

A Visit to Sderot, 2011

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Our sages question why God commands not once, but on several occasions that a census be taken of the people of Israel after their departure from Egypt. Rashi says God wanted them to be counted so frequently because of His tremendous love for His people, who were so precious to Him. The image that Rashi's comment evokes for me is of a teacher carefully counting her children on a field trip, or when coming back from recess, images which came to mind when I was in Sderot a little more than a week ago.

It is difficult to imagine what life is like for the children and the teachers, the parents and the people who live in the shadow of missiles falling from the sky on a regular basis. We visited an indoor playground the size of a half a football field constructed with donations collected by the JNF. It begins with an area with toys and dolls for babies, and gradually continues to climbing walls and basketball courts for older kids. What is not apparent to the eye in the colorful, cheerful building is that the roof and walls are made of heavy reinforced steel and concrete to protect the children from bombs. We saw a home-made video of a party where a magician in a clown's suit was entertaining small children to take their minds off of the constant attacks. And right in the middle of the party, a loud siren suddenly went off, and everyone was running for cover, as they had 15 seconds to get to a shelter.

Today I want to share with you the words of David Buskila, the mayor of Sderot who addressed the delegation of 30 rabbis with whom I travelled last week to Israel. He spoke without a single note, and here is what he told us:

Born in Sderot, his parents, like many who first came to Sderot in the 1950's when the town was founded emigrated from Morocco. In the 1960's people from Rumania arrived. In the '70's, immigrants came from Russia and in the '80's from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, bringing the population to its current number today of 25,000. Although the area has always been part of Israel and is not disputed territory this has not brought them any extra security. The first missile launched from Gaza to Sderot landed in April of 2001. Until that time, no one had heard of Sderot. Now everyone has heard of it. If given the choice he would prefer to go back to those days of anonymity.

Between 2001 – 2009, a span of 8 years, over 8,000 missiles hit. It is hard to imagine how many and how frequent that is – but keep in mind, Sderot is not so big an area. They fell day and night, weekdays, as well as Shabbat. There was no respite from the random unprovoked shelling of civilians. When the missiles first started falling, there were 46 bomb shelters in the city of Sderot. Today there are 5,000 shelters. 6,000 people, about 25 % of the city suffers from some form of post traumatic syndrome.

One of the things that causes the most pain for the mayor is that people do not understand the extent of how much the children suffer. In most societies the first words children learn to say around the world are “abba, ima”, “mommy, daddy”, but in Sderot the first words children utter are “tzeva adom”, which means “red alert”. That is because an alarm can go off at any time, in the middle of the night, while sleeping, during a class, or during a birthday party, and everyone has 15 seconds warning to take shelter from an oncoming barrage.

Despite the massive amount of missiles that have hit the city, it is difficult to find signs or remnants of the damage. That is because although roads, houses, community buildings and other structures have all been hit, in keeping with Israel's values and its desire to preserve a sense of normalcy for its people, they are repaired immediately. I saw this when I led a group from our synagogue to Haifa, shortly after the Hezbollah war a few years ago. This stands in stark contrast to the Palestinian preference to not repair destroyed buildings, for their goal is to seek sympathy by playing up their role as victims.

The mayor expressed his frustration with the situation and Israel's need to explain why it is right and why its response is justified. He asked, "Why do I have to explain that I am right in trying to defend myself against those who launched 8,000 missiles into civilian areas, with the express purpose of causing harm and to kill us? In the Middle East it is hard to be strong and popular at the same time. But it is not even a question for us. We have no choice. Once we let down our guard, and are weak, we will not have a country. So if it is a choice between being strong and surviving, or weak and popular," he says, "I prefer to be unpopular. I am not prepared to say to the Palestinians that they can have Sderot. To do so would reward their aggression and lead to more violence, as they would seek Ashdod and Ashkelon, and continue their march up the coast to Tel Aviv."

We must remind people that the root of the problem with the Palestinians and Arabs is not what Israel does or does not do, but because they do not want us to live here. This helps explain why rather than use the funds contributed by the world to rebuild Gaza or to improve the lives of their people, to build roads or to provide housing for their people, the money they receive is used to import weapons. At a rally for Israel during the Cast Lead operation against Hamas I said that "the Palestinians have inverted the Biblical vision of the prophet Isaiah. They have turned their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into weapons."

The mayor asked rhetorically, what other country in the world waits 8 years before taking action to stop missiles from falling on its citizens? For 8 years our government did nothing, hoping that others would respond and condemn or take some sort of action, or pass a resolution in the UN against what was being done to us and to stop what was going on. But as we all know, nothing happened. So when Operation Cast Lead was finally launched, the ultimate insult occurred, as we were accused of intentionally killing civilians. The mayor emphatically stated what I knew to be true. "We do not teach our children to take innocent lives. Our children are taught respect for human life, and to love others, even our enemies. As a result of our value system our soldiers are trained to shoot only when they are certain they have a military target in sight. This is why we took the unprecedented act of warning people in advance of impending attacks, and took other extraordinary measures to avoid civilian casualties."

This contrasts with the way in which they learn math in Gaza. He has seen the text books where children are taught that if you have 3 Jews and you kill 2, how many are left. Quite a way to learn subtraction tables!

We feel isolated, he said, and as if there is no justice in the world, which is one of the reasons why I speak out so passionately and frequently on behalf of Israel. He went on to say that our hands are tied in a way that no other nation of the world must contend with because of world reaction. We had to fight against soldiers and terrorists who did not wear uniforms, who hid between and behind children and in schools and hospitals. The Israeli forces exhibited tremendous restraint, for they could have taken care of the situation by leveling Gaza in a month. Instead they struck select targets and displayed great caution against an enemy who took cover in heavily populated civilian areas. The Goldstone Report which inappropriately condemned Israel was adopted by the Human rights Council, whose

members include such paragons of virtue and protectors of human rights as Libya, North Korea and Syria.

At one point the mayor wrote Goldstone and asked, where was the UN for the previous 8 years, when missiles were falling on our citizens? Why were you silent and did nothing then? Mayor Buskila said it was just like World War II when Jews were being killed and no one did anything or expressed outrage then either.

He reminded us that we were not the ones who started the conflict or the fighting. We were not the ones who launched rockets against their cities or civilians. "I never fired a rocket into Gaza, and neither did anyone else in Sderot." With a touch of intended irony he told us that since Operation Cast Lead things have been quiet – only 800 rockets have fallen in the past 2 years.

He felt it was a mistake by President Bush to impose an election on a non-democratic society, and inevitable that Hamas would take over. In the west people vote for the candidate they think will be best for them. In Gaza, as in Syria and other Arab countries, the choice is – vote for the powerful party, or be killed.

On the bright side, Iron Dome, the new missile defense system developed by Israel with partial funding from the US had amazing success just last month. It hit 8 of 9 missiles headed for Israel and prevented them from causing any damage. Each missile costs a few hundred dollars, whereas each missile defense launched costs about \$ 64,000.

Despite the harsh reality he must face, he is not bitter, and remains conciliatory, expressing his sincere desire to live in peace and cooperation with his neighbors, the 1 ½ million residents of Gaza, as they had in the past. After all, it is the leaders who are terrorists, not all the people. As a result of his desire to extend a hand in good will six months ago, via Al Jazeera television he offered to meet the mayor of Gaza – not to discuss issues of war and peace, but mayor to mayor: to talk about water treatment, education, sewage and infrastructure. He has yet to receive a response to the invitation, but still holds out the hope as he said, "I wish they would realize that no one wins anything from war, but that both sides reap the benefits of peace."

To me the situation is one of those rare instances when it is pretty much black and white. Yet I was surprised when I spoke just the other day with a friend associated with J-Street who told me that the problem with Gaza was that the Israelis had withdrawn unilaterally, and that it wasn't coordinated with the other side. As if that would have made a difference? As if that somehow justifies the missiles being launched against the innocent residents of Sderot?! We Jews must speak with one voice when Jewish lives are under assault, and that voice needs to be one of support for the people of Israel.

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