

A Letter from Israel: As Shabbat Descends on Jerusalem and Israel

July 11, 2014

Dear Friends,

From the time a rocket is fired from Gaza until it reaches Jerusalem, one has, at best, a minute and a half to reach a Miklat. A Miklat is a bomb shelter, a safe room. Every new home built in Israel today, every new building, must have designated Mikla'ot, shelters built with thick, steel reinforced concrete. But the restaurant at which Lori and I were eating dinner, with our children and grandchildren, was in an older building. So, when the siren went off in Jerusalem, between hummus and our main course, indicating that a rocket was headed in our direction, there was no Miklat to run to. Instead, we all ran to the safest, interior room in the restaurant, away from windows and doors: the kitchen. I thought, as we moved into the center of the crowded space that, although this room may have not been as safe as some of the newer Mikla'ot (plural of Miklat) might have been, if we were to remain there for any extended period of time, we would, at least, not go hungry.

We heard the booms of the exploding rocket, signaling to all that it were safe to emerge. A few of us went outside to see where the missile had been intercepted by the Iron Dome defense system ... right over our heads. We left the kitchen, returned to our table and, shortly thereafter, to our lives.

Israel is not at war with Hamas or with Gaza. That is, Israel has no desire to harm, to kill, to conquer or to destroy. But in the face of the relentless barrages of rockets, indiscriminately lobbed by Hamas into civilian areas, into cities as close to Gaza as S'derot (less than two miles) and as distant as Jerusalem (75 miles away), Israel has no choice but to stop the rockets by attacking the installations from which the rockets are fired and targeting the individuals known for their connections to terrorism. I have nothing with which to compare this experience, as I have never been anywhere else where this sort of thing occurs. But my sense is that the way Israelis live, the way Israel understands the world and routinely fights for its existence is not normal.

Things in Israel rarely seem normal to me and even less "normal" these days. Those who live here seem preoccupied. They must be constantly vigilant, keeping a watchful eye on busses and in stores, looking for suspicious or abandoned packages which may contain a bomb. At this time, Israelis are also preoccupied as they listen for the "Azaka," the siren which summoned us back to the Miklat.

And discussions here of the fighting are also not “normal.” Normal, I would think, would be conversations about strategy, about casualties and about goals. Although these topics are covered on the news, much of the talk has been quite introspective. The questions that I, and those with whom I speak, have asked and discussed have been about restraint. The speech given yesterday in the Knesset by Prime Minister Netanyahu was not a call to eradicate, once and for all the, the terrorists who are provoking and encouraging the fighting. The Prime Minister’s message to Hamas was, “Please stop. Quiet will be met by quiet.” We are not looking to destroy. We are motivated by a desire for peace. And, mostly, how we behave in war is not determined by the enemy against whom we fight. It is determined by us, by who we are and by the values which we cherish, values seemingly unknown by our enemy.

At the same time, the relentless stream of rockets has created a national state of preoccupation, if not paralysis. We go through the day, hoping that a siren is not heard. People look as if they are living their lives as before the bombing started. But they remain a bit aloof, watching and listening, wondering where the closest shelter can be found at a moment’s notice and praying that the threat will not continue indefinitely.

Life under this sort of siege is not normal. It is not normal to live one’s life knowing that, at any moment, you may need to run for cover. It is not normal to hear sirens in the night, telling us to awaken from our sleep and run to our safe-haven. It is not normal to leave a pleasant dinner table to find shelter in order to escape a rocket shot at no specific target. Any target will do. And we run to try to avoid being that target.

As Shabbat descends on Jerusalem and on Israel, I pray for peace. As the Day of Rest arrives, may we become preoccupied, not with where to hide, but with how to live. And as we begin Shabbat, may this day return us to a situation which, if not perfect, then, at least to situation which Israelis, and perhaps others, can call normal.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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Rabbi