

About Last Night

(February 2009)

Dateline: The morning after the Gaza Update program.

It's not often that I wake up the morning after a program and feel a knot in my stomach. I'm not used to putting out a product that results in people being disappointed. And I include myself in that group. The Monday evening, January 26 presentation on Israel's recent military engagement with Hamas in Gaza was unsuccessful. It did not really answer people's questions or sufficiently address their concerns. It failed to engender a feeling of community. We had virtually no give-and-take, no real opportunity to share our thoughts, certainly not in a way that would make us feel like our voices mattered. I apologize for this. I misread the needs and expectations of those who came.

By the same token, I was not troubled by what our presenters had to say. We asked them to come and share their sense of what this conflict was about—why it occurred, what really happened, what the implications are for the future. Given the time constraints, I thought they did as good a job as possible. What's more, I need for you to know that I share their assessment of the situation.

I agree that this was a war of necessity (known in the rabbinic literature as *milchemet chovah*); Israel, I firmly believe, had no choice but to respond militarily to Hamas' renewed rocket salvos into southern Israel. I share what one of the presenters said, that war is messy, that the death of innocents is unavoidable, that Israel went to great lengths to minimize civilian casualties. Even more, I feel that the blood of the non-combatants—the women and children—is on Hamas' hands. They are the ones who intentionally place their people in harm's way. They are the ones who broke the cease-fire. They are the ones who are ideologically devoted (in a religiously passionate way) to the destruction of Israel. For me Israel gets the benefit of my doubt. Every nation has the right, first and foremost, to protect itself from those who seek to do it harm.

Of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a matter of black-and-white. Palestinians do, indeed, suffer. Especially in Gaza. And as Jews, many of us—and I include myself here—feel it *mitzvah* to be concerned with the suffering of others, even one's enemy. Torah is clear that we are required to alleviate the suffering of our enemy's cattle, we are commanded to sate the hunger and quench the thirst of our enemy, we are forbidden to rejoice in their suffering. And if we take Hillel's dictum seriously—If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what am I?—then our compassion for the other must include all others. As Hillel suggests, our failure to engage in self-transcendence calls into question not a pragmatic concern (“Who will be for me?”) but rather an existential one (“What am I?”). Even as our first concern must always be for ourselves, the second part of the equation is the one upon which

our humanity hinges. What kind of human being can I be if I do not concern myself with the suffering of others?

I think where we failed last night was not in our attempt to better understand the conflict in Gaza and southern Israel; actually our presenters gave us good information. Rather what we missed were the internal struggles, the pain that so many of us feel when these wars break out. Last night was about Palestinians and Israelis; it should have been about us.

This was manifestly clear last month when many of us started to take sides in the Montclair Times. And even though the presenting issue was—depending on your perspective—either the “justified” or the “immoral” actions of the Israeli military, in fact the driving force behind the “ads” was ultimately about how we see ourselves as Jews. You know, it’s no big deal for Israelis to mirror those identical stands within the context of Israeli political debate (just as we here in America often find ourselves on different sides of the political spectrum). But somehow, when we find ourselves with opposing views about Israel the emotions rise, the atmosphere of community gets charged, and—simply put—we get upset.

Last night I think a lot of people came to Ner Tamid for the stated purpose of learning more about what is true and false, of getting help in being able to discern fact from fiction. But what they really wanted was to be able to remove the knot within their souls. Whether that “knot” was a result of the way they feel Israel fails to reflect their values or the way they feel that Israel is unfairly judged, the dis-ease with which we struggle has—to my thinking—more to do with the complexities of diaspora existence than anything else. Shvertz azayan Yid. It’s hard to be a Jew.

I want to see if we can find ways to not merely move past this but build from it. I want to explore ways to talk together, not just about Israel but about ourselves. I want Israel to bind us together, even as we may disagree about how it struggles for survival. For if there is anything we can learn from this, Israel and we are one. Kol Yisraeil areivin zeh b’zeh. All Israel are bound together.

We can grow from our differences, not just communally but individually. Of this I am certain.