

A Letter from Israel: Resigned to War

July 18, 2014

Dear Friends,

I had hoped that this letter could be written in the aftermath of the “Protective Edge” military incursion into Gaza. News of the proposed cease fire created a brief moment of cautious optimism in Israel. We thought that the airstrikes had made their point convincingly to Hamas. Their rockets were ineffectual against Israel. Israel’s military superiority had rendered Hamas nearly impotent against Israel. We had hoped that Hamas would agree to stop, to desist from firing their rockets indiscriminately into Israel and to halt their aggression. We hoped that Hamas’ bombing, the bombing which provoked Israel to retaliate, was over. We had hoped that the damage to property and the deaths of so many innocent Gazans had come to end. Especially for the sake of Gaza’s residents who had been caught in the cross fire, Hamas, we believed might accept the terms of the cease fire.

But, alas, this would not be the case. In fact, with the support and encouragement of the overwhelming number of countries and friends who will support any actions or resolutions against Israel, Hamas rejected the cease fire. As Shabbat approaches, the rockets continue to fall in Israel. The IDF continues to target homes, rocket and arms storage facilities, tunnels and installments of Hamas. IDF ground forces have now entered Gaza to destroy that which cannot be destroyed from the air. This war seems far from over.

The mood here is neither one of surprise nor sadness. There is some anger over Hamas’ rejection of the cease fire. The overwhelming mood, however, is one of resignation: Israelis feel resigned to the fact that Hamas will choose to die rather than to make peace with Israel. Israelis are resigned to the fact that the war for its existence, a war which began in 1947, continues to this day. There is resignation over the fact that Israel shall continue to live beneath the shadow of sirens and missiles. And resignation over the fact that, Israel’s children will continue to grow up in a world surrounded by people who want to kill them.

There is also resignation over the mounting world opinion against Israel. The international news sources continue to willfully forget that this most recent war was instigated by Hamas. Israel, in response to the relentless barrage of rockets asked for international condemnation of Hamas, for international acknowledgement for Israel’s initial restraint in enduring attacks on her innocent

civilians without responding. Israel offered to stop the bombing so long as Hamas would also stop. All to no avail.

Instead, again, the world rallies behind Hamas, portraying Israel as an unprovoked and unabashed aggressor, committing wanton, state-sanctioned murder against innocent Palestinians. I am reminded here of the story of the son who murders both of his parents and, when brought to his trial, asked for the mercy of the court because he was an orphan. Hamas has presented itself before the world as the victim rather than the perpetrator. But this is not a new scenario for Israel. And Israelis, no longer surprised by international condemnation and the twisting of reality despite the facts to the contrary, watch the world's response with a sense of resignation.

Where there is no sense of resignation in Israel is with regard to the collateral damage of war. There is little dissent here regarding the need and justification to fight. At the same time, the deaths of civilians, of children in particular, generates here the ongoing aversion to war and the unavoidable guilt when civilians are killed.

Last year, writer and social commentator, Sagi Melamed, visited our synagogue for a weekend. I continue follow Sagi's writing. I find him to be both sensitive and perceptive in his comments and analyses of life in Israel. This most recent piece in particular states beautifully my own sentiments and the sentiments of many here. I close, therefore, by sharing with you Sagi's words, with his permission. These words, crafted this week, reflect my own thoughts, and the thoughts of many Israelis. Sagi joins me in extending to you all blessings for a restful and quiet Shabbat.

Is it necessary, is it appropriate, for Israel to respond full force to Hamas rockets?

It's necessary, and it's appropriate.

Is it legitimate to bomb an entire neighborhood in Gaza to reestablish deterrence and stop the rocket attacks on Israeli civilians? Is it seemly to be proud of the fact that the IDF issues warnings before it bombs?

It's legitimate. It's seemly.

Do we truly have no other choice, even knowing that on the other side dozens of innocents are being killed?

Sometimes in war there is no other choice. That is the horror of war.

Do we have any understanding that to be a Gazan is to live with distress and overcrowding, with humiliation and fear?

Yes. Yes, we do understand.

Is it possible to kill our enemies and destroy targets in Gaza, and at the same time, in a small corner of our hearts, feel for Gazans, for fellow descendants of Abraham who under other circumstances – may the day come! – might perhaps be our good neighbors and partners in prosperity and growth?

Can Israelis, who in the summer of 2014 are themselves struggling with distress and anxiety, identify a little with the suffering of our Gazan neighbors? Can we overcome the natural tendency to hate and dehumanize one's enemies, while still maintaining our vital ability to fight back and defeat them?

Are we strong enough to hit our targets while shedding a little tear?

Shabbat Shalom from Israel,

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Rabbi