Tuesday the Israel Defense Forces took out Baha Abu al-Ata, the leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Al-Ata was a ruthless terrorist who has been the mastermind of numerous attacks on Israel, and was allegedly on the cusp of launching another one. The mission of Palestinian Islamic Jihad is to eradicate Israel and replace it with an Islamic state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, governed by Sharia law. Islamic Jihad receives millions of dollars in funding, weapons, and training from its sponsor and benefactor, The Islamic Republic of Iran. In response to Israel's targeted assassination of Abu al-Ata, Islamic Jihad has fired hundreds of rockets at Israeli population centers. After several barrages of rockets, there have only been slight injuries and zero fatalities thanks to the Iron Dome Missile Defense system. Rarely do the imprecise missiles launched from Gaza cause physical harm to Israelis; but I am a father, and I can't help worrying about my child being anywhere near a rocket. I asked Mia not to leave Jerusalem until this latest round of aggression calms down. Without missing a beat, my strong-willed, invincible 18 year old daughter said, "They've already told us all of this. ['They' being the seminary where she is studying] Anyway, life in Jerusalem is totally normal." Thank God the rockets typically don't have sufficient range to hit Jerusalem, most of them falling in the south and occasionally along the coast toward Tel Aviv. The jihadis also don't seem willing to have one of their rockets fall on, say, the Dome of the Rock, the al-Aksa Mosque, or their fellow Arabs in East Jerusalem or the Old City...so they tend to aim away from Jerusalem. "I understand, and I'm sure you're perfectly safe" I told her, "but as your Abba, I can't help worrying about you."

On Thursday, the Army gave the all-clear for people in the range of rockets to return to their homes. I spoke to Orna Wolf Levi, our former Education Director who lives on Kibbutz Erez, on the northeast tip of the Gaza Strip...they could see Gaza from their living room before a security wall was built around the kibbutz. When a rocket exploded on the kibbutz at 4:00 in the

morning on Tuesday, Orna and Tzachi grabbed their kids and their dog, jumped into their car and drove up north to stay with Tzachi's parents. While there have only been light physical injuries and no fatalities, it is impossible to calculate the mental and emotional toll, particularly for children in southern Israel, who have only seconds to run to a bomb shelter; who cannot freely play outside on a playground, or walk around their neighborhood without being preoccupied by a potential rocket attack. I am in awe of Orna, her family and the many others who live in proximity to the Gaza border, because that is their home, that is where they grew up, that too is part of Israel and they are committed to staying there no matter what.

But there is another extraordinary part of the story of this week's events. Here is the account of Liron Tzedaka a school teacher in Sderot, a city that is a half mile from the Gaza Strip...She said:

"I saw them leap into action again, as if a hidden button had been pushed in their hearts. This happens every time there is another round of missile attacks on our community. Immediately we are inundated with a flood of announcements and telephone calls. We are talking about people and places, too many to count—up north, in *Yehuda* and *Shomron*, along the coastal plain and everywhere from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, all extending invitations to their brothers and sisters in Sderot to come to them as guests and enjoy 'a relaxing day' and 'a quiet night,' to rejuvenate themselves a little. Hotels, guest houses, and hostels generously offer, with open hearts, lodging and meals in a quiet place where you can rest and relax...Regular people open their homes, prepare a room with extra beds, and set a table full of delicacies."

Then she said this...

"And I can see Avraham Avinu (our patriarch Abraham) looking down at all of this from above, where he is surely thinking: 'How delightful it is to see my children going out to their brothers, running to them and offering them the best of everything. And bringing others—friends, neighbors, children—to join in the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, of welcoming guests into their homes. Exactly as we did it 3,000 years ago in my tent. Standing over their guests, concerned only with how they can satisfy their precious visitors' every need. And I can hear the heroes of Sderot, the angels who live among us, tired and a bit confused by all this kindness, ceaselessly thanking their hosts. And I, your father Avraham, look down at all this kindness and laugh. It

gives me so much joy to see that the actions of ancestors are truly an inspiration for their children.””¹

Of course, this school teacher is referring to the legendary story of our parasha; of the remarkable hospitality that Abraham and Sarah show to three total strangers who show up in the heat of the day, at the entry of their tent. The first eight verses of Genesis chapter 18 are brimming with words that describe energetic, enthusiastic concern for these guests. Abraham runs, greets, fetches water and bread, bathes their feet, waits on them, insists that they rest and refresh themselves. And this is the very same spirit that has caused Israelis not to think twice about opening their homes to people displaced by the Gaza rocket attacks.

In the past week, not only were schools and businesses closed across southern and central Israel, but many weddings also had to be canceled or relocated at the last minute, as large gatherings were not permitted by the Army. That’s when a bride and groom, Moran Nizrad and Yaniv Kahlon, whose wedding was scheduled to take place in a venue northeast of Tel Aviv offered to share their wedding with a couple from the south that had been displaced. There was indeed a couple from Sderot whose wedding was cancelled, and they welcomed the opportunity to come up north, with all their friends, and family, and even their rabbi to get married along with Moran and Yaniv. The owners of the Tel Ya venue paid for the cost of hundreds of additional guests--to the tune of tens of thousands of shekels--and both couples shared the band, dance floor, and banquet areas (though they did have separate chuppas!). Two couples who had never met each other before, were now connected for life as they danced the night away together, celebrating not just one Jewish wedding but two.²

It is the spirit of the Jewish people for time immemorial. It is one significant way that we have survived the whims and quirks of history...Jews always made a place for each other...at their tables, in their homes, in their communities, and even at their weddings! It is why the British journalist and member of the House of Lords Daniel Finkelstein said, “Every time you meet another Jew for the first time, you are really taking part in a family reunion.”³ This is a family

¹*The Daily Portion*, Sivan Rahav Meir (Account of Liron Tzedakah, translated by Yehoshua Siskin), November 13, 2019

² <https://www.aish.com/jw/id/A-Special-Double-Wedding-In-Israel-When-the-Rockets-Rained-Down.html>

³ <https://www.thejc.com/comment/columnists/that-mysterious-sense-of-jewish-connection-daniel-finkelstein-1.464375>

that traces its origins all the way back to our original patriarch and matriarch, Abraham and Sarah.

I think we would all wish that we could be discussing these “family reunions” and remarkable stories of hospitality without the backdrop of incoming rockets. Yet, sometimes it takes extreme and trying circumstances such as these for the true character of a people to be on display. I’m still not entirely at peace with my kid being 48 miles from Gaza. But I am grateful that she is seeing one of the great miracles not only of the State of Israel, but of the Jewish people: the radical hospitality and the bonds of extended family that have always held our people together. In this latest test of endurance, it seems those bonds are as strong and durable as ever. *Am Yisrael Chai...Shabbat Shalom!*