

Pillar of Defense

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The term used by the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces for its recent campaign in Gaza was *Amud Anan*, which was translated into English as “Pillar of Defense.” The translation is not accurate, and although I wish the translation would have been more faithful to the original Hebrew, I can understand why they chose to mistranslate it.

Pillar of Defense makes it clear that Israel’s actions to severely reduce Hamas’ weaponry and stockpile of artillery in Gaza was a defensive move. It was not an aggressive act, for Israel was not motivated by a desire to grab territory, but rather its intent was to protect its citizens, primarily those in the southern portion of the country, from the constant, ongoing missile attacks. 600 missiles were launched from Gaza into Israel in the first 10 months of the year – an average of two a day. I could not help but think when I first learned this, why were we not made aware of this steady flow of attacks earlier?

Contrary to the obnoxious assessment of the Washington Post Ombudsman, these were not like bee stings on the behind of a bear, but dangerous weapons that posed a real threat to the citizens within its range. Israel has developed a warning system which sounds an alarm and gives its citizens 15 – 30 seconds to take cover in a protected area. The alarm could come when one is sleeping in the middle of the night. It can come during a child’s birthday party. When it is sounded, it means having to move elderly parents or crying infants, or sometimes both, or sometimes having to choose which one to carry to a protected shelter. As one of the people I visited with in Ashkelon, the week before last, said, “When you hear the siren it penetrates every bone of your body.” The traumatic impact of such ongoing threats should not be minimized or taken for granted. In explaining Israel’s operation, Prime Minister Bibi Nethanyahu explained, no people anywhere in the world should have to live under these circumstances.

For all these reasons, Israel acted, and called its operation Pillar of Defense. But *Amud Anan*, literally means, Pillar of Cloud, and it is a Biblical reference. First introduced in the book of Exodus, the pillar of cloud guided the Israelites by day during its exodus from Egypt and while wandering in the wilderness. I thought of the Hebrew term not just because I like its biblical overtones, and the image of God’s protecting care, but because as I visited Israel the first week in December, less than two weeks after the war, it was all a cloud. It was almost as if it was an apparition, as if the war hadn’t happened.

When the hostilities broke out, I wanted to join one of the solidarity missions to Israel, as a sign of support. I joined the previously scheduled, but now reconstituted, Masorti mission, of the conservative movement. Upon our arrival we went straight to the south, where we visited southern communities and conservative congregations, the areas hardest hit by the rocket attacks. While we learned of what happened during the war, of the precautions taken, of the nature of the situation, of the horror they experienced, we also saw firsthand the resiliency of the Israeli people. In many respects, our visits there, and elsewhere, as well as with government officials and political leaders revealed a desire to move on, to speak of other issues.

The decision not to send in ground troops was a difficult and controversial one. Many Israelis wished that the government would have done so, in order to further eliminate Hamas’ military capabilities. But

as Ron Dermer, the Prime Minister's Senior Adviser explained to us, it was one of Netanyahu's most difficult decisions he has had to make. The solid support of the United States, as well as of the international community helped to make it possible to forego the need to take such action. And perhaps the most significant factor of all was the amazing success of Operation Iron Dome. Not only did it save Israeli lives, but it factored into the decision-making process, allowing Israel to achieve its goals and to end its operation sooner than it otherwise would have been able to do. As a result, it saved both Israeli and Palestinian lives.

I was pleased to be able to personally tell President Obama at the Chanukah celebration at the White House this past Thursday evening that I had just returned from Israel and thanked him for his support of Iron Dome.

The contrast between Israel and Hamas is significant. Whereas they put their resources into making more efficient bombs, Israel develops more efficient means of protecting its citizens. Whereas they build bombs, Israel builds bomb shelters. They lose people in a war, and cry to the west that Israel is brutal and cruel. They then turn to their people and proclaim victory. The Arab strategists have perfected the concept: Heads I win, tails you lose.

So what were Israelis speaking about if by the time I got there, the war was old news?

The United Nations vote on November 29 in favor of upgrading the status of the Palestinians was of grave concern and the subject of much consternation. Feeling it was a rejection of the binding agreed upon formula of Oslo that the two sides discuss and resolve their differences in face to face negotiations, the move was seen as a unilateral violation of the accords. The Palestinians were seeking to do an end-around to circumvent the need to make concessions to Israel. And so while we were there, Israel sent a clear and loud and strong message to the Palestinians, by approving housing units that have long been on the drawing board.

Many of our meetings and conversations were dominated by discussion of the upcoming elections. The whole system itself was discussed at length, as it parlays the influence of minority parties and interest groups into being major players. Specifically, we addressed some of the domestic issues facing Israel as well, especially those pertaining to religious pluralism.

In this area, I sensed hope that there is a growing resolve to address issues that have been ignored or shunted aside in the past. American Jews who travel to Israel for the first time are often surprised by how non-religious Israeli Jews are. They expect to see a country full of Hasidim, or keepah wearing, kosher eating, gun wielding sabras. Religion is a very complex issue in Israel. Much of the current structure is based on decisions made by David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel. He did not want to tackle the tough issues of religion and state in its infancy, and felt the imperative of focusing on Israel's survival. He also wanted to preserve the remnant of the Chasidic world that had been so decimated after the Holocaust. Unforeseen was that the few thousand exemptions granted to Yeshiva students in the early years would grow to hundreds of thousands. Many of these ultra Orthodox do not enter the work force, or if they do, do not pay taxes. There is a growing awareness that the situation needs reform and is untenable in the long run. Seceding marriage matters and other halachic issues to the Rabbanut, which has become increasingly conservative and restrictive has caused many to get married outside of Israel. The system has also turned more and more Israelis off to the beauty of Judaism and to reject observance and identification with Judaism as a way of life. An orthodox rabbi we met with, Shai Piron, who is number 2 on the list of one of the parties standing for election met with us.

It was the first time he had met non-Orthodox rabbis, and he was surprisingly open to changing the current system. He called for a revision of the method of granting kashrut certification so that places open on New Year's Eve or Shabbat need not be automatically denied status as kosher establishments. He also expressed support for reform of marriage laws. Just this week, another Orthodox rabbi called for recognition of Conservative and Reform rabbis. I am optimistic that these initial steps bode well for breaking the monopoly and opening up Israel to forms of religious expression other than just the repressive form known as Haredi.

These reforms are important to us in the Diaspora because at the end of the day, being Jewish is what unites us with our brothers and sisters in Israel and is what we have in common. In addition to our advocating for a strong Israel, we must also work to strengthen the inner fabric of Israeli society as well, to show our Israeli brothers and sisters that Judaism is a meaningful way of life. We need to strengthen our Conservative institutions in Israel so that our fellow Jews can appreciate how wonderful it is to be Jewish, and know that there are a variety of ways to celebrate Judaism.

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