

Facing Israel: The Struggle for Hope

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Somewhere, deep in a vast American military base in Sicily, a skype call was initiated. It was mid-summer and the young man was calling his rabbi: in Portland, Oregon. Now, this is the kind of thing you live for in my line of work. One of my students, a young man with promise, making his way in the world, wanted to speak to the rabbi of his youth! He had a problem and he hoped his rabbi could help. There he was on my computer screen - looking more like a man than I ever did at his age. Confident. Secure. Military. "Rabbi," he said after some preliminaries, "I'm constantly getting into fights with people on the base." I raised an eyebrow. "No, verbal fights, arguments" he corrected my obvious misconception. "About Israel."

"They know I'm Jewish. And with the war going on in Gaza, I am always put in the position of having to defend Israel. But I don't have the words. Can you help me, rabbi?"

Well, this wasn't exactly the spiritual crisis I had expected. Or maybe it was. He had learned from me, I hope, the Jewish ideals of compassion. Not seeking vengeance from an enemy. He had learned that G-d wept over Pharaoh's army drowned in the rushing waters while Moses and the Israelites cheered their victory from oppression. G-d cries for the victims. So should we. He had learned - this military man - that while the Torah acknowledges there is a time for peace and a time for war, that there are ancient Jewish rules of warfare that stress concern for the innocent.

And he had learned that Israel, the Jewish homeland, was at that moment engaged in a painful war resulting in many civilian casualties.

What surprised me was his report of the young men and women he was serving with. In my innocence, I had forgotten that this was no longer the generation who were inspired by the attacks of 9/11 to defend their country. This was no longer a force scarred by the images of a great nation caught unaware but proudly committed to fighting back with full force and power - even shock and awe. These young enlisted men and women he was serving with were not even the battle-hardened weary soldiers returning at long, long last from too many tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. No, his comrades were far from the realities of suicide bombers and IEDs. They were fresh, safe recruits; and terrorism was

something they saw on TV - probably in the fictionalized bad guys of movies and video games.

What words could I give him that would help him understand? He didn't grow up in a nation at war with terrorists who target civilians on our soil, or in which civilians are caught in the cross-fire. I, like him – like you – weep at the deaths of innocents; children killed on a beach, whole families killed in destroyed buildings. And how can I help him understand the fear I've never lived through but that innocent Israeli families had endured continuously for years before this war began? What images would help him communicate what it is like to live under constant rocket and mortar fire in your home, in your children's school, on your way to work? I've heard people count the fifteen seconds Israelis in Southern towns have to stop whatever they are doing and get to a bomb shelter - but it doesn't convey what it feels like for a mother giving her child a bath who has that kind of time to register the reality; scoop up a crying, wet and confused infant and dive into the safe room; and then do the same with her other children - all in one quarter of a minute. How do I tell him? How does he tell them?

His friends, soldiers, fighters - who should know the tragedy of war and the sacred commitment the military makes to protect its own civilian people - cannot see, cannot empathize with young Israeli soldiers, their age or younger, who are sworn to protect not some abstract idea of nation or state or Democracy - but the very lives of their family and friends. Missiles, rockets and mortars are falling indiscriminately on their own towns and villages. The only things that stands in the way of mass civilian casualty in Israel is the ubiquitous public and private shelters, a sophisticated Iron Dome system and these young, uniformed soldiers. The Palestinian civilians in Gaza have none of these. They have an acknowledged terrorist organization committed more to the destruction of Israel than to the creation of a Palestinian state. They have leaders with an ideology which permits the use of human shields - placing civilians on rooftops daring Israeli airplanes to attack, placing attack rockets Israel must target in and near schools, storing weapons in mosques. The Palestinians of Gaza have no shelters, because they were turned into terror tunnels for Hamas. They have no champions for their safety except Israeli restraint. These young American recruits do not know. They can only see the images: terrible! of death. The only images Hamas allows - never of fighters or even fighting age men. Only the too many civilians. Who would not weep for the innocents when even G-d weeps for the combatants?

What do I tell him, this young Jewish man of conviction, that will help his comrades understand?

He wanted to know about history, the ability to explain the roots of the conflict. While I gave him a reading suggestion, I also cautioned that history has a way of turning into personal narrative. The mutually exclusive stories told by two sides become accepted by each as fact and become impossible to disentangle. That is not to say that history is irrelevant – far from it. But the historical arguments become confusing and a distraction from the harsh realities of the moment. For those who are living through the horrors of war, the emotional story is more personally relevant than the search for facts. How people understand their situation shapes their actions. More useful is to look to the present and the future. What are the hopes and dreams? What does each side of a conflict actually want?

I encouraged this young man to remind his friends that Israel shares the very values they were recruited to fight for: Democracy, pluralism, freedom. The enemies of Israel, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran control their populations through terror and fear. Religious extremists impose their version of a religious-political nation with no tolerance for diversity. Just as in the US, Israel struggles with an empowered religious minority shaping its politics – but in most spheres the government operates in a secular manner. Israel protects the rights of minorities – even if there is room for improvement. And they are thriving. Meanwhile Christians and other minorities are fleeing Palestinian territories even without the overwhelming and obvious threats declared by groups like ISIS. Shared values matter in an era of increasing polarization. And it is no surprise, I tell my student this summer to remind his colleagues, that the American Government and military has stood steadfastly with Israel. The very Iron Dome system developed by Israel and funded by the United States will soon be protecting American soldiers.

But I know it will not be enough. The protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and more significantly the conflict that much of the Middle East has with Israel's very existence – makes it hard for many of us to sustain our attention – much less our hopes. In a follow-up exchange, I asked my young man – at his military base on the Mediterranean – what he had been thinking since our summer conversation. I had suggested to him a book by a left-wing Israeli journalist about the history of Zionism and modern Israel. "The biggest takeaway" he wrote to me "is just how multifaceted the situation is, and it really does all parties a disservice to try and simplify it – there are so many layers to the story. People like a quick 'he is right/he is wrong' kind of story," he concluded "but this conflict is not that simple."

His words remarkably reflected the impressions of many people who travelled with Cantor Cahana and me to Israel in the Spring of 2013. Several in our very thoughtful group came to Israel with their own strongly held opinions about the right and wrong of the conflict. Most left a few weeks later – after seeing the separation barriers, after

speaking to Israeli teachers and scholars and hearing from Arab-Israelis – feeling that there was great complexity. They learned how the stories each side tells themselves shape their perception of every subsequent event, every hurt, every insult and injury until it becomes impossible to hear anything from the other side. Far too much pain and death can become self-justified and perpetuated.

But I believe there are ways to step back from the details and see the greater trends that are rocking the Middle East, shaking Israel and Europe and the United States in their wake. And when we take a longer view, pull back for a moment from seeing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in isolation, there are actually signs of hopefulness and reasons to caution patience.

I recently heard a talk by a remarkable young man. His name is Mosab Hassan Yousef, and he is the author of a book about his own life entitled “Son of Hamas.” Mosab is the eldest son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, one of the founders and leaders of Hamas, Israel’s direct terrorist enemy in Gaza and a threat to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Mosab is of Hamas royalty – the subject of a recent documentary entitled “The Green Prince.” What makes him remarkable is that through a series of events, he became one of the most prized informants for the Israeli Shin Bet, the famed secret service which serves as the core of Israeli intelligence. He spied for Israel even while serving as a leader of Hamas. His book is a true-life thriller and he is unflinching in his criticism of both the Israeli soldiers he encountered and of Hamas’ death-fixation – the ways in which they brutalize their own people.

In the talk I heard, Mosab – this insider - spoke of Hamas as not an isolated group but part of a larger problem. “Hamas is a ghost, an idea,” he said. “An ideology and a manifestation of an ideology. Al Quada, ISIS, Boko Haram, etc. – many masks of the same face. It is hard to fight an ideology,” he continued “you cannot bomb it. Hamas is intent on destroying Israel, not on building a Palestinian state. But they are living in a state of illusion.”

Mosab told us that he grew to love the values of pluralism he learned from Israel, the values promoting life over death. “The region would be better off if Israel managed the natural and human resources of the Middle East” he said. When asked why he worked for 10 years during the Intifada against the ideology of his own father, even while believing in Palestinian independence, he spoke about serving not Israel or Palestine but his conscience. “Innocent people were killed in suicide attacks,” he said “all kinds of people: Arab, Jews, Americans. How can you go wrong saving a human life?”

Mosab acknowledges that if Israel were to reach a peace agreement to create a Palestinian state tomorrow, it would not change Hamas’ intention to violently destroy the Jewish state. “Hamas cannot recognize the state of Israel,” said this son of Hamas “one

inch of land given is forbidden in their ideology.” Unfortunately, those who think ending the occupation will end the conflict have a contradictory reality in groups like Hamas. Ending the occupation and settlements, creating a just and equitable and sustainable peace with an independent Palestinian state is a morally correct goal which I continue to support. But alone, it will not end the conflict.

Mosab Hassan Yousef and many others are seeing the hateful ideologies that have given rise to Hamas and Al Quada and most recently to public horrors perpetrated by ISIS or ISL. They see the link in ideologies which value a violent purge of all who disagree, all who represent religious beliefs and interpretations other than their own. This is why for the first time we have heard a chorus of Muslim leaders decry ISIS – the so called “Islamic State” as “neither a state nor Islamic.” As noted Islamic scholar and peace activist Wahiduddin Khan put it:

“Establishing an Islamic state is not the mission given to Muslims. The Prophet of Islam never said: ‘I have been sent to establish an Islamic state.’ The Prophet’s mission was a peaceful *dawah* mission—inviting people to God’s path—and not a political mission.”

“The case of ISIS is certainly a case of illegal coup, rather than an Islamically-lawful act.”

This is why 10 Arab nations have given support to the US led coalition striking against ISIS – even bragging about the first female fighter pilot from the United Arab Emirates who led strikes against ISIS alongside US forces. And significantly, this is why Saudi Arabia and other gulf emirates (except Qatar) are for the first time siding with Israel against Hamas. They recognize that there is a greater ideology at work which threatens them as well. This is why, as former Ambassador Dennis Ross has pointed out, during the summer’s Gaza war we saw anti-Israel protests in Europe and even in the United States, but not in the Middle East. PA President Mahmoud Abbas’ scurrilous charges of Israeli genocide aside, those who are directly involved do not want to see a Hamas success. There are many large forces at work which cross the lines of states – the Sunni-Shia-Kurdish divides, the rise of Sunni Wahhabism’s radical extremist elements, Iran’s race to develop a nuclear weapon – which so far has been only slightly slowed by the West’s crippling sanctions – all these are forces into which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to be placed.

And, this to my mind, is where some glimmer of hope arises. As I said, for the first time, Saudi Arabia and others are finding themselves in alignment with Israel in its opposition to Hamas. This alignment of necessity raises the prospect of a larger Israeli-Arab settlement, far more significant than an Israeli-Palestinian settlement alone.

In 2002 the Arab League summit in Beirut heard a proposal from then Crown Prince, now King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia for a comprehensive settlement with Israel. This “Arab Peace Initiative”, which was re-endorsed in 2007 visualized normalized relations between Israel and the entire Arab region, based on a withdrawal from occupied territories and a “just settlement” of the Palestinian refugee crisis. For a number of reasons, this was a “non-starter” for Israeli leaders of the time. But perhaps with new realignments, with the Palestinian Authority all but abandoning direct peace talks; with a greater vision arising of combating together the extremist ideologies which prevent peace – perhaps a better, more hopeful time is approaching. But it will not be easy.

While there are extremists in Israel who oppose peace, the majority of Israelis support the right of a Palestinian state to exist. “Moderate” Islamists, “moderate” Palestinians are not supportive of Israel’s right – but they are resigned to its reality. While we would like more, while a true peace will require a true understanding of Palestinian pain and Jewish pain, that reality may take time. Normalization, acceptance of each other could come more quickly. If we are willing.

And it is worth it. Peace is worth it. Israel is worth it. It is our grand experiment in putting Jewish values into action. As Dr. Einat Wilf, a former member of Knesset, put it “Israel is the one state in the world where we can argue about what it means to be a Jewish State.” I want that argument.

When I wrote to my young friend, my former student, on a base in Sicily, it was before the United States military became involved in the goal of eradicating ISIS. But the winds were clearly blowing in that direction. I asked him how his comrades who were criticizing Israel’s war with Hamas were thinking about their preparation for war with ISIS. “People know they’re bad, but people are kind of numb to the whole situation over there,” he wrote back, “because it’s just one bad thing after another. And people have gotten so cynical that not much gets through. That’s not everyone of course but it’s significantly more than it should be.”

We cannot afford to be cynical, we cannot afford to give up hope. In the midst of war, a glimmer of another way begins to shine forth. That is the Jewish hope – *hatikva* – the belief in a shining tomorrow. “Stay true” I wrote back to him. And I pray, stay true to your Jewish values. Stay true, even when immersed in the complexities and counter-claims, stay true and remember the words of the prophet you learned in religious school:

בּוֹרֵא נֹבַ [נִיב] שְׁפָתַיִם שְׁלוֹם | שְׁלוֹם לְרָחוֹק וְלִקְרוֹב אָמַר יְהוָה וְרַפְּאֵתִיו:

I will create a new expression of the lips; Peace, peace for him who is far off and for him who is near, says the Lord; and I will heal him. (Isaiah 57:19)

May the Middle East, a region which has known too much terror, too much loss, be healed of cynicism. Though we struggle, may we never give up or give in to fear. May we also keep alive the dream, the pathways, the hope for peace.