

Toldot 5773 Israel and Gaza

As I was walking to shul this morning, I started looking for cover. Imagining what our Israeli sisters and brothers are experiencing, I examined an old New England stone wall, wondering if it would be thick enough to shelter me from an incoming Grad missile.

The wall I was looking at was to the north so I pictured rockets being launched from the Burlington Mall toward Temple Emunah.

Would I find shelter? Would I be safe?

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Friends, this is what our Israeli family and friends have had to endure not just during the last week, but steadily over the last DECADE!

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On Wednesday nights, I have the wonderful privilege of teaching our tenth and eleventh graders in a Prozdor class that's held here at Temple Emunah. We discuss theology, spirituality, philosophy, and modern Jewish movements. Over the course of the semester, the students seek to understand not only our tradition's perspectives on deep questions but also what they believe - how do they understand God, revelation, theology, and how to live as a Jew in the modern world.

Since students walked into class concerned about the deteriorating situation in Israel this week, we diverted from those issues. I quickly ascertained that, while our students understood that Hamas terrorists were attacking Israel with missiles, and Israel was defending herself, they didn't fully understand the larger context of the situation.

I shared with them a quick history of the Gaza Strip.

Thinking about the growing conflagration that Israel finds itself in over the last few days, I realized that many adults do not understand this history as well.

So, I've brought this map of Israel for a quick history lesson.

Jews and Arabs lived throughout the area in and around Israel before 1948. When Israel announced its independence on May 14, 1948, the surrounding countries, including some very large ones, immediately invaded the fledgling Jewish state.

Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq all sent troops to invade Israel. After more than a year of fighting, Israel was able to repel all these attacks and solidify its borders, although at an extremely high cost. 6,000 Israelis, 1% of the 600,000 Jews living in Israel, were killed during the war.

To put that in some perspective, that would be a war that killed 3-1/2 million Americans today.



Israel found itself in control of a significant amount of the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, but not in control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The West Bank was then “occupied” by Jordan, and the Gaza Strip was “occupied” by Egypt.

During the war of 1967, Israel captured the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Desert, and the Golan Heights.

While Israel wanted to return these territories for peace, the Arab world responded in one voice from Khartoum with its famous three no’s. “No peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel and no recognition of Israel.”

After signing a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, it returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but Egypt did not want the Gaza Strip and so that remained under Israel’s control.

After Israel embarked on making peace with the Palestinians in 1993, it slowly withdrew from some areas which then came under Palestinian control. At first, it included vast parts of the Gaza Strip and Jericho. During the 1990s this area expanded to other cities in the West Bank.

In the year 2000, the Palestinians embarked on a terrorist campaign against Israel. In the Gaza Strip the situation was particularly difficult: there were only several thousand Jews living among 1.5 million Palestinians. It was challenging and risky to defend these Jews, and so, under the leadership of Ariel Sharon in 2005, Israel decided to forcibly remove all the Jews from the Gaza Strip so that Gaza would become under full Palestinian control.

It did this because it thought that it would further the peace effort and improve the security situation for Israel. In addition, it felt that if Gaza were to attack Israel, Israel would then be justified in responding, as Gaza would no longer be under Israeli occupation, and Israel had the right to defend an internationally recognized border.

Many opponents of Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza claimed that Israel would still be blamed for any conflagration.

I thought the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was a good idea, hoping it could bring peace and that, if it did not and Gaza attacked, Israel could respond and the whole world would back Israel.

And sure enough, after Israel withdrew, terrorists within the Gaza Strip began to attack Israel with fairly constant missile fire, continuing for much of the last eight years.

I had to eat my words. The world did not support Israel’s defending herself across a recognized border from territory it vacated.

This came to a head four years ago when Israel said that it had had enough and needed to respond in a significant manner.

Operation Cast Lead in 2008/2009 was an attempt to stop the constant terrorist missile fire from Gaza into towns like Sderot.

By the way, in that conflict Israel called up only about 10,000 reservists; whereas, they are calling up 75,000 now...

Just two years ago I brought a group of Christian clergy from the Boston area on a visit to Israel and we visited Sderot. We saw how people live in Sderot. It is simply unbearable.

“Tzeva Adom, Tzeva Adom....”



When a missile launch is detected within the Gaza Strip, a siren sounds: *Tzeva Adom*, Code red – and you have 15 seconds to enter the nearest bomb shelter. If you can't get there, then you could be out of luck. The Palestinian terrorists deliberately fire into civilian zones trying to kill or harm Israeli civilians.

As you can imagine, the population is traumatized. Over 80% of the children in the town of Sderot suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. They can't sleep at night. They wet their beds. They simply cannot function. Life in Israeli towns, villages, and cities around the Gaza Strip is simply unbearable.

One young woman who was offering a report to foreign diplomats in Israel said that it was almost impossible for her to decide whether or not to take a shower because if a siren goes off when she's in the shower, she won't have time to get out of there and get into the bomb shelter.

In the past year alone Israel has been hit by more than 780 rockets. Approximately 1,000,000 Israelis live within Hamas' medium rocket range; half of these people have less than 60 seconds to find shelter after a rocket is launched. These attacks, and more than 100 suicide bombings and shooting attacks that have killed more than 500 civilians over the years, are part of an ongoing war that Hamas has waged against Israel in which it deliberately targets Israeli population centers.

In order to understand the current conflict in Gaza, we need to go back to the night of Oct. 23 in Khartoum.

“Around 11 p.m. that night, the [Yarmouk weapons facility in the Sudanese capital was attacked](#), presumably by the Israeli air force. There were indications that Iran had been using this facility to stockpile and possibly assemble weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, guided anti-tank missiles and long-range Fajr-5 rockets capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem from Gaza.

“One of the major drivers behind Israel's latest air and assassination campaign is its belief that Hamas has a large cache of long-range Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 rockets in its possession. Israel's primary intent in this military campaign is to deny Hamas the ability to use these rockets or keep them as a constant threat to Israel's population centers. This likely explains why in early October, when short-range rocket attacks from Gaza were still at a low level, Israeli officials began conditioning the public to the idea of an ‘inevitable’ Israeli intervention in Gaza. Israel knew Hamas had these weapons in its possession and that it could require a war to eliminate the Fajr rocket threat. It began with the strike on the facility in Sudan, extended to the [assassination of Hamas military commander Ahmad Jabari](#) (the architect of the Fajr rocket program) and now has the potential to develop into an Israeli ground incursion in Gaza.” (Stratfor)

This past week the attacks from Gaza intensified as more than 120 rockets hit Israel and [an IDF Jeep was struck by an anti-tank missile](#). Israel’s carefully orchestrated response deliberately targeted military assets—not civilian infrastructure.

In addition, Hamas is now targeting Israel’s major population centers with attacks on Rishon L’Tziyon, Jerusalem and now, Tel Aviv with regularity.

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Let me take a moment to relate this situation to the *parashah*. When Rebecca heard Esau’s plan to murder Jacob, she sent her son hundreds of miles away to Haran where he could hide with her brother Laban: “*Kum, brah lekha el Lavan ahi* – Rise and run away to my brother Laban (Genesis 27:43). Fleeing was not Jacob’s only option; he could have stood his ground and defended himself against his brother. Yet, a simple understanding of the story makes clear that Jacob didn’t stand a chance against his more powerful brother.

One commentator (*Torah Sheleimah* vol. 2, p. 1,110) sees a deeper meaning in Jacob’s flight, noting that the getaway “alluded to future exiles, that the Jewish nation would [similarly] be exiled [from their land] among the nations.”

Nachmanides goes further, explaining (see his comment on Gen. 12:6) that “The actions of the forefathers represent a sign for the children.” Therefore, in running from danger, Jacob set the stage for the future exile of his descendants many generations in the future.

The contrast between our forefather Jacob’s situation and the situation in Israel today couldn’t be starker. While in both cases there was a threat to their lives, today Israelis are able to defend themselves and after the Holocaust, we know we cannot run

away. We in the American Jewish community must make sure that the United States continues to support Israel's right to self-defense.

I was discussing Israel with a member of our community who said, "The Israelis who live near the Gaza Strip should just move further in, away from Gaza."

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Challenging this person, I responded that when missiles rain down further in, then they'll move again and when missiles attack Jerusalem and Tel Aviv (as they are now), they will move again – maybe to Europe or America?

Friends, if Israeli Jews cannot live in Israel, then where can they live?

Fortunately, unlike Jacob in our *parashah*, Jews don't have to run away from their homes. The state of Israel can defend itself against this particular threat.

This Shabbat, let us pray for the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel. And we have work to do ensuring that our government continues to stand firmly with the Jewish state.

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Israel this week responded to these constant terrorist attacks against its people – terrorist attacks that don't merely inflict incredible psychological harm and violate Israel's internationally recognized borders, but constantly harm and, as we saw in the city of Kiryat Malachi, kill Israeli civilians.

Three Jews were killed, Yitzchak Amsellem, 24, from the Kraiyot region, Aaron Smadja, Mira Sharaf, while they were sitting in a fourth-floor apartment.

There is no question that under international law Israel can respond, but Israel does not respond in the way that other countries, including our own United States, respond in a time of war.

Often, it first "knocks" buildings, meaning that it drops a bomb near a building to warn the residents that it is going to destroy the building and gives them sufficient time to get out of the immediate area. It also drops leaflets telling people to get away. It also calls their cell phones and sends them text messages urging them to leave before Israel bombs the Hamas terrorists' rocket launchers that are embedded in civilian areas, or the weapons caches of the missile-making factories. Israel works incredibly hard to minimize civilian casualties, while its enemies deliberately target civilians. (This is not the case when it targets terrorists, though it has called off some of those strikes due to the presence of civilians.)

In addition, while Hamas tries to kill Israeli civilians, the IDF makes sure that civilians in Gaza receive humanitarian aid, even in the midst of this time.

Watching the coverage on CNN and listening on NPR over the last few days, I constantly see this situation being described as a tit-for-tat or as a "cycle of violence." This description is naïve and inaccurate and, quite frankly, offensive. We have terrorists embedded within an area that Israel relinquished firing over an internationally recognized border into Israel.

Imagine if Mexico started shooting missiles into Texas? How would America respond? Would American tolerate it? And if America fired back, would that be OK?

A loss of life is incredibly tragic, and I mourn all losses of innocents on both sides. War is horrible. I cannot imagine the pain that people are experiencing right now and my heart goes out to the Palestinians who do not support Hamas who are caught in this situation.

That said, my sympathies lie much more strongly with my family – both literal and figurative who have been targeted by terrorists for years.

There is simply no question in my mind that either the international community stops terrorism from impacting on Israelis, or Israel, sadly and tragically, must make sure that this does not occur and must utilize these thoughtful and calculated military measures.

No other country in the world faces daily rocket attacks against its civilians, nor would any other country tolerate such violence. Thankfully, the United States has stated its support for its ally Israel, including its right to live in peace and to defend itself. Not only has the situation in Gaza intensified, but [Syrian mortar shells](#) have recently landed in Israel, the [Sinai Peninsula](#) is becoming increasingly dangerous, the [Palestinian Authority](#) has spurned negotiations in favor of a “statehood” bid at the U.N. General Assembly, and [Iran](#) is continuing its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Finally, the world’s changing landscape makes this conflict even more complicated. Now, Egypt is no longer ruled by Hosni Mubarak, but by Mohammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood who see eye to eye with Hamas. US allies, Egypt and Qatar, are supporting Hamas – will Egypt keep its peace treaty?

Rockets have been fired by terrorists in Sinai into Israel! And, of course, the UN has come out with a statement by the 120-nation Nonaligned Movement attacking Israel and somehow they forgot to mention the Palestinian missile attacks that started all this. The biggest joke is can you guess which country is the president of this group?

Yes, Iran. That bastion of peaceful words and actions!

The United States should continue efforts to ensure that Israel has the necessary resources to meet the growing threats and chaos in the region.

(For more on how you can have an impact, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.)

We need to be advocates for Israel – post on Facebook and twitter and forward Israel’s YouTube videos.

Show up to the community rally on Monday.

Almost all Israelis are united in a moment such as this and even those on the more dovish wing of the Jewish community and have come out clearly in support of Israel. For example, see Rabbi Eric Yoffie’s piece in Ha’aretz, *A Call to U.S. Progressive Jews: Support Israel’s ‘Get Tough’ Policy in Gaza*. <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/a-call-to-u-s-progressive-jews-support-israel-s-get-tough-policy-in-gaza.premium-1.478056>

We all must be able to explain clearly what the history is. One cannot say that there is any reason to attack Israel from Gaza – Israel withdrew from that territory and there are no settlements there.

Yet it has experienced some 8,000 rockets launched against it from the Gaza Strip, since it pulled out from that territory. These attacks not only make it harder for Israelis to survive, but they undermine efforts towards peace. If this is what Israel gets when it withdraws from territory, how can Israel be convinced to withdraw from the West Bank?

I fear for the future of the Middle East if Muslim, Christian, and Arab voices cannot shout down the terrorists to help create a better and more peaceful tomorrow for them, for us, for their children, and for our children.

There is no more running away from this situation. It's time for all of us to pray for Israel's safety, to advocate on her behalf, to explain to all the nuances of the situation, and to hope that a new reality will dawn – a new reality of peace.

Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisrael, v'imru: Amen.
Shabbat Shalom.