

The Gaza War: Three Principles

Rosh Hashanah 2014/5775

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For the past decade I have used this occasion, Rosh Hashanah morning, to speak with you about Israel. I have always felt that American Jews should think about Israel at least 25% of sermon time during the High Holy Days.

Public speakers would like to think that a few pearls of wisdom expertly presented by a master orator can change minds. An enchanting sentence here; captivating logic there – will, by their very brilliance, compel agreement. It is not generally true. Speeches tend to reinforce positions we already have.

Abraham Lincoln was the most eloquent of all American presidents. One wonders now why Lincoln failed to convince more of his contemporaries. His speeches were masterpieces of impeccable logic, lyrical beauty and political and moral truth. But in the end, the primary effect of Lincoln's oratory was not to convince those who disagreed, but to fortify those who already agreed – or were inclined to agree – that great principles were at stake that justified even war. It was the same with Churchill. Throughout the 1930's – a decade he described as "the locust years" – he remained in opposition, unable to convince those who disagreed that Britain was unprepared for the gathering storm. It was only when the storm hit and events proved that Churchill was right all along, that he became the orator for the ages we now admire.

So I have no illusions that any one speech will persuade those of you already inclined to disagree. And if you disagree with me stand in line: even I don't agree with everything I say. But the exercise is still valuable to help clarify what are the great principles at stake in our troubled times.

I will focus on three:

1. The Right to Live Free

Every person and every nation has the right to live free. Americans have that right; Russians have that right. Ukrainians have that right. Palestinians have that right. And so do Israelis – they too, have the right to live in safety. When that right is violated the basic obligation of any government is to protect its citizens.

It is just common sense. We do not need a doctorate in politics or international relations to figure it out. If someone is shooting rockets at you – a war crime - you must stop the rockets. If someone is tunneling under your house to kill you, you must seal the tunnel.

How you do this is a relevant and important issue – which I will address later – but the method of self-protection is the secondary issue that flows from the primary issue: the obligation to protect yourself.

Self defense is not merely a privilege granted by studious scholars or supercilious statesmen sitting in sterilized, sanitized snugly secured sanctums, whose starched collars are unstained by the sweat of the farm and whose manicured nails are unsoiled by the soot of the field. You are morally bound to protect yourself. Turning the other cheek is immoral. The reason it is immoral is that, as our tradition teaches: My life is no less valuable than his life. And when he picks up arms to kill me, that is the crime, not my reasonable response to his aggression.

Better education does not guarantee better moral judgment. In fact, amoral intelligence is usually an attribute of the highly educated, not the less educated. If all you focus on – if all you see on the screen or in the papers – is my response – you see only a small part of the picture. The victim of the mugging stands accused while her assailant is cleared because all you saw was the violence of the pepper spray.

If you followed media coverage anywhere in the world except Israel, you would think that this war was about unprovoked Israeli aggression against Palestinian civilians. Their suffering was surely part of the story – but was not its central theme. And in any case, your failure to understand the full picture, either because of your preexisting biases or because the media didn't bring it to you does not detract from my moral obligation to protect myself, let alone, my children.

Where you stand on Israel often depends on where you sit. If you sit near the Gaza border and have fifteen seconds to run to a shelter fifteen times a day for fifteen years – interspersed with a few weeks or months of quiet; or if you are 45 miles away in Tel Aviv, and regularly run to shelters in the 45 seconds available to you: If you have relatives or friends in Israel – say – elderly parents or young nephews and nieces - you may tend to see the problem differently than if you are reading about so-called “Israeli aggression” in *Le Figaro* as you contently consume the crumbled crumbs of your croissant and savor the last sip of your *café au lait*, making sure to fold the newspaper after reading about all the bloodshed around the world: *Mon dieu, le monde et un endroit violent*, – Gosh, the world is such a violent place.

If you are the target of non-stop missile fire, you don't think it's just a pin prick or a mere nuisance, safe and protected under the Iron Dome. What a nice little euphemism: Iron Dome – as if way up in the sky – above the clouds in outer space – there is a magical sphere that protects all of us underneath: we hear nothing, we see nothing; there is no danger. As if people don't get killed and injured, and as if property is not destroyed; and as if any kind of normal daily routine is possible.

The most peaceful person cannot live in peace if his neighbor won't let him. If our neighbor is determined to kill, such as our world is now, we cannot avoid force. I wish with all my heart that we lived in a tranquil world. I wish that we were all reasonable,

honest and peace-loving and preoccupied with the other's well-being; that what is hateful to us we do not do unto others. I wish that our enemies, too, were raised on the philosophy of John Rawls, John Stuart Mill and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Israel discovered an underground hell; a diabolical network of tunnels, command centers and weapons intended to wreak terror, murder and destruction. I think it took even Israeli intelligence by surprise, but either way, it stunned the population that had not comprehended the threat it was living under – literally – under its feet: Under its homes, schools, parks, hospitals, synagogues and community centers; under the beds of their children.

We knew that Hamas was depraved. We knew it in an intellectual way; in a distant rhetorical way. But we didn't feel it. We didn't see it. The extent of the depravity is incomprehensible: "Naked villainy clothed with old odd ends stolen forth of holy writ, and seem a saint when most I play the devil." People have a staggering capacity to underplay and disbelieve what murderers tell us they want to do. Until we actually see them kidnap and decapitate we assume they don't really mean it. And then, when they carry out their dastardly designs we are shocked. Shocked! A failure to comprehend naked villainy is also an attribute of the educated.

Today was the day that Hamas planned to launch a surprise attack through the tunnels. What dumb luck that they overreached and launched a war two months ahead of schedule. The arrogant often over-reach. Captured Hamas operatives confessed that they trained for over a decade to flood the tunnels with hundreds of terrorists on this day – Rosh Hashanah. Their mission was to pop out of the ground and fan out on the Israeli side of the border - at or near kibbutz dining rooms, village synagogues and playgrounds – and perpetrate a mass murder and hostage taking operation the likes of which the world has never seen. Can you even imagine children drugged and dragged to the dungeons of Gaza?

Now if you are pre-inclined to be anti-Israel you may deny all the evidence, lie about it or minimize it. But if you live near the tunnels you might not think it would be so trivial. And I understand that if one is so inclined, one could make the same argument on the Gaza side: The Israelis are attacking our homes and our children and we have a moral obligation to defend ourselves.

Except it's not true. If you are inclined to be anti-Israel – everything Israel does will be perceived by you as aggression and even Winston Churchill, himself, will not persuade you. If you understand the problem – not as a murderous gang fighting to destroy Israel - but as one of Israeli colonial apartheid against a helpless, peaceful, innocent, native population whose lands were stolen – not even Abraham Lincoln could convince you of Israel's right to exist, let alone its right to self-defense.

It's not true. We have a spectacular five day mission to Israel scheduled next month; I hope you can make it, especially in the light of recent events. It will be the experience of a lifetime and there is still room for you. We will be speaking round-the-clock with

Israelis of all stripes. Do you really think that those people in Sderot or Ashkelon want to kill, conquer and control Palestinians? There are very few sane Israelis who want to return to Gaza. All they want is peace and quiet. That's why Israel left Gaza in the first place. What do you think would happen if Hamas would lay down its arms tomorrow – the razing of Gaza? The opposite; there would be massive reconstruction. Israel has an interest in a prosperous Gaza. On the other hand, what do you think would happen if Israel laid down its arms? Actually, we know: they've told us – it's too terrifying to contemplate.

2. Civilian Casualties

Civilian casualties are a horrible consequence of war. War is not a video game. War is violent, dehumanizing, ugly, brutish and nasty. It is why every effort should be made to prevent war in the first place. But if war does break out, there are – and should be – rules of war. Not everything is permitted.

I am saddened and deeply mourn the loss of life of Israeli civilians and soldiers. Our synagogue prays for the speedy recovery of all those still recuperating and wishes them complete healing. So many beautiful people lost their lives, mostly soldiers, and almost half of them, officers. They were the flower of our youth, our finest sons.

I am also pained and scarred by the many hundreds of innocent Palestinians who lost their lives, and the many thousands of innocent Palestinians who are physically and emotionally maimed. We wish them, as well, a speedy recovery from their wounds. We yearn for the day when all shall sit under vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.

We can never allow ourselves to be desensitized to the other's suffering. A profound midrash tells of the angels on high celebrating the demise of Pharaoh's army as the Sea collapsed upon them. God admonished the angels: "My children are drowning in the Sea and you rejoice?!" Death, even of your enemy, is nothing to celebrate. The reason we extract ten drops of wine from the Kiddush cup at the Passover Seder is to symbolize that even in triumph, our joy is diminished because freedom came at a terrible cost of human life on the other side – and all life is precious to God. Even the life of our enemy should be taken with sadness. And when innocents are harmed, it is a tragedy. I dislike intensely the phrase "collateral damage," that depersonalizes scattered limbs and gaping wounds, and sanitizes rivers of blood.

Israel does not purposely target civilians; to accuse Israel of that is a big lie stated over and over again in the hopes that a lie repeated often enough will become true. It says more about those who believe it than it says about Israel. In addition, the Israel Defense Forces takes precautions unlike any other military in the history of warfare.

But still, even by Israel's count, at least a thousand innocent Palestinians were killed and many more were wounded, displaced and dispossessed. This is cause for lament and great sorrow. Our tradition commands us to mourn this loss, especially since even Israel

said that many of those harmed were, in effect, captives of Hamas. The war is against Hamas, not the Palestinian people.

It is not weakness to identify with those on the other side, even when you are under fire. Empathy is not a weakness, it is a great strength. Compassion is not a weakness, it is a great strength. Mercy is not a weakness; it is a great strength. Jews are described in our tradition as *rachmanim bnai rachmanim* – compassionate ones, the children of the compassionate.

It is not wrong to weep for the innocents of Gaza. These are not the crocodile tears shed by those who witnessed in silence 200,000 Syrians butchered and three million displaced, tens of thousands of Iraqis slaughtered, whole Christian communities dispersed from their ancient villages - and never said a word; never launched a protest in London or violent street mayhem in Paris; never asked for, and never convened a Security Council meeting in the United Nations.

No, these lamentations are real. It is possible to defend yourself and still mourn the taking of life, especially innocent lives. What decent person is unmoved by undeserved suffering, the suffering of children?

And yet, with all of our authentic sadness for the suffering in Gaza, the context is broader than their suffering. Their leaders intended for them to suffer and knew that suffering would be their lot. It was a war aim. The strategy of using your own people as human shields reeks of moral decay. As the United States and our allies learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, and will soon learn again if we are to be serious in our effort to defeat ISIS, no country can prevent civilian casualties when terrorists purposely use civilians as shields and fire at you from residential neighborhoods.

And therefore the question of proportionality is not resolved simply by comparing Israeli and Palestinian casualty counts. I do not apologize that more Israeli civilians were not killed, as some would have preferred. Comparing civilian casualties has never been the moral standard; if it was – America and Britain would have been guilty for every bombing raid against Hitler's Germany. Hundreds of thousands of German civilians were killed by American and British bombers. How many American civilians were killed on land or at sea by the German military? The synagogue will be offering a mission to Eastern Europe this summer; and we will spend a few hours in Dresden on the way to Berlin. Dresden was practically wiped off the face of the earth by British bombers: What you will see in Dresden is a new city – essentially all of it built after 1945.

So the moral question is not the relative proportion of civilian casualties. The question is whether the military action is proportional to the threat. Was the bombing of Dresden proportional to the threat posed by Nazi Germany? Was the bombing of Hiroshima proportional to the threat posed by Imperial Japan? Hamas rockets threaten most of Israel. Two thirds of Israel's population lives under the threat of Hamas missile attacks.

These are tough enemies: They challenge us militarily; they challenge us emotionally and they challenge us morally. They have become skilled in the dark art of asymmetrical guerilla warfare. They have tunneled their way from the Dark Ages, bursting into the sunlight of the modern world armed to the teeth with the glittering weapons of our times. They would rather see one building destroyed in Tel Aviv than an entire neighborhood lost in Gaza. They can show the world pictures of Israeli aggression. A picture is worth a thousand words; more. A million words cannot compete with the sight of a suffering or slain child.

Israelis and Palestinians alike are dying because too many of us are unable to distinguish between terrorists and freedom fighters; between those who kill reluctantly and in self defense and those whose entire purpose is to kill; between those who love life and choose life, and those who glorify martyrdom and choose death. To confuse democracies with autocracies, to confuse terrorists with their victims, is a “moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered – intentionally or not – to the negators of truth.” (Primo Levi in James “Cultural Cohesion, page 262)

3. Anti-Semitism

Jews are often way too quick to accuse critics of anti-Semitism. Can you blame us? We have developed such exquisite senses by now. Like sound waves before the noise - we feel anti-Semitism even before we hear it. We are often right, but sometimes wrong. Since all of us are flawed and the world is in constant need of repair, critics play a vital role. Democracy, itself, is based on the concept of criticism. A full public airing of dissent is the essential self-correcting mechanism that lay at the heart of all pluralistic societies. Judaism, too, is inherently democratic and intellectually pluralistic. We relish controversy: “All disagreements that are for the sake of heaven are destined to endure,” the Mishna teaches.

And truth be told, there is much to criticize. It didn't take long for Israelis, themselves, to return to their daily routine of criticizing every leader and every policy decision. It is legitimate to lament the damage and destruction in Gaza and to ask hard questions about whether all of it was necessary. The Israeli government, itself, established commissions to investigate the conduct of the war. Sometimes even biting criticism can be delivered by a friend – by those who respect you and have your best interests at heart. And even if they are not your friends, they often still raise relevant questions that have nothing to do with anti-Semitism.

But when asking the broader question, was anti-Semitism part of the picture of the Gaza war, the only possible answer to that is: of course; you have to be out of your mind to even ask that question!

First, Hamas is, of course, anti-Semitic. Its very charter calls for the killing of Jews everywhere. Hamas has other motivations as well, but at the heart of its world view is a Holocaust-denying genocidal thirst to destroy the Jewish state.

The harder question is what is going on in the West, and especially, in Europe? It is undeniable that parts of Europe have become breeding grounds of hate, expressed in street protests, violent attacks against Jewish individuals and institutions and outrageous propaganda against Israel that would not have embarrassed *Der Sturmer*. That European governments fail to see this, or underestimate the problem, is not only disturbing, in and of itself, but also bodes ill for these societies. Already Jewish emigration from France has reached record levels, and we see this trend throughout Western Europe. History teaches that whenever Jews have fled their countries of origin these countries have become worse: less tolerant, less prosperous and less free.

But European street anti-Semitism is also a relatively easy case. The hardest cases are the more subtle expressions of anti-Semitism: like expecting Israel to behave like no other nation in the world. I don't really mind that people hold Jews to high standards; we hold ourselves to high standards. But to hold Israel to impossible standards expected of no one else, and to delegitimize Israel when it does not meet those standards – is, of course, anti-Semitic. To hold the Zionist project to be racist in its very conception – as the United Nations once resolved: “Zionism is racism;” to consider Israel to have been born in original sin and that its crucifixion is the only avenue of atonement - is, of course, anti-Semitic.

There is a human tendency to assume that our times are unique; that we can break away from history. We have not suddenly appeared on this earth free of all the social vices of the past. We are part of history. Europe was always infected with anti-Semitism: Not all Europeans were anti-Semitic, but enough of them were, so as to make life difficult for our ancestors, at best, and at worst, it led to mass murder - even in the most enlightened and cultured societies. Herzl envisioned the Zionist project in the first place only after witnessing vile, venomous, vicious anti-Semitism in France – the very capital of liberty, fraternity and egalitarianism.

The ultimate destruction of European Jewry did not materialize until the 20th century, but it was centuries in the making. Europe unleashed on us generation after generation of putrid persecution. Most of us are here in this country because an ancestor fled riots, pogroms, genocide, ghettos, or just plain nasty old discrimination.

Post-War Europe is like a recovering addict. She requires non-stop work and self-vigilance not to fall off the wagon again. And the mass infusion of immigrants, some of whom were raised on anti-Semitism, only exacerbates a predisposition to that old European addiction. Addicts never fully recover; the most successful of them are only recovering; they are always susceptible to a relapse.

So why should we assume that post-War Europe has shed its centuries-old anti-Semitic past? Europeans who have never met a Jew in their lives still express anti-Semitic views.

And why should we not suspect that some of the hatred of Israel in Europe is a substitute for the age-old European hatred of Jews: a more acceptable way to express the same basic Jew-hating sentiment?

It goes without saying that the anti-Semitism of our day is far from the anti-Semitism of past days. We should not get carried away. Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany itself, recently headlined a rally at the Brandenburg Gate castigating the rise of anti-Semitism in her country.

We are not on the verge of a Holocaust or anything close to it. But it is still worth asking Europeans: Is the call to boycott Israel all that different from your past calls to boycott Jews? Is the effort to isolate Israel all that different from your past efforts to isolate Jews? Is the delegitimization of Israel all that different from your past delegitimization of Jews? And if so, how so?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But what I do know is that when people introduce the Holocaust against Israel, something deeper is going on. When leaders like Turkey's Erdogan compare the Nazis with the Israeli government, and the Nazis come out looking better – you know that something deeper is going on. It does not excuse any Israeli wrongdoing, but at some point, even the most enlightened of us cannot suppress the terrible feeling welling up inside that the monster is stirring again, and that this beast is irrational, inexplicable and impossible to eradicate. It is not something that people have reasoned themselves into, and hence it cannot be reasoned out of them.

And a word to fellow Jews: We are often way too sensitive to internal Jewish dissent on Israel. Anyone who seeks to silence Jewish criticism on any issue whatsoever, let alone Israel, doesn't understand the first thing about Jews. To expect a Jew to be silent is like expecting your suitcase to be the first off the plane: it will never happen.

I would only point out the obvious: Jews are sought-after by Israel's opponents to express criticism of Israel: the more critical they are, the more they are sought out. It doesn't mean they shouldn't criticize; I am not saying that. But I took note when Presbyterian colleagues told me that the most important factor in the successful passage of their divestment resolution last spring was the presence of Jews who lobbied for it. When a Jew advocates boycotting Israel it is perceived as more moral and more courageous – and oh so much more enlightened - than all those tribal Jews who are defending an outlaw state.

I would say this to Jewish critics of Israel: If you feel compelled to speak, you must speak. If you feel compelled to act, you must act. You must be guided by your own moral compass. But you may want to ask yourselves whether you are contributing to the increasing efforts to weaken, isolate and delegitimize Israel. If that is your intention, so be it; we will never see eye-to-eye. But if that is not your intention, it is not wrong to assess the ramifications of your words and deeds. A little self-reflection is good for the soul. Remember, you are also imperfect and you can also be wrong, and while you often

accuse others of not tolerating dissent, you, yourselves, seem to have the thinnest skin of all.

As you know, I believe in compromise. Compromise is not a weakness. Stubborn inflexibility is a weakness. To live is to compromise. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be resolved by force. If it is to be resolved, it must be through political agreement. No one is going anywhere. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians have anywhere else to go. Let us hope that the war opened new opportunities for a political solution and that courageous leaders will pursue them.

But if the conflict is to be resolved by compromise, how do you compromise with a force committed to your destruction? Is it possible to compromise on your demise? Is there a middle road between being and not being: to be and not to be at the same time? Can those who deny Israel's right to exist be placated – whether their animosity is expressed in its violent Middle Eastern form or the more genteel Western version found in some universities, NGO's, political establishments and international forums?

If they are right that Zionism is racism; that Israel was born in original sin, an outlaw nation that stole land not hers, seizing it and holding it by the force of oppression, persecution and apartheid – if they are right on this – then we must join them. If they are right that Hamas is a force for Palestinian liberation, that they are freedom fighters and Israel is the jailer – then we must join them for we cannot reject the universality of the principle of freedom that we, ourselves, taught the world. All deserve freedom, the powerful and the weak, kings and commoners.

If they are right that there was no Jewish history in the Land of Israel; that it is all a Zionist plot to oppress Palestinians, who are the original inhabitants of the land: there was no kingdom, no Temple, no Jewish civilization – these are all fabrications;

If they are right that the Jewish people has no native claim to that tiny island within a sea of 370 million Arabs dispersed in countries drawn in Churchill's map room and artificially divided up between the British and the French during World War I; if they are right that these countries, now shattering the Sykes-Picot order and reverting to pre-World War I tribal arrangements - if they are right that these peoples have authentic claims but the Jews do not; if they are right that Israel has no legal reason for being: that its very existence is a war crime and contravenes international justice;

If they are right, then we must join them. We cannot be in favor of a state whose very reason for being is oppression and persecution. If they are right then we must reconsider it all.

Since I began with Abraham Lincoln, let me conclude by paraphrasing his Cooper Union speech:

If we thought they were right – we would agree with all their demands. But they are not right, they are wrong. And our thinking them wrong is the precise fact upon which

depends the whole struggle. And because we think them wrong, can we yield to them?
Can we?

If our sense of duty forbids this, then let us stand by our duty, fearlessly and effectively. Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored – contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between...[being alive and being dead]...reversing divine rule and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance.