

Our son, Nathan is currently spending the semester in Israel. If it had been up to me, he probably would not be there. It's not that I did not want him to go. It is just that two years ago I would never have thought he was all that interested in Judaism. It started when he came home and asked if we knew about a program called *Meitav*. "Sure," I said. "How come you never told me about it?" I was a bit surprised, and answered, "I guess I never thought you would be interested." "Well," he shot back, "my rabbi thought I would be." Ouch. Lucky for Nate his rabbi – my friend and colleague, Rabbi Edelman – saw something in him I failed to notice. "So," I said, "why don't you ask your rabbi to recommend you?"

It was not easy saying goodbye to him a few weeks ago, knowing we will not see him until January. The parting was doubly hard because there were plenty of people who, given the current political situation, felt Anne and I were misguided, at best, if not *mishuga* to send him. Hearing the excitement in Nate's voice about what he is learning and doing, however, I know Nate is doing exactly what he should. What, when he returns, will be his vision of Israel? Will he come back loving the land and its people? Will he be even more confused about the challenges modern Israel faces?

Our family lived in Israel a little over six years ago – in the halcyon days before the *intifada* or 9/11, before the rise of Hamas to power and the war with Hezbollah. Back then I thought that peace between Jews and Palestinians was around the corner. Two incidents during that time should have hinted, however, that there remained a chasm between our peoples.

The first took place at Jerusalem's Zion Gate. The sounds of church bells from nearby Mt. Zion mingled with the haunting cry of the *muzzein*, calling Muslims within ear-shot to one of the five daily prayers. A nearby guide pointed out the pock-marked walls of the Old City. "These are the holes from bullets fired during Israel's War of Independence in 1948," he explained. During that war the Jews in the Jewish Quarter were forced to leave. In the ensuing 19 years, with Jordan in control, synagogues were used as horse stables, Jews were forbidden entrance into the Old City and could only gaze upon Jerusalem's walls from afar. In contrast to what took place before the Six Day War, after 1967 Israel allowed the Arab inhabitants of Jerusalem to stay. Israel relinquished

control over the Temple Mount to a Muslim administrative council, called the *Wakf*. Jews, our guide explained, gave Arabs free access to the city.

Only a few moments later I saw an Israeli soldier stop an older man dressed in traditional Palestinian garb. The man was flustered, unable to find his identity papers. I, a visitor, strolled easily through the gate, yet one who I assumed lived there, had to prove who he was in order to walk freely from place to place. It was not a big issue, but that – perhaps – is the point. It is the hassle of the many “little things” that irritate Palestinians – suspicion just because they are different, watching Israelis whiz through security check points while they wait in long lines, difficulties getting permission for any building approval (even expansion of their own homes). I did (and do) understand Israel’s legitimate need for security, but seeing this man brought home his reality – and the moment was a tiny window into how small annoyances can grow into a larger rage.

My empathy with this man – and Palestinian suffering – was tempered by something that happened not long after. I went with Rabbi Arik Ascherman, head of Rabbis for Human Rights, to meet the director of the Palestine Land Committee, a group working through Israel’s courts to limit confiscation of Palestinian land. As we spoke I glanced at the wall behind the director’s head. I was flabbergasted. There was a map of Israel ... or, more properly in his context, Palestine. I could not read the Arabic, but the map was unambiguous. Palestine encompassed the whole of the land of Israel, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. “If even here – with the people I see as my allies,” I wrote to friends that night, “there is no possibility of compromise – if their ultimate goal is the whole Land of Israel – can there be any hope for peace?”

Two millennia ago Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel taught, “The world stands on three things: On truth, on justice and on peace.” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:18) He understood that peace alone is not enough. For peace to truly exist it must be part of a larger constellation of values. What then is the truth about Israel? Given the complex realities of this struggle, can there be any shared sense of justice? And are we willing to venture hope for peace – or do we despair of it ever making an appearance?

Truth

According to Jewish legend, the mountain on which the Temple in Jerusalem was built – the very spot where the golden Dome of the Rock stands today – was the place where Abraham was prepared to offer up his son Isaac. The name of that mount – *Moriah* – is a play on the Hebrew word meaning “to see.”

What is it that Abraham sees? And what does God hope he will discern from the encounter? While there are many interpretations of the story, the basic message is plain *al tishlach et yadecha el ha'naar*– “do not send forth your hand against the lad.” At the foundation of this story is the lesson that God’s truest desire is that we not sacrifice our children on the altar of our aspirations or faith.

Think about something you are passionate about. Do you not want your children or grandchildren to share that love? Every one of us offers up our children to our dreams, asking them to give up something – time or their own interests – for something we see as a greater good. Jewish faith does not, however, cross the line of knowingly putting our children in harm’s way – even for our most deeply held beliefs. Abraham is taught – as are all who descend from him – that no faith, no doctrine, no land – is more precious than the truest link to our future, the “flesh of our flesh and the bone of our bones.”

How different have been the means used by Israel’s enemies. In Beit Hanun in Gaza, Ribhi Hussein, the father of little Osama, was recently interviewed by a reporter from Australia. His words were uttered calmly, but bring a chill to the soul. “You see this one-year-old? He will grow up to a bomber in Tel Aviv,” he vowed. “He is my boy, but he is not as priceless as Jerusalem.”¹ His willing sacrifice is reflected in the theology espoused by the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah. When Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, smilingly calls for the annihilation of the “Zionist enterprise”, it is cold comfort that at least now we have enemy who speaks so candidly. When he says he wants to kill us, we know the truth. He means it. But no less troubling than his desire to take our lives is his willingness to offer up the lives of his own people. In a speech given this past May Nassralah claimed that one of the Jewish people’s great weaknesses is that they are a “people who guard their lives most.” He continued: “In contrast, our people and

¹ Paul McGeough “Palestinians On The Verge of Civil War”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (September 6, 2006)

our nation's willingness to sacrifice their blood, souls, children ... and families for the sake of the nation's honor, life and happiness has always been one of our nation's strengths.”²

With amazing foresight, Golda Meir, former Prime Minister of Israel once declared, “we will have peace when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us.” That day has yet to dawn.

My friends, I agree with the Jew-hater Nasrallah on one point – we Jews do love life. The truth is – this is our strength. We should be proud of an Israeli army that struggled mightily this summer to avoid civilian casualties. What other nation at war warns those who either harbor or are living close by its enemies that they should leave? Were the Israeli citizens who were not only indiscriminately killed – but who were targeted to maximize the terror amongst the population – given the same option? The truth is that Hezbollah fought by not only targeting Israeli civilians, but using Lebanese civilians as shields. The Israeli army made mistakes, but it endeavored to limit collateral injuries. Critics of Israel point to the numbers of those killed and injured and say, “You see, Israel is the oppressor. Look how many more in Lebanon were hurt.” Many see a kind of moral equivalency in the struggle, if not a greater evil perpetrated by Israel. “Yes, Hamas and Hezbollah resort to violence,” Israel’s detractors say, “but look at the ‘disproportionate’ response of Israel.” This reasoning is repulsive. It is a lazy morality, at best, and, at worst, is anti-Semitism clothed in moral language.

A final point about the truth is that we must recognize how the media is manipulated in this conflict. Israel is remarkably open to journalists – even those who are vitriolic in their attacks against the Jewish State. There is substantial evidence to show that Hezbollah, by contrast, intimidated and manipulated journalists covering the war. Anderson Cooper of CNN admitted in one report that Hezbollah “only allowed us to videotape certain streets, certain buildings.” He went on, “This is a heavily orchestrated Hezbollah media event.” The issue is not fair or honest reporting, therefore, but using the media as a means of propaganda.

Here, then, is the truth. Israel did not resort to disproportionate strength. We do love life – not only our own, but even those manipulated by our enemies. There is no moral equivalency in the fight between Israel and her neighbors because Israel responds

² http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=7&x_issue=11&x_article=1158

to violence, and only rarely acts pre-emptively. With regard to all the lies bandied about as truth, therefore, it is time for us to rise up and say – *dayenu*, enough of falsehood, enough of deception.

Justice

According to Jewish legend, the sixteenth century Rabbi Judah Loew is said to have created the *golem*, a being made from clay. The *golem* was made to protect the Jews of Prague. Once the *golem* began to wreak vengeance on those who were persecuting the Jews, however, it began to do more harm than good and Rabbi Loew was forced to return the figure to the dust.

In the weeks since the ceasefire took hold we have heard much about the internal debate within Israel. Government and army inquiries have already started. People are second-guessing the actions taken. Was the army unprepared? Did Prime Minister Olmert raise expectations too high? Did the *golem* of war unleashed in July lead to an Israel even weaker by August? The debate still rages, but I believe that a just appraisal of the conflict shows that Hezbollah has not – despite its claims – gained a victory.

Many worry about the debate within Israel that took place almost as soon as the war was over. Yet this is a sign of Israel's strength. More than this, Israel's democracy is strong and vibrant. While heads may roll and the government may be weaker temporarily – this debate about the conduct of the war will likely lead to a stronger Israel Defense Force. In addition, despite the debate about how the war was fought, the war showed that in time of crisis the nation is united – and supported by Jews in the Diaspora. Why did we hear so little about the nearly one million Israeli refugees? Because they were taken in by family and strangers, they were given shelter in *kibbutzim* in the South and in tent cities built to accommodate them. Israel took care of its own.

A year ago a dear friend, Rabbi Shelley Donnell, left his congregation in California to make *aliyah* (to move) to Israel. In the days after the war he reflected that we are strong, indeed, as a people.

Israel will not go away. We have the means and the determination to defend ourselves at all costs. Our enemies' misread this past war when they call us weak. Unlike any war since 1948, the home front was tried and tested and - by all accounts - we did not succumb to the rockets and the katyushas raining down on our cities and towns. Our brave citizenry

displayed heroism equal to our soldiers on the front lines. How can such a people be defeated?

Despite public acclamations of victory, the jury is still out on what real justice was achieved for Islam or Lebanon or the Palestinian cause by the rash acts of Hezbollah. For the near term, Hezbollah's military capabilities have been greatly diminished. Though the Arab street turned against Israel (so what else is new!), a number of Arab nations – among them Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – expressed pique with Hezbollah's actions. A survey in Israel taken a few weeks ago shows that only a small percentage of the Arab population of Israel (less than 20%) supported what Hezbollah's actions.³

There are reasons to remain wary. Any assessment of the Middle East should give even the most optimistic amongst us sober pause. A year and a half ago I heard David Horowitz, the editor of *The Jerusalem Post* (who will be here for a weekend in March as a scholar-in-residence) offer a brilliant analysis of the current situation in Israel. When asked what he thought lay ahead, he offered a wise caution. "Don't believe any predictions," he said. "With Israel and the Middle East there are just too many variables. No one knows, no one."

Since the road ahead is uncertain, the brave-hearted no less than those who are fearful ought to be prepared for anything. Ever before us, however, must be justice. Along with seeking truth, then, as Jews we must demand that all who live there have the same liberties and freedoms. We demand that Jewish children live without fear of violence, even as we seek the same for Palestinian and Lebanese children.

Peace

At first glance, Sarah's demand that Abraham banish her handmaid and her son, Ishmael, seems callous. On deeper reflection Sarah may have had deep insight. The name of Sarah's maidservant is Hagar. Vocalized differently Hagar, in Hebrew, is *ha-ger* (the "foreigner"). She is the classic stranger in our midst. Even more powerfully, one of the few things we know about Hagar is that she is an Egyptian. Just as her name has a *double entendre*, so does the Hebrew term for "Egyptian" – *Mitzri*. Those who know a bit of Yiddish may know that *tsooris* means "trouble" or "sorrow." It comes from the Hebrew *tzarah*, of the same meaning and is derived from being in a tight place,

³ <http://www.nif.org/content.cfm?id=2749&currBody=1>

constrained from making a decent choice. Since the Nile River created a narrow valley where the inhabitants of Egypt could live, the land was called “the narrows” (*Mitzrayim*). For the people of Israel, of course, the description of Egypt as a narrow place was more than physical; it was a reminder of those who restrained their lives through slavery. At first read Hagar seems an innocent victim, but Sarah may have recognized the other side to this stranger, epitome of those who would embitter our lives. In fact, Torah hints to the dangerous quality of Hagar’s son, Ishmael, as the angel announcing his birth predicts that “his hand [will be] against every one and every one’s hand against him.” (Genesis 16:12) Ishmael is – as we fear his descendents too often are – a man of battle, ever at war. Perhaps, then, Sarah understands that in the face of such a threat, the best one can hope for is to distance oneself from such people. From the outset, then, the descendents of Ishmael and the children of Isaac have been bound together – though often in conflict.

After the collapse of the peace process in 2000, and in the face of suicide bombings and the *intifada*, Israelis abandoned the hope of an easy peace with the Palestinians. The dominant mood these past six years is that Israelis will be safe only by living apart. Hence, the retreat from Lebanon, the security barrier that continues to be built, last summer’s disengagement from Gaza and the hints given (even as late as mid-July) that Israel would unilaterally withdraw from most of the West Bank. The irony is that this summer’s wars demonstrated the fallacy of thinking that Israelis were safe now that the separation was moving apace.

If being together does not work ... and being apart does not work, is there any way forward? Are Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians doomed to forever be so “the other” that we can never find a meeting ground?

Perhaps, though Torah suggests there is a glimmer of hope. Ishmael and Isaac, separated after Hagar was banished from Abraham’s camp, do come back together – at the funeral of their father (a sign, according the Talmud, that Ishmael is not irredeemable). It is sad, indeed, that only at such a moment they can reunite, but is it not ever thus? Does not one generation have to pass before a new one can come to be? They reunite – linked by destiny and blood – but they remain apart. It is a limited, but sustainable, peace, but it is better than animus and hate. Only with such realism *and* hope can we move towards any resolution that might be called “peace.”

What kind of realism? Admiral Jim Stockdale, the highest-ranking U.S. military officer, who was held as a prisoner of war in Hanoi during the Vietnam War, suggested a way when he spoke about what he endured during eight years of captivity. “Who didn’t make it out,” he was asked. “Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists. They were the ones who said: We’re going to be out by Christmas. And Christmas would come and Christmas would go and then they would say: We’re going to be out by Easter. And Easter would come and Easter would go. And then they would say: Thanksgiving. And then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

And then he said: “This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end - which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

But as Jews we live with an equal amount of hope. And what does that hope look like? I offer the tale of Diana Bletter, who moved from New York close to the Lebanese border in 1991. It was during the time of the Oslo Peace Accords, and she figured her then small children would no longer have to worry about war. This summer, however, one of her sons – now grown – fought in Lebanon. When she said good-bye to him “the story of Isaac’s possible sacrifice spoke to me in a new and profound way. I came to understand that, like Abraham, I needed to turn the four-letter word, fear, into the five-letter word, faith. I had to believe even though there was no reason to believe.” After her son was wounded, a Muslim friend came to visit, but was worried that the family might not want her to be there. Diana and her family welcomed her in, however, for they had been friends since they arrived 15 years earlier. Diana finishes her reflection saying the war has not made her hate Arabs, only become more committed to work for peace.⁴

I have no idea who Diana Bletter is, but if peace does come it will be because of people like her – not hopeless idealists, but men and women who are willing – like the people of Israel always have – to move from fear to faith, the embodiment of what is expressed in the anthem of this Third Jewish Commonwealth, *Hatikva*. “Our hope is not lost – to return to the land of our ancestors ... our hope is not lost.” Soon and speedily.

⁴ http://www.beliefnet.com/story/199/story_19922_1.html