

In Solidarity with Israel Shabbat Nachamu 5774

Today is Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath of Comfort; it always follows Tisha B'Av, the traditional commemoration of the most horrendous and catastrophic events in Jewish history, collective experiences of the oppression, persecution, and slaughter of impotent Jewish communities at the hands of those with power. On this particular Shabbat Nachamu, as the rockets fired from Gaza at citizens in the cities, towns, and villages of Israel – over 3000 of them – either have or have not ceased, as the tunnels of terror, or most of them, seem to have been destroyed, as Operation Protective Edge, now in its 32nd day, seems to have wound down after nerve-wracking days with over 60 Israeli and over 1800 Palestinian dead, one message of comfort I experience is this: we Jews, those of us who live in the sovereign state of Israel and those who, as I, feel bound to those who do, we have in our day the means to fight back. That means is no small matter. In my view, we should not take it for granted even as we must not fail to exhibit the moral responsibility that accompanies such capacity.

This evening, I intend to speak about how I view Israel and my relationship to Israel during periods of war such as the one we have witnessed this past month. I intend not to adjudicate among the many pundits with claims and counter claims made about this conflict, not to speak about the extra difficulty of American liberal Zionists when the Israeli government tilts to the right, not to address the role of the media and what I perceive as frequent distortions and readiness to accept as factual the claims or spins that come from one camp or another, or to move to the infuriating default position of so-called balanced reporting as if all accounts have equal relationship to the facts. Nor do I intend to discuss ultimate solutions or even partial solutions, or to delve deeply into the larger historical sweeps of the political and ideological struggles in which Israel finds itself but a small player, albeit a regional power. This Shabbat evening, this Shabbat Nachamu, I simply intend to share some personal thoughts and feelings as one American rabbi about how I see myself and my obligations when Israel engages in an existential struggle.

I will tip my hand at the outset: a week ago on Wednesday (July 30), the well known author and left wing Israeli peace activist, Amos Oz, gave an interview to the German Magazine *Deutsche Welle*. He introduced a metaphorical image that, for me, captured the moral dynamics of the situation into which my response arises. He said:

I would like to begin the interview ... by presenting ... two questions to your readers and listeners....

Question 1: What would you do if your neighbor across the street sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire into your nursery?

Question 2: What would you do if your neighbor across the street digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or in order to kidnap your family?

After posing the two rhetorical questions as context, Oz goes on to give an interview with the kind of complicated nuance and left wing slant one would expect from a left wing intellectual, peace activist. He criticizes what he sees as Israel's excesses, including the blockade of Gaza. As expected, he reiterates the imperative for a two-state solution with Jerusalem as a shared capital. At the same time, he also insists that none of these things can happen until the Gazans eject Hamas the way the Romanians ejected Ceausescu.

Peacenik though he is, Oz simply does not currently see an opportunity for entering into a negotiation with a neighbor when that neighbor has sworn to continue firing deadly ammunition at you from his balcony with a child in his lap. Even a peace activist recognizes the primary moral obligation of self preservation and self protection. Even the most staunch peace activist recognizes that a neighbor who shields himself behind children will inevitably put the lives of those children at risk. Even one devoted to peace-making recognizes the horrible cynicism of employing children and civilians and hospitals and schools and mosques as shields for rocket launchers and armed combatants, playing for sympathy at the expense of the lives of those innocent citizens. Across the wide political spectrum of Israel, from left to right, folks have come to recognize full well the public relations advantages Hamas seeks, sometimes with success, when luring Israel into its own defense. Elie Wiesel, for one, referred to the strategic use of children as shields for weaponry as child sacrifice.

By beginning my remarks with reference to the Oz interview, you already know that I see Israel's decision to respond militarily to the rockets fired at Israeli civilian centers as justified. Rabbi Hillel long ago articulated the ethical principle of "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" One has a right to defend oneself and a nation has a right and a responsibility to defend its citizens from attack. But as you know, Hillel added the clause "but if I am only for myself, what am I?" I

cannot only be concerned about my personal survival and safety. Jewish ethics requires me to regard and take responsibility for my neighbor as well, even when my neighbor shoots at me. In this regard, I applaud the great extent to which Israeli forces routinely have gone to warn the Palestinian citizens of Gaza prior to attacks and I share the deep remorse expressed by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu over the regrettable loss of life in Gaza. As Golda Meir remarked sorrowfully about previous wars thrust upon Israel by neighboring nations unable to abide Israel's existence: we can forgive the Arabs for killing our children but we cannot forgive them for making us kill their children.

In short, I see no moral equivalence between the side that uses rockets to protect civilians, as does Israel, and the side that uses civilians to protect rockets, as does Hamas. Let me be clear. The moral justification to enter into a war and the morality about how a war is waged are two distinct subjects. The issue of how to wage a just war as to minimize civilian casualties on the other side when the enemy's seeks to harm your civilians and at the same time seeks or seems unconcerned about the loss of life on his own side -- that is a real and complex dilemma with no easy solution. The concept of proportionality requires the soldier in charge to decide when and how to apply lethal force and when to use restraint. I am told and can imagine that in the heat of battle such moments of decision typically present themselves without clarity. In the midst of battle, we who observe from a distance on our TV or computer screens do well to exercise caution before reaching conclusions about alleged violations of this or that ethical or legal code or about where to assign blame. In broad sweeps, it seems clear to me that Israel seeks to minimize the loss of civilian life. Specific cases, however, must be examined carefully, one at a time. There will be time for such careful and dispassionate review after the blood has dried, after the dust has settled.

One more thought on the notion of proportionality. It cannot mean the equal loss of life on both sides. Israel need not apologize that more Israelis did not die. Israel need not apologize for its greater relative strength and it need not apologize for the ability of the Iron Dome Defense system to efficiently protect its civilian population centers.

A bit more personally, permit me to invoke the notion of Jews as a family. It has been said that given the range of diversity among the Jewish people, we Jews do not so much share a faith as we share a fate. As members of a large extended family, we often disagree with one another, we may not always like one another, but we are necessarily affected by one another and are indubitably bound up with one another in one, shared fate. In a word, we are family. For me, I also mean the

notion of family literally and quite personally. Israel for me pertains to actual family, both on my side and on Dela's. As you know, Israel which was founded in large part as a place of rescue and refuge for Jews who had come to realize correctly that anti-Semitism continued to thrive in most nations even after enlightenment took hold, even after one movement or another had come and liberated the masses. Those liberations routinely seemed to exclude the Jews. That was the lesson of the pogroms and blood libels of Eastern Europe, the Dreyfus Affair in France, and of course, the Holocaust.

Dela's parents, thank God, had the prescience and good fortune to escape Nazi Germany and make their way to mandatory Palestine in 1937 where Dela's brother was born in 1943 and she arrived in 1950. Thus, when people refer to Israel as place of rescue and refuge, I do not take these notions as matters of theory. To me, they are a matter of my family. Moreover, in 1975, my dear sister Judi of blessed memory and her husband Joel choose to make their mark on the world by living and raising a family in Israel, to join their personal stories to the unfolding drama, some call it a miracle, the return of a sovereign Jewish state in the ancient Jewish homeland.

Thus, Dela and I have a niece and a nephew and a brother-in-law and second cousins and two great nieces and one great nephew who live in Israel. So when people question Israel's right to exist or when nations or organizations seek to undermine her ability to exist (through misguided or ill-intentioned divestment schemes and the like) or when armed thugs kidnap Israeli citizens or attack Israeli neighborhoods with rockets, or blow themselves up on Israeli buses or at restaurants, these are not matters of theory to me. They constitute attacks on my family and the places where my family lives. If I am not for my family who will be? I need not apologize for the instinct to stand in solidarity with my family when others seek to harm them.

But even if I did not have biological family or family by marriage in Israel, verbal and ballistic attacks would still assume a personal standing in my moral universe. The Talmud teaches: *Kol Yisrael Aravim Ze La Zeh*. We Jews are obligated to one another, bound up in that common fate. We Jews are bound up with one another both as a matter of descriptive truth and as a matter of prescriptive mandate. When Israel is in the news, the synagogue gets a call, as if the CBI president and its rabbi somehow had inside information on Netanyahu's motives and the strategies of the IDF. Of course, we do not. But in a way, the callers are right to think that we Jews living our comfortable lives in the commodious setting of Charlottesville do obsessively pore over the news when

Israel dominates it. It is not that we have any insight, but we do care in a manner that runs deep. And we should. We Jews partake of a collective spirituality; we are wired for interconnectivity and we value that wiring.

Some of you know I spent two weeks in Jerusalem a bit earlier this summer, studying as I do most summers at the Shalom Hartman Institute. I returned home a few days after the announcement that the three kidnapped Israeli teens had been murdered, during the first days of Operation Protective Edge, but before the large scale ground incursion and before the death toll began to escalate. On Tuesday evening, July 8th, I was walking with my friends, Rabbi Steve and Sabina Sager, and several others, toward my hotel. Suddenly, the deafening blast of an air raid siren pierced the cool night air. Here are Rabbi's Sager's musings on that moment:

More than one prophet warned that it was both nostalgic and naive to think that Jerusalem could resist the forces of history -- Babylonia, Rome. Nevertheless, the impulse persists to think that Jerusalem's special status will protect it from harm. I know this to be true because I discovered the impulse within myself: No aggressor would risk destroying one of his holy sites, I reasoned -- protection from above rising from below.

Yet, a few nights ago, Sabina and I, along with some of our friends and a handful of strangers, all ran for the same garage as air raid sirens blared. The next day, as we headed north to the Golan, more sirens in Jerusalem cleared the streets, buses, classrooms, and playgrounds. "Iron Dome" missiles neutralized threats to populated areas. But, having learned from the ancient warning, everyone seeks shelter when the siren screams. Help from above might not prevail.

Rabbi Sager then offers by contrast:

I just saw a video of a group of Palestinians on the Temple Mount celebrating the news that rockets had hit Jerusalem. Perhaps they feel that their holy sites are expendable in the service of another cause. Perhaps, on the other hand, they trust in powers above, both divine and Israeli, to protect that which is sacred to them.

To which I would add on this Shabbat when one of the prophets who has warned us to avoid nostalgia also promises the possibility of comfort:

May those who mourn the loved ones whose lives were lost during this recent conflict come to experience a measure of comfort.

May the souls of the dead be received in grace by the One Full of Mercy.

May Israel continue to have the strength to defend its citizens but not the hardness of heart lest it become morally callous.

And may we all continue to hope, pray, and work for security, peace, and prosperity for all the inhabitants of the region.

And let us say, “amen.”