

The Tragic Realities of Our Wilderness – Parashat B'midbar 5781

Rabbi Michael Safra

It isn't always comfortable to see how the sausage is made.

That's what it felt like for me seeing the news from Israel this week. Thousands of rockets fired from Gaza to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ashkelon, and other cities. Buildings blown up in Gaza. Dangerous mob riots in Israeli towns pitting Jewish citizens against Arab citizens. Police action on the Temple Mount. ... Jerusalem intellectual Danny Gordis suggested that the last time there were fires on the Temple Mount was in 70 CE. But this is different. In 70, the Jews were on their way out. They looked over their shoulders to catch a final glimpse of their holiest space as they were marched out of town. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Our people were defeated.

But not this time. No doubt it was painful to see the fires. Surely it is scary to hear air raid sirens warn that there are only seconds to get to a safe space. But this time the Jewish people have the means to fight back. Hamas may terrorize, but they will not defeat us. *Am Yisrael Hai*.

Perhaps there is a downside to the Iron Dome, Israeli Air Force, and military might. Because we think we know all the answers. We were discussing in Israel at the dinner table the other night because my children wanted to understand: Sheik Jarrah, the end of Ramadan, Yom Yerushalayim, the cancelled Palestinian election, the uncertain aftermath of the Israeli election. ... These are the flashpoints that trigger the predictable debates: who fired first? What caused this? How will it end?

One of my children said she doesn't think Israel should retaliate against the rockets because they don't inflict much damage, certainly not as much as the missiles. (This is where I must pause to point out that my daughter is 12. Maybe she should be forgiven offering such a simple solution to one of the world's most complicated and oldest conflicts. But I'm not sure that seasoned politicians and veteran journalists should be afforded the same grace for their childhood naivete. Because the world is more complicated than that.) I tried to explain. Go tell the families of the two women in Ashkelon who were killed that the rockets don't inflict any damage. Go tell the children running through the streets on their way to shelter; go tell the students from JDS who are in Israel right now that rockets aren't dangerous.

That doesn't mean I agree with every decision of every military or government leader. Who does? But we have to wonder, given the available options, how a country is supposed to protect its citizens. Remember that rockets are fired from civilian areas. We don't want to see everything we are forced to see; but we have to recognize that the issues are complicated. Be wary of simple solutions to difficult problems.

This morning, we began a new book of the Torah. It began with a most utilitarian, ordinary, call it "profane" event. Moses counted the people to prepare them to defend themselves in the wilderness and eventually conquer the land. We might ask why the Israelites needed an army. They had God on

their side. The Torah promised, “*Adonai yilahem lakhem*, God will fight for you.” Why do the people need to worry about such ordinary pursuits as counting and procuring an army?

The 19th-century German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says the counting was a reminder that they still lived in the ordinary world of reality, the world as it is. For the past couple months, you see, we’ve been reading the book of Leviticus. The people weren’t travelling; the narrative paused. It is as if we were sitting in a classroom and studying the ideal world of holiness. We learned about purity, sacrificial offerings, sanctity of space and time. But that was like a frictionless environment, an idealized lab-version of how the world should be. “Now,” says Hirsch,

this fourth book comes back to stark reality and shows us the actual relationship between the actual nation and this ideal of their calling shown in the third book. Accordingly it begins by having the individual members of the nation counted, [to emphasize] that the united nation is no mere vague conception, but exists in this universal calling of its members, ... and that the national mission reckons on the faithfulness to duty, and conscious devotion to the common calling ... of each individual.

The classroom is great. It’s wonderful to learn in a space where everything works; good is good and evil is evil. But the actual world is more complicated. In the wilderness there is war, complaining, misunderstanding, uncertainty. In the real world you have to stand up and be counted; you have to be prepared to defend yourself.

The end of the portion describes how the Tabernacle was dismantled each time the Israelites traveled. The clan of Kehat would carry the sacred vessels, but not before they were prepared by Aaron and his sons. The ark, the table of display, the menorah, the altar – each sacred vessel had to be covered with a blue cloth. The Kehatites were not allowed to see the objects as they were being carried. Again from Rabbi Hirsch: “The effect of this prohibition would be that the holy objects remain to their bearers as symbolic objects, subjects of the mind, for thoughts, not so much as the tangible objects. ...”

In other words, when these vessels were set up in the Tabernacle, they were special; the space was holy. But when they were dismantled, they were just stuff; ordinary; things that get dirty. The Kehatites weren’t supposed to see the ordinary aspects of the Temple vessels; they wanted only to see them in their holiest state, with all the grandeur. They weren’t supposed to see how the sausage was made.

I wonder if we can relate during this time of violence in Israel. We have a certain idealized notion of what Israel should be – a holy land for a holy people. Jerusalem is *ir shalem*, the city of completeness; *ir shalom*, the city of peace. “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,” says the Psalmist, “we were as dreamers.” To which Herzl responded, “If you will it, it is no dream.”

It is no dream. The violence in Israel is real; and in the real world there are enemies. In the real world, Israel finds itself in a dangerous neighborhood where Iran supplies missiles to anyone willing to shout “Death to the Jew! Death to the Zionists.” To use Hirsch’s terms, we want to live in the land of Vayikra where everything is pure, everyone is holy, and morality is simple. The international community

imagines we already live in that holy land. We want that too. But, unfortunately, we understand that we still live in the *midbar*, the wasteland, the confusion of the wilderness.

And in that wilderness, we must stand to be counted. “*S’u et rosh kol adat b’nai yisrael*, Count the heads of the entire congregation of Israel by family and by household.” The moment demands we be counted; are we with our brothers and sisters in Israel or against them?

That’s not to say that anything goes. It is telling that even in the wilderness, the Israelite community is led by priests. Even *b’midbar*, the people concern themselves with matters of purity and impurity. Even those people who had to count and fight were commanded to strive for holiness. And the same is true for us.

The Israeli Army preaches the concept of *tohar haneshek*, purity in arms, the notion that even in war we must take pains to ensure the safety of civilians. Soldiers are sometimes asked to risk their own lives by holding fire until there is ample time for non-belligerents to evacuate targeted spaces. And it doesn’t always work. There are tragic mistakes; values are trampled; and we can’t just say that those tragedies are okay. The enemy will not force us to abandon our values. We will not be like them.

But it’s complicated in the wilderness. And so we pray. We pray for the security of our relatives and friends who live in Israel. We pray for the safety of the seniors from JDS who are in Israel right now, barely a month after receiving clearance to travel after a 6-week Covid delay. We pray for the civilians – Arab and Jew, Israeli and Palestinian. We pray for our values and ideals. We pray for the peace of Jerusalem, that someday soon we might no longer be forced to see the realities of our dangerous world, that the realities of this violent wilderness will be transformed into the purest hopes of our most sacred dreams. May that day come speedily. Shabbat shalom.