

“Our Battle for the Soul of Israel & the Jewish People”

When I first arrived in Israel this summer, the kidnapping of three teenage Yeshiva students, Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaar, and Eyal Yifrah, was on everyone’s mind. A full scale search was underway in the West Bank, and then tragically, the police recovered their bodies and released a sickening recording of their cell phone call for help from the backseat of the car, and the sound of gunshots at close range. Israelis were simply outraged, as the recording played over and over again on radio and television – Hamas was accused of crossed the line, of orchestrating a calculated civilian kidnapping and murder.

But then everything changed when, in revenge, three *Israeli* extremists kidnapped a 13 year old Palestinian boy, Abu Khdeir, and brutally beat him and set him on fire. The tone in Israel instantly retreated from self-righteous condemnation of Palestinians, to disbelief that Israelis themselves could perpetrate such a reprehensible act. When Abu Khdeir’s family set up a mourning tent in the front yard of their home in East Jerusalem, literally hundreds of Israelis from across the political spectrum flooded in from all over the country to express their deepest condolences to his bereaved parents.

Israel sank into a state of despair at the realization that Israelis could be as barbaric as the terrorists themselves. The pervasive feeling around me as I listened and spoke with Israelis was that Israel had clearly lost the moral high ground.

Then, the next thing everyone knew, missiles started flying into Israel – hundreds of them. I was walking home from an evening lecture on a warm Jerusalem night, when I suddenly heard a sound I had not heard since my childhood – the sound of a shrill air raid siren. But this time it was no drill. Everyone on the street around me instantly scattered and ran for shelter.

Operation Protective Edge had begun, and the mood in Israel shifted yet again.

Amos Oz, the famous Israeli author and noted peacenik put it this way:

“What would you do,” he asked, “if your neighbor across the street sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire into your nursery?” “What would you do if your neighbor across the street digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or in order to kidnap your family?”

These were the very real questions that Israelis were confronting as they huddled in bomb shelters, as rockets rained down out of the sky, as terror tunnels surfaced along the Gaza border into kibbutzim, as their children were being called back into the army and sent into war. To sit here in America or comfortably in Europe and react to events is one thing, but to live them, to be under rocket attack and infiltration from underground tunnels, to send your college age son into Gaza in a tank or even on foot, is something else.

Israelis simply closed ranks. The trauma of Abu Khdeir faded into the immediacy of self-defense. This is what I saw and heard and felt this summer in Israel. It just seems that there's never time to finish anything, because the next trauma is around the corner. This is what it is to live on the front lines of Middle East conflict.

So, now, in the aftermath of 50 days of war, I stand before you with all humility, knowing how dangerous it is to speak publicly at this time about Israel, and how fearful many rabbis are to address the subject from the pulpit over these High Holy Days. But I feel I must try to share my response to the question the world is asking. Was Israel morally right in the war with Gaza? Or is the world-wide condemnation Israel has received justified?

The answer is not simple.

On the one hand, Israel fought only when attacked by Hamas and, therefore, only in self-defense. Each time Hamas agreed to a truce, Israel immediately stopped firing. To be absolutely clear about the facts, Israel did unilaterally withdraw from Gaza in 2005, and gave Gazans every opportunity to create a flourishing coastal enclave living peacefully beside Israel. But, Gaza instead chose another path and that trial balloon came crashing to earth in flames. Hamas rose to power, ejected the more moderate Palestinian Authority, and turned Gaza into a military fortress, whose avowed goal is to wipe out the Jewish State. In this latest round of summer aggression, Hamas fired 4,500 rockets directly at the cities and citizens of Israel, and Israel had no choice but to defend itself and stop the bombardment of rockets. On this, 95% of Israelis agreed – Israel was morally justified to defend itself.

On the other hand, Israel lost ground in the war with Gaza for two main reasons. First, because it was drawn into a lose-lose situation. This was Hamas's strategy from the beginning – to force Israel to return fire into crowded civilian populations where Hamas was embedded. The more Israelis killed, the better for Hamas, and the more Gaza civilians killed, also the better for Hamas. Either way, Israel was diminished and Hamas gained power and support.

Second, in choosing the path of self-defense, Israel also made inevitable mistakes in warfare. There is no doubt that some Israeli soldiers shot where they weren't supposed to shoot, and bombed targets that weren't supposed to be bombed, some with disastrous results. Of course, we all realize that human error is inevitable in every human activity, and war is no certainly exception. Right now, there are at least twelve internal Israeli military investigations taking place. Undoubtedly, mistakes will be proved and the tragedy of war will be amplified by both the unnecessary death of innocent Gaza civilians, and the guilt with which these young Israeli soldiers will have to live for the rest of their lives because of their split second errors in judgment. This is the tragic nature of war.

Golda Meir's words still hold tremendous power for us today. She said: "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing *us* to kill *their* children. We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us."

Fortunately, we don't have to beat Israel up for Gaza, because Israelis are already beating themselves up. Here in America, we're reluctant to criticize Israel, mainly because the rest of the world is standing in line to do it. But, in Israel, the debate is vibrant and there is no lack of self-reflection. Israelis will be the first to say they were faced with a dreadful choice – either self-annihilation, or the tragic loss of innocent life that results from self-defense. But, in this lose-lose scenario, our Talmud is clear: "When your enemy comes to kill you, you must rise up and kill him first." That was, and continues to be the painful and morally complex choice Israel faces.

But this is not how many in the world see things. Not only did the graphic devastation in Gaza prompt an outcry of sorrow, even from Israelis, and not only did some assert that Israel should exercise more restraint of her superior firepower – all concerns that can and will be debated – however, most of us were utterly taken aback when these concerns coalesced into a wave of anti-Semitism.

Protesters in Belgium came out in demonstrations chanting "death to the Jews." Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan called Israel's acts of self-defense "barbarism that surpasses Hitler." In Berlin, protesters called out, "Jews, Jews, cowardly swine," and in Frankfurt, "Hamas, Hamas; Jews to the gas!" Then there was the synagogue in the middle of Paris that was surrounded and stoned by an angry mob during services. The police had to come in and rescue them. In Rome, signs were posted to boycott some 50 Jewishly owned businesses, and in London, a grocery manager pulled kosher products off the shelves.

Dr. Deborah Lipstadt, one of our most renowned Holocaust scholars, is normally sanguine about such things. She is often asked whether she sees another Holocaust coming, and her answer is routinely, no. But, in a recent New York Times editorial she started out with the old Jewish joke, “What’s the definition of a Jewish telegram? ‘Start worrying. Details to follow.’”

While she concedes that, “the differences between then and now are legion,” because, “when there is an outbreak of anti-Semitism today, officials condemn it,” recent events have definitely given her pause. Dr. Lipstadt says she’s “unpersuaded by those who try to dismiss what is happening as ‘just rhetoric.’” It’s a slippery slope from “anger at the Israeli military action, to hatred of Jews.”

She concludes: “The telegram has arrived. Jews are worrying. ... This is not another Holocaust, but it’s bad enough.”

Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, asks another question. With all of the slaughter of innocents going on around the world, why has the international media and the United Nations focused such an inordinate amount of their attention on Israel’s actions in defending herself against Hamas which, in fact, bears the primary responsibility for using civilians as human shields?

I don’t even have to chronicle it for you. Killing, destruction, rape, forced exile is going on all around the world, and in much greater proportions than in Gaza. In Syria’s civil war, 200,000 people have been killed, and half a million have been driven out of the country. Boko Haram has claimed the lives of more than 4,000, and committed heinous acts of brutality.

And the list goes on. Yet Israel is particularly singled out for accusations of war crimes and inordinate use of force. Israel is at the top of the list of the BDS boycott movement internationally, and on our college campuses.

Something bigger is happening here. This is not just about Gaza or the West Bank. I have to tell you that I think Dr. Lipstadt is right: “This is not another Holocaust, but it’s bad enough.” It’s time to start worrying.

Anti-Semitism has resurfaced from its dormancy. It is finding open expression, if not legitimacy. And it is precisely for this reason that the Jewish State was founded – to create a haven from anti-Semitism, a state in which Jews could defend themselves and never be marched to the gas chambers again. And now, that part of the world which today resents the stigma of the Holocaust, particularly in Europe, wants to rid itself of guilt, by accusing Israel of perpetrating a holocaust in Gaza. Friends, we have to wake up and be clear eyed about what is going on.

Hamas is not ISIS or Boko Haram, but it *is* on a spectrum of fundamentalism that preaches death to the Jews and liquidation of the Jewish State. Make no mistake, Israel is on the front lines of the battle. America may send in its bombers to Syria, but Israelis live in the war zone.

So, what can we do about it?

First, we have to stand with Israel in whatever way we can. Our member, Micha Danzig, writes extensively in the Israeli and American press and goes in front of the cameras to tell Israel's story. Rick Barton, as many of you know, is on the National Executive Committee of the Anti Defamation League. Danya Shulman, and several other of our Solel graduates have even chosen service in the Israeli Defense Forces. And many of us here are active in the varied organizations that support the State of Israel with voices across the political spectrum.

The second thing we need to do, is understand and affirm the centrality of Israel to the Jewish people. If American Jews have grown apathetic and alienated from Israel, we need to reverse that trend. And if Israel is an imperfect democracy, which most democracies certainly are, then we need to do all in our power to help Israel reach its potential as an "*or l'goyim* – a shining light unto the nations."

Disaffection from Israel is not the answer. Helping Israel become a Jewish nation that makes us proud, is.

And this brings me to the great opportunity we have before us as Reform Jews – a chance to help shape the soul of Israel. In 1897, Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, declaring the vision for a Jewish State. That World Zionist Organization still exists to this day, and is instrumental in building the society and culture of Israel.

Through the WZO, we fight for ideals such as religious tolerance and pluralism, greater roles for women in religion and society, combating through public education the rise of the kind of Israeli bigotry that led to the murder of Abu Khdeir, and strengthening our Reform movement in Israel that reflects our Jewish values, and presents a religious alternative to Israelis hungering for creative Jewish expression.

In short, you and I have a vote and a voice in Israel. We can be part of creating an Israel that excites our young people who visit, and makes all of us proud to defend and embrace our Jewish State.

Only once every five years, does the WZO convene the World Zionist Congress for elections. I am proud to say that in the last election, ARZENU, our world-wide Reform party, won 83 delegates out of the 500 total. This gave us a tremendous influence. We not only commanded \$4.5 million to build our Reform institutions in Israel, but we became key players in setting the social priorities of the Jewish Agency and, with our coalition partners, influencing important legislation in the Knesset.

In this New Year, the next Congress will take place, and you can vote; you can directly influence the social, political, and religious culture of Israel. ARZENU is hoping not only to equal, but to exceed the number of delegates we've held for the last five years. However, in order to do that, every Reform Jew has to put in a ballot.

There is no cost and no obligation, other than checking off the ballot. I hope you each received voter pledge cards when you entered our sanctuary. I cannot urge you strongly enough to fill them out and send them in. If we want a voice in Israel, if we want an Israel that shares our ideals, then we have to seize this opportunity.

So, what have we learned from this horrible summer? Well, one of the important things I learned is that despite a war, and despite the surge of anti-Semitism, Israel has remained steadfast. Israelis went to work, children went to camp, lectures and concerts and even the beaches were full. Israel refuses to allow its adversaries and detractors to define it.

That is something we would all do well to remember. Being post-Holocaust Jews means that we have power – power to ensure Jewish freedom, and power to determine our own character and destiny. I cannot imagine a Jewish future without the State of Israel. And whenever the Shofar is sounded to rally the Jewish People, I will always be counted among Israel's strong supporters.

Though the complex work of shaping the soul of Israel continues, *ani ma'amin* – I believe in Herzl's dream, and in *Ha-Tikvah's* promise – "*l'hiyot am chofishi b'artzenu*, to be a free people in our Land."

I hope you will share that dream with me.