

Parashat Tzav - The War in Iraq
March 22, 2003

With our nation at war, our prayers should properly be focused on the welfare of our troops, and our thoughts on what is happening there.

How should we feel about this war? Unlike past military actions, our nation was not directly attacked. As a result, there are those who question our right to launch an invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, the international community clearly does not support what we are doing. Yet many believe that our nation is morally justified to topple Saddam Hussein and his regime.

Is this a just war? Is there ever such a thing as a just war? Is there such a thing as a Jewish position on war, on this particular war?

(Before I answer that, I just want to be sure Jim Moran isn't here before I go any further.)

The truth of the matter is, as most of us know, Jewish tradition embraces peace and calls upon us to be like Aaron, pursuers and advocates of peace. So central is this concept to Judaism that today's torah reading, parashat Tzav, delineating the various sacrifices concludes with the shlemamim sacrifice, the offering of peace, as does the amidah. But the issue is not at all a simple one, as Jews can be found amongst those formulating the President's policies and defending American actions, as well as amongst those protesting it.

How do we form our position as to what is the right thing to do?

My grandmother, who immigrated to this country at the turn of the previous century from Tavrik, a shtetl in Lithuania, viewed world events from the perspective of asking, "Is it good for the Jews?" (That also was the criteria she used for choosing which washing machine to buy.)

It is clear that after it will all be over, the world will get back to its favorite past-time --- pressuring Israel. The war, regardless of its outcome, will have a major impact on Israel, one way or the other. Despite this and the widespread concern that Israel might take the brunt of Iraqi anger, and be subjected to retaliatory attacks, most Israelis support American intervention.

I would like to share with you an excerpt from an extraordinary editorial from this past week's Jerusalem Post.

"Those who wish to gauge the spirit of the Israeli people as the winds of war gather ever-ominously right around the corner from this country and at least in theory menace us need only pass by a bus stop and marvel at the fact that ordinary folk still line up there. Or they can peek into busy shopping malls and movie theaters. These have not been

shunned despite more than two years of unremitting terrorism, which deliberately and fiendishly targets precisely the sites where noncombatants congregate.

Israelis have gone through hell since September 2000 and it's not over yet, by any stretch of the imagination. But despite the merciless slaughter of children, housewives, people at work, and people at play, life here has not come to a standstill.

Just in the past couple of days, against the backdrop of American ultimatums being issued and summarily rejected in Baghdad, as well as ever-shrill Hamas threats, Israeli parents took their costumed children to Purim celebrations.

These street festivities appeared surreal as unessential diplomatic staff and their families were flown out of the country, foreigners were urged to get out ahead of the Iraqi conflict, and airlines limited their services or avoided our airports entirely.

Indeed, the throngs at the Holon Adloyada celebration gave proof to the fact that Israelis are not scared off too easily. It's not because they are reckless or foolhardy. They are unassumingly resilient, without flag-waving jingoism.

They keep going though the going is tough even downright dangerous. Only the inclement weather cancelled some outdoor Purim merrymaking. The stormy weather, in fact, has dominated much more small talk than the war looming next door.

This contrasts starkly with the panic which not long ago gripped the Washington, DC, area while the serial sniper duo were still at large. Israelis brave the likes of them almost daily. The mere act of raising the terror alert to Code Orange recently instilled trepidation in heartland America, whose civilians are immeasurably less exposed to danger than their long-suffering Israeli counterparts.

Observers of our scene both seasoned locals and visiting outsiders must be struck by the composure with which most Israelis are gearing up for the war in Iraq. This is not the fatalistic resignation of an apathetic people.

Israelis, in fact, are anything but passive, are not given to taking much of anything lying down, and are unlikely in the extreme to refrain from speaking their minds or exhibiting their emotion on any occasion...A dozen years ago when another president Bush and the same Saddam Hussein first faced off, no fewer than 39 Iraqi Scud missiles shattered Israel's relative security and took a considerable psychological toll. The population realized belatedly that plastic sheeting offered no defense against conventional explosives, while the government's abstention from retaliation whether one approved of it or not added to the sense of vulnerability and loss of deterrent...

The absence of hysterical fear and foreboding doesn't negate the existence of tension and unease, especially as we realize that for us it will not be over with the last air raid over Iraq."

We can learn much from our fellow Jews in Israel, including how to confront a frightening situation with courage and fortitude. As stated in another editorial in this week's Jerusalem Post, "...Israel is with you (America) -- not only official Israel, but all its citizens. Israelis feel a special kinship toward America... No one can more wholeheartedly empathize with the parents of U.S. soldiers now in battle than Israeli parents whose own children have been where America's are going..."

War is not something which should ever be taken lightly. Our tradition speaks of milhemet reshut and milhemet hova, wars which may be deemed optional, and wars which a nation is obligated to undertake.

The teachings are based on the writings of Maimonides, who takes his direction from an analysis of the laws governing warfare as stated in the torah, and the actions of the kings to protect the nation of Israel. Based on this, we have the Talmudic concept, which governs the actions of Tzahal, the I.D.F., (the Israel Defense Forces) called tohar neshek, the purity of arms. It discusses the imperative to avoid war, and when it is unavoidable, to wage it in a moral manner, by, among other things, trying to limit the number of casualties.

But clearly, there are times when turning the other cheek leads to greater loss of life. It was military intervention that stopped the fratricidal slaughter in the Bosnia and Kosovo and that destroyed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. On the other hand, inaction and the reluctance of the international community to intervene in Rwanda, resulted in the deaths of more than 800,000 men, women and children.

And one cannot help but wonder how different history would be if the world would have intervened against Adolf Hitler's aggressive ambitions in 1938 instead of appeasing him in Munich.

Earlier this month, Elie Wiesel wrote the following, in an op ed piece in the Los Angeles Times, "Under normal circumstances, I might have joined those peace marchers who, here and abroad, staged public demonstrations against an invasion of Iraq... Isn't war forever cruel, the ultimate form of violence? It inevitably generates not only loss of innocence but endless sorrow and mourning. How could one not reject it as an option?"

He concludes, "What it comes down to is this: We have a moral obligation to intervene where evil is in control. Today, that place is Iraq."

The purpose of this war is not to expand empire or to colonize, but to rid the region of a cruel tyrant who rules by reign of terror, and who promotes and rewards terrorism. The mission of the United States is to take possession of and destroy a mass murderer's weapons of mass destruction, and to deliver 22 million people from tyranny. The record of the horror he has thrust upon his people and the world is too gruesome to recount. In the late 1980s, he ordered tens of thousands of his own citizens gassed to death. He should have been indicted then for crimes against humanity. As Wiesel noted in his article, Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic was arrested and brought to trial for less.

As a Jew, I am proud of the fact that our nation is willing to take on the mantle of leadership in the free world, even if it is unpopular. I am proud of the fact that we are selflessly willing to confront evil and have the will to seek to eradicate it. I am pleased that we have a leader willing to fight for the cause of freedom.

Shakespeare's lines from his play, Henry IV come to mind: "Now, for our consciences, the arms are fair, when the intent of bearing them is just."

This is a just war.

May our nation continue to have the courage and the resolve to be an advocate of justice and liberty throughout the world, and to oppose oppressive tyranny when it threatens the noble principles of freedom.

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March 22, 2003
Congregation B'nai Tzedek * Potomac, MD
Potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org