

The Assault on Israel: No Time For Silence

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Shabbat, July 26, 2014

Thank you, Rabbi, for the privilege of speaking in this synagogue that means so much to our community, in this sanctuary infused with the memory of Rabbi Chiel, who set such an example in so many ways, only one of which was for raising difficult issues in difficult times.

In that spirit, I want to address the grim and dangerous situation in which we find ourselves, some troubling truths that make that grim and dangerous situation even more grim and dangerous, and then, finally, some hopeful news, which is the opportunity we have, if we have the strength and the energy to seize it, to deal with where we find ourselves.

Every person here knows at some level what the situation is. Israel is under assault by a genuinely savage enterprise, Hamas, armed with some 12,000 rockets and a doctrinal determination to eliminate Israel altogether. It is an enterprise that has constructed an elaborate underground city of concrete tunnels packed with explosives and weapons for the purpose of infiltrating Israel and killing Israeli civilians.

It is an enterprise that is perfectly prepared, as we have painfully seen, to sacrifice pure innocents—Palestinian children—for the purpose of degrading yet further Israel's already shaky international legitimacy.

And when Israel, which has now endured some 14,000 rockets over the last 8 years and some 2500 over the last 3 weeks alone, has the temerity to attempt to stop the rocket fire that has left 80% of its civilians in fear, the international community has by and large abandoned it. Never mind that Israel has absolutely no choice but to defend itself. Never mind that there is not a country that has existed at any time, at any place, under circumstances even remotely comparable to hers, that has come close to exercising the restraint that it has exercised.

Massive anti-Israel rallies across Europe. Bombings of synagogues, assaults on Jews, and the unleashing of the worst anti-Semitic vitriol on the Internet, on streets, in cartoons, on sports fields that we have seen in our lifetimes. And with this grotesque toothpaste out of the tube, there is no chance it can be put back in.

The Israeli economy threatened by the cut-off of tourism, the costs of paying for this war of self-defense, the costs of calling up thousands of reservists, the need to defend itself now from violence on the West Bank, and a road map handed to its enemies—place Ben Gurion Airport at risk and you have the chance to bring Israel to its knees.

In the United States, we have seen large anti-Israel rallies all across the country, including here in Boston. The BDS movement aimed at delegitimizing and ultimately eliminating. Israel has gained fashion on campuses and elsewhere. A CNN poll released 48 hours ago reports that by a 2-1 margin Americans under the age of 30 believe that Israel is unjustified in trying to stop the rocket fire against it.

And I have not addressed the 50-100,000 Hezbollah rockets aimed at Israel from just across its border with Lebanon, let alone the spectre of an Iranian regime bent on obtaining nuclear weapons and implacably opposed to Israel's existence, whose leaders have threatened to bring about Israel's destruction.

That, in an incomplete nutshell, is the grim and dangerous situation that we find ourselves in.

Now, for the troubling truth which exacerbates that situation yet further.

We have become complacent. We have become smug. We have become calcified, and fatigued, and, for a people of immeasurable confidence in other respects, we have lost our confidence, lost our will to fight back, and lost our energy to do so.

And our lack of will, our lack of resolve, our lack of courage, our lack of the proper sense of urgency, is making matters worse.

Here I stop to tell three stories, all true, which I tell not for the purpose of being sardonic or unpleasant, but because they illustrate the kind of mentality that we need to overcome and overcome quickly.

In the summer of 2006, the Rabbi at our synagogue asked me if I wouldn't please join its "Israel Action Committee," so-called. That is what it was called—the "Israel Action Committee." The Rabbi had asked me to join this committee because it was, shall we say, ever so slightly on the inactive side.

Now this was July 2006, and you may recall that this was when 4,000 Hezbollah rockets were slamming into northern Israel. About a million Israeli civilians were either in bomb shelters or had moved south out of range of the Hezbollah rockets. If ever there were a time for Israel Action Committees to focus on the middle word of their title—"action"—that was it.

When I went to my first meeting as Hezbollah rockets were raining down on Israeli civilians, there were a total of 4 people, sitting on someone's porch. After some initial pleasantries, one of the Committee members offered her suggestion for what the Committee should be doing. "I think," she said, "that we should find some interesting monographs with some interesting discussion topics, and then discuss them."

I allowed as how I was led to understand that this was the "Israel Action Committee," and I thought that we could perhaps do even better than discuss some monographs. I said that I happened to love monographs as much as the next person, but that inasmuch as Israel was under siege, it seemed to me that we might take one of a number of different forms of action to support Israel, since we were the Israel Action Committee, not the Israel Coma Committee.

That was July 2006. It is now July 2014. Israel is in its third week of being under siege, and it is fair to say that, whether they are not they are reading monographs, neither synagogues nor individuals who care about Israel are reaching down into their resources, institutional and personal, in order to get out and make the case for Israel, a case which is a moral and a righteous one.

We are not a Giant Book Club, in which we confine ourselves to recommending books and articles to one another. “You read the Shavit book? I read the Shavit book. Have you seen this article. Here’s an interesting article.” We cannot simply be JSAOJ: Jews Sharing Articles With Other Jews.

Book and article reading is not the outer limit of what is needed of us right now. We need people to stand up and speak out, in every forum, in every venue that they can think of—in person, on social media, through emails and Facebook and Twitter and blogs and on every ball field, and every cocktail party, and every workplace coffee station. And we are not doing it.

I have had three United States Congressmen from Massachusetts tell me in recent years that they receive far more mail, far more visits, far more questions from those who are anti-Israel than they do from people who are pro-Israel. How have we permitted that to happen? What substance are we inhaling that has permitted us to grow so complacent, so somnolescent, so smug, while others are pressing their case with so much more energy and fervor?

Permit me to tell another story that occurred more recently, not to pick on anyone but to illustrate a painful point.

As some of you know, Jewish faculty and Jewish students are facing increased intimidation, ostracizing or worse on college campuses across the country. Faculty members have told me that candidates will not be hired if they express or have expressed pro-Israel views and if they are already part of the faculty, they face rejection at tenure-time if they have been supportive of Israel.

One tenured law professor at a prominent university in the Boston area told me that he wanted to speak to me about the intimidation of pro-Israel faculty that he and his colleagues faced, but asked if I could please call him at home that night, rather than at his office, because he felt that the walls in his office were too thin, and he might be overheard.

BDS, or boycott, divestment and sanctions, measures have attained the height of full political and social fashion at various campuses, and Jewish students and faculty have their backs against the wall. They need our help and they need it now.

Some of you may have heard about the resolution targeting Israel at the Modern Language Association, the largest academic organization to consider a BDS resolution. It was approved by the leadership by a narrow 60-53 margin after those opposing it were prevented from participating in a panel on it, and were forced to have their own program opposing the measure off-site and were impeded from passing out fact sheets opposing it.

And after it narrowly passed its Leadership Council, it went to the full membership for an online vote that took place over a 6 week period.

This was a very big deal. It was an important battle. If it passed it would generate headlines all over the world. It mattered, a very great deal.

I called up a Professor of Jewish Studies at a prominent university, a member of the MLA whom I knew to be personally opposed to the resolution, and I asked her to simply write in

opposition to it, or post something on her Facebook account urging colleagues of hers to vote against it, or to otherwise contact colleagues to urge them to oppose it.

You know what she said? She replied “I’m not prepared to say anything on the public record about this. There is no upside in my doing so.”

If we do not have ordinary people, let alone leaders, let alone people who teach students, with the courage to speak up publicly in support of Israel, because they are afraid of how it will look, or they are afraid of criticism, then we are in big, big trouble. If we are incapable of summoning up the courage to defend Israel publicly, then we are going to lose this battle. It is, unfortunately, as simple as that.

A few days ago I spoke to a Jewish friend of mine, who is an elected official. I know he cares about Israel, and even has a sister in Israel. He told me that his son was scheduled to go on Birthright in August. I said that with any luck things would be over by then. He replied with what no doubt is the kind of thing he says whenever the issue of Israel comes up in fashionable company. He said “From your mouth to Netanyahu’s ears.”

I said “How is this Netanyahu’s fault?” I said “You say this because you feel comfortable blaming Israel for what is going on, rather than placing the blame where it lies.”

He said that he knew that, of course, and he had a sister who lived in Israel who was afraid to come out of her house, but that, after all, and I quote “she was a fraidy cat.” I said “Fraidy cat?” I said that I bet it had been some time since his street had been rocketed by people trying to kill its inhabitants. I said that I knew in my case it had been more than a few weeks since rockets had landed on my street.

He did not seem to get the irony, or he chose to ignore it. For him, defending Israel is unfashionable, and so he does not do it. I said that he really needed to get on his Facebook and Twitter and defend Israel if, as he said he did, he understood its situation. He said that he did not do that, that he had staff that posted on his accounts. I allowed as how I imagined that in 20 seconds or so he could walk to the other side of his office and ask his staff to post things on his account. He said that he imagined so.

I don’t expect that any of this is terribly surprising to you. You no doubt see and hear variants of this every day.

Ladies and gentlemen: there is no guarantee that Israel is going to exist in 10 years, let alone 30 or 50, if we remain complacent and inactive. It isn’t a matter of praying for Israel. It is a matter of getting off our individual and collective derrieres and defending her, in every way and with all of the resources at our disposal.

The good news, which I promised I would end with, is that we have the ability to make a big difference.

Anyone here who does not have access to a computer? All the rest of us can go back home and every day reach thousands, or even tens of thousands, of people by commenting on a website,

by posting articles or pictures on Facebook, by emailing stuff about Israel to friends, especially non-Jewish friends.

Studies show that when non-Jews hear from their Jewish friends about Israel it makes a big difference to them. So you know what? Stop being silent. Talk about your trips to Israel, your friends and family there, what it means to you, your pride in it. Talk about an article, a student, an invention, an encounter—when you are on soccer fields or at PTA meetings or at work or at a reception, or anyplace else. It makes a difference.

Israel has been taking an economic pounding. Her people need our financial support. Her people need our emotional support. You may not have thought about going to Israel over the next few months. I hope you think about it. I hope you find a way to do it, and to take people with you. I hope that when you get there you hire a driver and go south—to these brave communities filled with brave people in Sderot and Ashkelon and Ashdod and elsewhere, and embrace them, and shop there, and help them recover.

We have been blessed with success. Let me tell you: this is a time to be as generous as you can be, so that communities and families can rebuild. I am not a pitch-man—I am barely a lawyer—but organizations like the CJP Israel in Crisis fund, and the Jewish National Fund, and the Friends of the Defense Forces, which supports these brave boys and girls who defend all of us, do magnificent work, and they need our help. Right now.

Organizations that defend Israel here in America, the last and most important battleground, organizations like AIPAC and the David Project, organizations that bring people to Israel so that they can see for themselves the difference between fact and fiction, like the American Jewish Committee and the ADL. They need your support.

This synagogue almost certainly has funds set up to help. Support those funds, now, and generously.

Above all, get out and speak—privately, publicly. Press others to speak. This is no time to be silent.

The bad news is that this is a historic time, and not in a good way. There is an assault going on, and if we do not defeat it, no one else will.

The good news is that each of you, each of us, has the ability to directly contribute to that effort, with our time, with our energy, and with our resources. But we simply cannot delay.

Thank you for permitting me to speak.

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