

Israel: All Alone, Again

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Rosh Hashana 2001*

I spoke yesterday about the tragedy that befell our nation last week, introducing my sermon by commenting on how the sound of the shofar parallels and evokes the sound of the sirens which have become all too commonplace, first in Israel, and now in America. And again, today, as I speak about the plight of the people of Israel, the imagery of the sounding of the shofar is relevant. The shevarim, the broken notes are meant to sound like a moan, reflecting the broken-hearted, incompleteness we feel. And the tekiah, our sages tell us, is the sound of alarm.

As I address this morning what our people, the people of Israel, has endured this past year, in many respects, it is the same experience felt by America, differing only in one critical respect.

For one thing, make no mistake about it, the very same forces who struck at the center of American power are the same ones who strike at Israel. And for some of the very same reasons.

Many American Jews received phone calls and emails from friends in Israel inquiring about our safety and to be sure we were all right after the attack. Israelis understood our pain, and felt a kinship with us. Wednesday, the day after the attack was a day of national mourning in Israel.

This was in contrast to the spontaneous celebrations among Palestinians, demonstrations which the Palestinian Authority encouraged, and then attempted to repress the reports about the festivities. The New York Times reported that the PA even tried to squelch reports about them squelching reports and of the confiscating of film, threatening and intimidating journalists. People often do not realize that the news and images we see of Palestinians, and for that matter, just about anywhere in the Arab world, as is true of all dictatorships and totalitarian regimes, are manipulated and controlled.

Americans should know once and for all, who is on whose side. Israel's allegiance is unconditional. Unlike the Arab nations President Bush is trying to line up for his alliance against terrorism, it makes no demands that the United States change the status of its relations with other countries to win its support.

Despite the efforts by some to blame the attack on our relationship with Israel, and to drive a wedge between us, we need to remind people that the assault on the center of America goes beyond who it chooses to befriend. And even if it was related to our relations with the only democracy in the Middle East, are we going to be intimidated into letting the tyranny of backward, repressive, undemocratic fundamentalists dictate to us how we should conduct our foreign policy?

What happened last week was precipitated by a deep, venomous rejection of modernity, and all that America represents. It was an attack against democracy, individualism and liberty, against the openness of our society, a place where minorities are accepted and diversity and freedom of religion is celebrated, a place where women can work and drive a car. The targets were carefully selected. Like the terrorist attacks in Israel it was calculated to do maximum damage, to instill the maximum amount of fear, and to take the lives of innocent civilians.

Osama ben Laden turned against the United States when the western forces arrived in Mecca and Medina to defend Kuwait and Saudi Arabia after they were invaded by Iraq. The deep-seated hatred and resentment of the fundamentalist Islamic radicals towards America and Israel, is driven by xenophobic zeal, and their openly stated desire to rid first the region of any non-Islamic presence, and subsequently to bring the whole world under Moslem hegemony.

Raed Salah, leader of Israel's Islamic movement said, just last week at a rally attended by tens of thousands of Israeli Arabs, in Israel that the way to achieve peace and security in the world is for President Bush to convert to Islam.

Several months ago, I came across a small quote at the end of an article in the Washington Post, in which a psychiatrist who runs a large mental health clinic in Gaza, Eyad Sarraj, said, "If there are still Jewish settlements in Gaza after the final talks, I will personally form an armed brigade to attack them." This is from an educated man, a doctor!

One of the things which I stated last Yom Kippur, and still maintain is that the root cause of the conflict must be addressed. And that root cause is not poverty. There is plenty of money in the Arab world if they wanted to solve the problem of poor Arabs. It has nothing to do with borders or settlements. Rather, it is precipitated by the steady diatribe of hatred, anti-semitic and anti-Zionist indoctrination which is sanctioned and emanates from the top, and is so pervasive in Arab culture, even among intellectuals and many of the nations who are not in a state of belligerence with Israel. The number one song in Egypt is, "I hate Israel."

Now, sadly, perhaps as a result of this tragedy, our fellow Americans will have a better understanding of what Israel faces on a regular basis and how they are forced to live their lives.

When I was in Israel this past year, I heard the plight of school children who worry whether or not their parents will return from work that day. They spoke of friends who wake up one day to discover that they are orphans because their parents have been attacked for no reason other than the fact that they are Jews. I heard from parents who worry whether or not their children will return home from their journey to school. And all of whom say that they would never want to live anywhere else. As one young 14 year old said, "If we change how we live, they will have won."

This past year is unlike any other that I can recall. Just when we thought we had sustained the worst, more was to come. Just when it seemed that things had reached rock bottom, and that nothing more shocking could occur, it did.

How much more can we endure? How much more suffering can one people take?

Koby Mandell, the young boy from Silver Spring, who is no different from your children or mine was butchered, bludgeoned and dismembered beyond recognition. What could be going on in the mind of the barbarians who do such things to an innocent, pure, peace-loving child, who never harmed anyone?

The bombing of a disco in Tel Aviv, where young teenagers, again, children like yours and mine, just trying to live a normal life, and have an evening out, tore us apart.

And then, most recently, a suicide bomber struck at the Sbarro's pizzeria in Jerusalem. This restaurant, at the corner of a major intersection, in Jerusalem, at the crossroads and epicenter of Jerusalem, like the other attacks was meant to take lives, and to strike fear into the hearts and minds of Israelis. But here, too, we see the link between our two nations, for ironically, and miraculously, the restaurant reopened last Tuesday, the day America was attacked.

There were other random shootings at civilians and attacks, and many which, thank God, were thwarted by alert citizens and vigilant intelligence forces.

Not only did the events of the past year take its toll on Israelis, it also affected Jews elsewhere as well, as many Americans canceled planned trips to Israel, causing potentially irreparable harm to the Israeli economy.

And how has Israel reacted through it all? With unbelievable restraint.

After the bloody murder of two Israeli reservists in Ramallah, Israel destroyed the police headquarters where the murder took place, announcing its plans in advance, so the building could be evacuated, in order to minimize the loss of life.

And yet Israel has been roundly condemned by the international community and the media for its actions.

Let's face it, it does not matter what Israel does, or how it acts – it will always be blamed.

It reminds me of what happened in 1970 when Israel responded to the killing of 17 school children in Maalot by blowing up a plane in Lebanon. At the risk of the lives of the Israeli operatives, caution was taken to insure that no innocent Lebanese civilians were killed. The result? Israel was censured by the United Nations and Pope Paul VI for blowing up an airplane, although neither ever said a single word about the loss of Jewish lives the previous week.

Look at what Israel has done more recently. Offer Arafat 98% of the territory he demanded, along with the unthinkable – shared sovereignty over Jerusalem, and it is not enough. Refrain from striking back after the explosion at the disco in Tel Aviv, and that is not good enough, nor does it convince the terrorists to stop their cruel acts. Limit the response, and strike only at the masterminds who plot these attacks and dispatch the suicide bombers in a precise manner to minimize loss of life, and that is not good enough either. Rescue and airlift 14,000 black Ethiopian Jews and bring them to freedom, the only time in the history of the world that blacks were taken out of Africa not in bondage, and we are condemned at a conference on racism. Withdraw from Lebanon, unconditionally, and we are blamed for creating a power vacuum, and Hezbollah still attacks. Close off borders to limit access by potential terrorists to civilian centers, and we are condemned for preventing Palestinians from going about their lives.

Israel is called upon to refrain from responding, every time it is hit, so as not to contribute to an escalation of violence.

But now, perhaps after the tragedy of this past week, Americans will have a better understanding of the need to react when terrorists strike, and to respond with unrelenting force and resolve. Unfortunately, ignoring them does not reduce the threat of terror. To all those columnists and pundits who cried out that Israel's policy of striking back against terrorists was wrong, that it should not overreact, or that doing so was continuing the cycle of violence, let us see how it feels when the shoe is on the other foot.

But there is one significant difference between what happened in America last week, and the reaction to what has happened in Israel.

Canada, Great Britain, and nations around the world expressed their sympathy, solidarity and support for America. Services and vigils were held around the globe. NATO declared that the attack on New York and Washington was an attack on all the countries of NATO.

And herein is the crux of the difference I referred to at the outset. Just think, on a small scale, how comforting it was to know that others stood with us in our time of need and sorrow, and how much more painful it is to be alone at a time of crisis.

Israel has never in its short history ever enjoyed this kind of support. It has had to endure its suffering alone. Any time an Israeli diplomat or delegate walks into a conference of the United Nations, representatives leave. They even protested Israel's having an exhibit at Epcot in Disney World.

How interesting that no one is calling upon the United States to negotiate with those intent upon destroying our country. How interesting that no one is worried that the response from the United States will escalate the cycle of violence. No one is calling on the US to give California back to the Indians, or Texas to Mexico. No one is suggesting that we surrender to the demands of the Taliban and convert to Islam, dismantle all of our

ATMs, turn over our VCRs, DVDs and BMWs in order to peacefully resolve our differences.

It is important to reaffirm certain basic truths and facts.

The Israelis who have been targeted this past year by Palestinians are children, mothers and fathers. The Palestinians who have died are, for the most part, perpetrators of the violence. Innocent bystanders are not intentionally targeted, for unlike their Palestinian adversaries, Israel does not attack malls or shopping centers.

Israel is doing what any democracy has the right to do --- to protect the lives of its citizens. There is no way that Israel's acts in defense of its people can be likened to the acts of the terrorists who take the lives of civilians on their way to school, work, or trying to have a normal life. There is no comparison between the hatred which is sanctioned and promoted in official organs throughout the Arab world and which emanates from schoolbooks, songs, children's television shows, the media and official conferences and what is done in Israel. Quite simply, that kind of hatred is not tolerated in Israel, nor is it allowed to take root. On a rare occasion when it occurs, it is immediately isolated and roundly condemned so that it is outside of the mainstream. Look at how many attacks there have been on Arabs in America since last Tuesday by Americans – and consider what Israel faces, how close its enemy is, and the miracle that this does not take place there.

Jerusalem Post columnist Naomi Ragen wrote after Israel's most recent Memorial Day commemoration about the nature of the ceremonies marking the occasion. She reflected on the message of Shaul Mofaz, the Chief of Staff. He did not talk about the glory of fallen heroes or battles fought. Instead he reminded those in attendance of the tremendous loss they feel, as they recall "the birth of a child, the first picture taken in kindergarten. The first baby tooth that falls. The bar mitzvah pictures. The graduation from high school. The mother's kiss on the cheek of the new recruit. He spoke about the incalculable loss that each human being who dies in war is to his family, his parents, his grandparents, his brothers, sisters, girlfriend, wife, children. About the preciousness of life, and the horror of death. "

Israeli society does not glorify or celebrate death, but embraces life.

Dr. Ami Cohen, immigrated to Israel from Silver Spring and set up a clinic to save the lives of children around the world who do not have access to heart surgery. The last operations he performed before his untimely death a few weeks ago were on Palestinian children from Gaza.

Among the first to send in a rescue team after the earthquake in Turkey in 1999 was Israel. Chief of the Israel Defense Forces National Rescue unit, Colonel Udi Ben Uri said at the time, "Our goal is to save lives. It doesn't matter if they are Christians, Jews or Moslems."

Attempting to equate Israel's actions with the Palestinian efforts to act upon their plan to dismantle and replace the state of Israel is outright wrong. It is ludicrous to compare the terrorist acts and the wanton disregard for life of the Palestinians to Israel's efforts at protecting its people. This kind of moral equivalency is unfounded and offensive.

Let us get back to basics, and remember that the state of Israel was founded after the Holocaust, when it was clear that millions of Jewish lives could have been saved had the State of Israel existed at the time of World War II. Boat loads of Jews were turned away from America, Palestine and elsewhere, and returned to Germany and Europe because there was no Jewish state to take them in.

Although it is true that Israel was born out of the ashes of the Holocaust, in truth, there were centuries of persecution, pogroms and annihilation which preceded the Holocaust.

It is one reason why already, in the 1800's, Jews formed groups to emigrate and settle the land, a land which was basically undeveloped, unsettled, and uninhabited. There was no Palestinian state or entity that was displaced to allow for the settlement of Jews.

The only people who have maintained an ongoing connection to the land of Israel, throughout its 2,000 years of wanderings in the Diaspora was the Jewish people.

Zionism is the yearning of the Jewish people to be free and to have a place where Jewish life and culture could thrive and survive, free of persecution.

As stated in a recent publication by Clal, "as we stand together, it is vital to remember that the State of Israel was born out of a diverse coalition – socialists, secular Zionists, religious Zionists, militant Zionists, spiritual Zionists, and revisionists. These factions were not brought together by a slogan, but by a vision of a new land where they would have the freedom to live out their ideals."

Rabbi David Hartman put it this way, the rebirth of Israel gives Jews "an opportunity to rethink Judaism on its most profound level...to let Torah become a way of life."

On this Rosh Hashana, let us recognize our responsibility and obligation to stand with our fellow Jews, especially in this time of need. You must do whatever you can to reaffirm your commitment to the people of Israel in their time of need. In 1967, Jews took out loans, deferred major purchases, and made real sacrifices to help assist the embattled state of Israel. If you can go to Israel, go and do not delay or put off for some other time, that trip of a lifetime you have been planning to take. Do it now!

Despite all I have said about the dangers Israelis face, life goes on. I wrote to my son Micha a few months ago when he was in Israel, asking him to exercise caution while he was there. He sent me back the following e-mail from his kibbutz:

"Dear Dad, I just read in the Washington Post that there were several murders in Washington D.C. the last few days. I also read that some people in Silver Spring were

recently killed in traffic accidents. Therefore, I suggest you do not leave your house, and stay home for fear of what may happen to you.”

Micha is right. We cannot live our lives in fear.

Monitor the media and do not let distorted and unfair coverage go unchallenged. Explain to friends the justness of Israel’s cause. Write letters of support to your elected officials and to Jews in Israel. On Yom Kippur, purchase Israel bonds in greater numbers than ever before.

Let us stand together with Israel, for let’s face it, friends we are all it has got!

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September 19, 2001
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