

“Routine” Shelling
July 21, 2006
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

Today is the ninth day of the war. Where are we? Are we at the proverbial "end of the beginning" of this war? I doubt it. This conflict is already 50% longer than the Six Day War, the first Arab-Israeli war I have a conscious memory of, yet it is certainly far from clear how it will play itself out. (Uncomfortable word to use in that sentence, isn't it? War is hardly a game.) Stability, clarity, equilibrium ... – none of these has yet been achieved. How can Israel move beyond the aggressive military stance of the first phase of this war toward a situation in which diplomacy can begin to exert itself? When will the displaced Lebanese begin to move back to their homes, when will the shelling of northern Israel cease, when will the border become peaceful again?

Life here in Israel remains a study in contrasts. On the one hand, Israel's air force is carrying out raids 24/7 with devastating success, hundreds of katyushas are falling in northern Israel, and millions of Israelis are sleeping in shelters. The casualties on the Lebanese side are substantial, and those on the Israeli side are mounting as well. Yesterday, two Israeli children were killed by a katyusha in Nazareth. Is it relevant that they were Arab children? Does this tell us anything about the Hezbollah's aims -- or does it simply speak to the limited accuracy of their arsenal? Two Israeli soldiers were killed and several others wounded in a fierce fire fight that erupted when an elite group of Israeli soldiers entered Lebanon in an attempt to silence a group of katyusha rocket launchers. It's clear that if political progress is not made, and if Israel will be forced to send ground troops into Lebanon to destroy Hezbollah (which it desperately does not want to do), many more Israeli casualties can be expected.

On the other hand, here in Jerusalem, life goes on. Restaurants are open and are thriving. This is not entirely disconnected from the violence up north. The city is swelling with refugees from up north. I understand that the Inbal hotel (where the Follow Me to Israel group from Boston is staying) has taken in several hundred Israelis who drove down from up north to get away from the stress, the discomfort and the disorientation of sleeping in shelters. I spoke with Hili Shiran of Haifa (whom our congregation has adopted) this morning; she told me that the first *az'akah* ("siren") in Haifa went off this morning at 5:00 am, and that she's been up ever since. Rabbi Rachel Shabbat, who works at the Hartman Institute (who, coincidentally, once served a congregation in Nantucket) is exploring opportunities for folks here to get involved and to help those who've been displaced.

A bizarre coincidence: yesterday was the sixtieth anniversary of the bombing by the Irgun of the King David hotel here in Jerusalem. (Remember that scene in "Exodus"?) A group gathered yesterday at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, practically in the hotel's shadow, to commemorate (celebrate?) this anniversary. It seemed to me an odd occasion for commemoration, during an unsettling time.



Watching the news here in Israel, the focus is very much on Israeli casualties and on the disruption of civilian life up north. Watching CNN, one gets a very different focus, from a very different perspective. There is, obviously an enormous disruption of life in Lebanon. Moreover, it is sad to acknowledge, many civilians have been killed as a result of Israeli bombing. This raises two questions: First, is Israel crossing moral and/or international legal lines in its bombardment? Certainly, the pronouncements of Lebanese or U.N. officials would suggest as much. But when words like "massacre" are bandied about, when phrases like "the intentional targetting of civilians" or "war crimes" are added to the mix, it is easy to tune it out and to dismiss it. (I don't recall hearing any condemnation by the U.N. of the explicitly intentional targetting of civilians by Hezbollah after hundreds of katyushas were indiscriminately fired at northern communities earlier in the week.)

And yet Israelis don't tune out those accusations. On the contrary, they confront them. Fortunately, Israel is a free and open society with a highly developed moral sense. On news programs, Israelis are asking their military and political leaders to explain where the bombardment is being focused, and why. No one here questions (as the international press appears to be doing) whether civilians are being deliberately targeted. Everyone knows that they are not – even though everyone also knows that this is how those against whom Israel is fighting conduct war. But Israelis do not take lightly the issue of "collateral damage," and the military is being required to defend its tactics publicly.

And yet, there is that charge of "disproportionate response," which certainly seems reasonable, given that hundreds of Lebanese, many of them civilians, have been killed, and so far few Israelis have died. Isn't that *prima facie* evidence of a disproportionate response?

Nachman Shai, a former Israeli army spokesman who is now a television commentator, spoke to this issue on T.V. last night. He provided a useful framework for understanding this properly. One must measure the appropriateness of military responses, he argued, against the *threats* they are designed to address -- not the enemy's effectiveness, at any particular point in time, in carrying them out. If the threat (thousands of katyushas hitting northern settlements, with thousands of other long-range missiles poised to hit Tel Aviv and points south) is severe, the response must be as well. This makes sense to me. If one only measured the proportionality of a military response by the *effect* of enemy action, then one person surrounded by one hundred attackers could only, as a matter of right, kill one of his attackers – and would then have to permit the rest to succeed. If we assume that Israel's goal of freeing itself from Hezbollah's ominous threats is legitimate, then it has every right to attack every one of those rocket launchers, wherever they may be found.

On the other hand, there is a second question that Israel must also ask, and that is the political cost of an all-out war on Hezbollah. So long as Israel is depicted as, or understood to be, overly aggressive, however legitimate her use of military power, it is likely that she will lose world-wide support -- support that I believe she needs if an acceptable political solution to this crisis is to be implemented.

There was an article in the paper the other day. It seems that several American (Christian) evangelists are seeing this conflict as (the beginning of) World War III. There is unanimity here

that this is not accurate. (Whew!) (In general, Israelis don't like thinking of themselves as pawns in the hands of others, and this characterization seems to be doing just that.)

So this is not the “escaton” (the end of days) – as a Protestant clergyperson friend of mine suggested to me the other day that she feared it was. At least I hope it's not. Sadly, one reason Israelis feel that way is that, to them, there's nothing new here. This is yet another challenge by one of Israel's enemies to her right to exist. In this case, it happens to be Iranian-armed guerillas in Lebanon. Another day, it may be Syrian Arabs; on another day it may be Iraqis or Jordanians or Egyptians. The war must be waged with the awareness that one may have to fight yet another battle on yet another day. What that means is that, as newscasters have discovered during the past several days, hearing a siren and running toward the nearest bomb shelter can become “*shigrati*” (“routine”) for Israel's northern residents. And that is because, if Israelis can do anything well, it is to cope.

This morning, I went over to the Inbal hotel to greet the “Follow Me to Israel” group from Boston. It was wonderful to see Glenn Levine and Joey Baron representing Temple Aliyah in the group of twenty-five Boston-area Jewish leaders. I spoke with them about the proper way to understand their role here this week. I suggested that, however difficult their decision to come to Israel during this war may have been, the language of heroism isn't appropriate. The true heroes are the soldiers risking their lives on the borders of Israel, or the more than one million Israelis who slept in bomb shelters last night. American visitors, after all, are being sheltered as much as possible. Nonetheless, I suggested, it *is* appropriate for them to think of themselves as models. By their presence, they are demonstrating that, as difficult as the situation may be right now, we American Jews are still going to want to maintain our strong links with Israel, we're still going to want to send our youth to Israel, and we still believe it is important to explore these possibilities through trips like this.

I then shared with the group a famous saying in the Talmud (found in tractate Berachot, page 5a) with which I would like to close this letter. According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, God has bestowed upon the Jewish People three precious gifts: Torah, the World to Come and the Land of Israel. That part sounds wonderful. The only problem, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai added, is that each of these can be acquired only through suffering and sacrifice.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if our right to a homeland were uncontested? Wouldn't it be wonderful if Israel's neighbors accepted her with open arms, and if they valued life as much as we do? But we Jews don't have a choice. We have to live in the real world. Messianic times have not yet arrived.

Israelis have their own challenges. Our challenge as American Jews is never to forget this saying of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: never to forget how precious a gift the Land of Israel is, and never to forget those who are making the sacrifices necessary to accept it.

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem!

Rabbi Carl M. Perkins