

What I Learned On My Summer Vacation
A Sermon About Israel
For First Day Rosh Hashanah
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Shanah Tovah.

This summer 30 of us had a wonderful time traveling the length and breadth of the Holy Land on our Beth Shalom Mission to Israel. It was an interesting time to be there. Before we arrived, Israel was very divided politically and religiously. That changed with the abduction of three Israeli teens. They could have been anyone's children. The whole country united in worry and then mourning.

Then the unimaginable happened. Six young Israelis abducted and brutally killed a Palestinian teenager. Again the nation united, this time in condemnation. Though still sitting shiva for her own murdered son, Rachel Fraenkel condemned the murder and called the teen's bereaved parents to express her condolences.

But the damage was already done. Israeli Arabs and Bedouin, many of whom serve in the Israeli Army, began rioting. Of course we canceled our own planned meeting with Bedouin civil rights activists in Beer Sheva.

Then the Hamas rocket attacks began. First they struck Israeli border towns: Sederot, Ashdod, Ashkelon, towns that regularly suffer attacks ever since Israel withdrew from Gaza and Hamas overthrew the Palestinian Authority there. Then the rockets began hitting Beer Sheva. We knew rockets could reach Tel Aviv so I diverted our trip to Jerusalem, which previously had been safe from Hamas rockets.

But Hamas has been smuggling in longer range rockets for years. That's why Israel blockaded Gaza and insists on inspecting every ship headed for its port. Even with these efforts, Hamas is reported to have stockpiled 10,000 rockets.

This summer they launched 4,000 of them. We were there for some of them.

We just had sat down for dinner in a lovely garden restaurant in Jerusalem when we heard the red alert. Rockets from Gaza were on their way. The staff calmly directed us to the safe room, a gallery containing an exhibit of Jewish life in Yemen. We looked at the photos and joked to cover our nervousness. All the missiles were intercepted by Iron Dome and we returned to our dinner.

Thank God for Iron Dome, the missile defense system created in Israel and funded largely by the United States. Iron Dome is so sophisticated it can determine precisely where a rocket is heading. Because Iron Dome resources are limited, enemy rockets are only shot down if headed towards a populated area, as was the rocket heading towards us.

The next day, a few of us got to actually witness Iron Dome in action.

After I saw most of our group safely off at Ben Gurion Airport for their return flight home, several of us remained in Israel to visit family. Some of us stayed in Tel Aviv. I was in the water with another congregant when the red alert again went off. We did not have time to reach a shelter, so the lifeguards gathered us under a cement overhang where surfboards were stored.

I had looked at my watch as we ran for cover. It took only 38 seconds before we saw two white plumes of smoke: incoming rockets. As we watched, we saw two more columns of smoke rise on an intercept course. A bloom of smoke exploded with a soft puff as the Iron Dome missiles found their marks.

Can you imagine the casualties if even one Hamas rocket got through to a populated area? But somehow, they didn't.

Those of you who followed us on Facebook know we had many other red alert moments throughout the rest of our post Mission stay. For all that I am glad I was there. I will tell you why.

When I was little, on the first day back to school, my teacher always assigned an essay on the subject, "What I Learned On Summer Vacation." If I had to write that essay today, this is what I would write:

The first thing I learned on my summer vacation in Israel is that miracles still happen.

Iron Dome is a miracle of Israeli ingenuity, of course. But God's hand is still sometimes needed. How else to explain that even though Iron Dome is supposed to be only 90% effective, not one rocket got through to a populated area?

Listen to this story attributed to an unnamed Iron Dome battery commander. Perhaps it is internet nonsense. Perhaps not: "A missile was fired from Gaza... This particular missile was going to hit either the Azrieli Towers, the Kirya (Israel's equivalent of the Pentagon) or [a central Tel Aviv railway station]. Hundreds could have died. We fired the first [interceptor]. It missed. Second [interceptor]. It missed. This is very rare.... At this point we had just four seconds until the missile lands. We had already notified emergency services...and had warned of a mass-casualty incident. Suddenly, Iron Dome shows a major wind coming from the east, a strong wind that...sends the missile into the sea. We were all stunned. I stood up and shouted, 'There is a God!' I witnessed this miracle with my own eyes. It was not told or reported to me. I saw the hand of God send that missile into the sea."

In the same article, Col. Ofer Winter, commander of the Givati Infantry Brigade, describes a mysterious fog that favorably covered him and his troops as they advanced on an enemy position in morning light, after their nighttime raid was postponed. Soldiers would have probably been killed and injured without that cover. Col. Winter labeled the covering as "clouds of glory,"ⁱ a reference to God's Presence that protected the Israelites in the wilderness.

Even miracles don't come without cost. Israel suffered 70 casualties, 64 soldiers and six civilians who were killed by short range mortars that Iron Dome cannot reach.ⁱⁱ We have some congregants in the Israeli Army. The son of one of our members served on the Gaza border throughout the war and lost some of his comrades in the fighting. As tragic as these losses are, they are a fraction of what our losses could have been.

It is said God works in mysterious ways. Israel did not want this war. But no government can allow its own people to be besieged day in and day out by rocket fire from across its border and do nothing to protect them. Analysts believe that if not for the rocket attacks, Israel would never have gone into Gaza and may never have discovered the extent of the Hamas tunnels or Hamas' plan for them: to send terrorists into six Jewish communities on Rosh Hashanah to kill and kidnap as many Israeli men, women and children as possible. The slaughter could have been

happening right now as we sit here in this sanctuary. The Israeli newspaper *Maariv* quoted security sources as saying the “unplanned war with Hamas prevented a disaster on the order of the Yom Kippur War.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Coincidence? Or Miracle?

The second thing I learned this summer was that Israelis are tremendously resilient. They will not let terror disrupt their lives. Every home and public building has a bomb shelter or safe room. There’s a Red Alert App to announce incoming rockets. When asked why there are so few Israeli civilian casualties, one Israeli quipped, “We know how to run to bomb shelters.”

Nevertheless, the attacks took their toll.

Hamas rockets can now reach almost every corner of Israel. CNN and other news sources don’t show what it is like for Israelis trying to live their lives when a red alert could sound any minute forcing them to run for shelter. The trauma kids undergo day in and day out, especially those living in the south, is unimaginable. Perhaps you saw the *You Tube* of the preschoolers singing the “Boom” song during a red alert to help them cope while moving to shelter.

We quickly learned the routine: each night we put our shoes next to the bed and set up a bag with medications, water, snacks. We slept lightly. David’s cousin worried whether her elderly mother and daughter with two little kids could get to the basement shelter if the alert sounds when she is not home.

Despite all this, Israelis refused to cower. They stay calm and carry on. They try to live as normal a life as possible under abnormal conditions. They continue to go to work. The Education Ministry opened school on schedule. Israelis who were not mobilized help fill in for those who were. And they continued to care. Not just for each other, but even for Palestinians.

That is third thing I learned this summer: We have reason to be proud of Israel.

We all have seen the news: Thousands of Palestinian dead. Thousands more wounded or homeless. How can you not have *rahmanus*, compassion, for the suffering of the Palestinian people? We, more than any other people, understand suffering.

What we don’t see in the news reports is how Hamas intentionally plants its rocket launchers and missiles stockpiles in schools, hospitals, and apartment buildings. We don’t hear how, when a launcher or stockpile is discovered, the Israel Defense Force warns civilians to leave the area before they fire. First they leaflet. Then they robocall everyone’s cell phones. What other army intentionally telegraphs its movements to the enemy for the sole purpose of limiting civilian casualties?

The same care is taken during ground offenses. This summer we shared Shabbat dinner with some Lone Soldiers, young immigrants with no family in Israel. They shared their concern that they have to take what otherwise would be unnecessary risks on a mission in order to minimize civilian casualties. I am proud of these young men but also of their officers who hold ethics as the most important part of their operational objective.

It is easy to blame Israel for Palestinian casualties. That is precisely what Hamas wants.

This morning's Torah reading recounts the escalating tensions between our matriarch Sarah and her handmaid Hagar. We know the story: Hagar has a rough deal. She is a slave, forced to leave her home in Egypt as Sarah's property. Sarah offers her a better life as concubine to Abraham and surrogate mother for Sarah. But something goes wrong. When Hagar becomes pregnant she belittles barren Sarah and tries to take her place. God and Ancient Middle Eastern law are on Sarah's side as main wife, so Hagar is put back in her place. Hagar runs away but God tells her to return to her mistress. Instead of reconciliation, though, Hagar hates Sarah and teaches her son, Ishmael, to hate Sarah's son, Isaac.

Our text says Sarah happens to see Ishmael "sporting" with Isaac. The Hebrew implies a form of abuse. One rabbinic tradition explains that Ishmael was shooting arrows at Isaac for sport. In other words, Ishmael was threatening Isaac's life. No wonder Sarah insists he and his mother finally be sent away. God concurs. Could Sarah have treated Hagar better? Probably. Does that justify Ishmael trying to kill Isaac? Not at all.

As my friend R Michael Gold says, "Sometimes hatred does not go away." That can be true no matter what we do or how hard we try to play nicely and find a way to share.

Don't get me wrong. Not all Muslims are our enemies. Just the opposite. There are many moderate Muslims just as concerned as we are about the spread of radical Islam. Internationally, there is a shift going on with more Muslim nations willing to work officially and unofficially with Israel to combat the threat posed by radical Islamists. Here in Howard County, we continue to work closely with our Muslim interfaith partners, building understanding and working for peace.

But Hamas, ISIS, al-Qaeda and their ilk are different. Their hatred for Israel is not going away regardless of how nicely we treat them or how many concessions we make.

Their goal is not a two state solution with a secure, viable and dignified State of Palestine living in peace alongside the Jewish State of Israel. Their goal is the destruction of Israel and of anyone who does not share their religious fundamentalism. They know they cannot achieve that militarily so they try to do so politically by delegitimizing Israel. Their main tool is not rockets. The rockets are just props. Their main tool is the sound bite and graphic image. When Israel asks people to evacuate targeted areas, Hamas warns them not to leave. Hamas wants casualties because they play well on TV. The dead and wounded are just more martyrs to their cause.

How do you deal with an enemy who hates you more than it loves its own people?

This is how Israel deals with it: They do what they can to mitigate the suffering of the defenseless. In addition to warning civilians to evacuate, Israel has continued to supply electricity, water, and humanitarian supplies to Gaza. Average Israelis have collected and sent diapers, baby wipes, and other supplies to the people of Gaza.^{iv} Israel is not perfect. No nation is. But the lengths to which Israel goes to protect civilians is unprecedented, even if unappreciated on the world stage. I am proud of those efforts, just as I am proud Israel accepted every ceasefire offered, though Hamas broke every one.

We have many reasons to be proud of Israel. It's vibrant democracy, free press; civil rights for women, gays, and minorities; its ingenuity and innovation in IT, medicine, energy, and water conservation that can help solve some of the world's most pressing problems; its willingness to be the first to help anywhere disaster strikes.

But I am most proud of this: even under fire, Israeli's retain their sense of compassion for the enemy. That compassion is part of what makes Israel a Jewish State. We are reminded every Passover, when we remove a drop of wine from our glasses for each of the plagues, not to rejoice

over the suffering of our enemies. Israel goes beyond that in trying to mitigate such suffering even in the midst of war. That is worthy of our pride.

The fourth thing I learned this summer is that Israel needs us.

The great sage Hillel taught, “If I am only for myself, who will be; if I am only for myself, what am I, if not now, when.” Anti-Semitism is rising across Europe, leading thousands of French, Norwegian and other European Jews to make aliyah even during the Gaza War. What if Israel were not there for them?

Israel counts on American support. Iron Dome is just one small example. Today Congress, the President and the majority of Americans support Israel. But rampant anti-Israel bias on college campuses is shaping the next generation of voters and policy makers. Main line Protestant Churches have already divested from Israel.^v What if Israel ever lost American support?

Israel needs us to be more passionate in our support of Israel than anti-Israel groups are passionate about destroying Israel. Israel needs us to educate ourselves about the issues and share what we know with our neighbors, our co-workers, and especially our children. Israel needs us to give what we can, show up when we can, and advocate for Israel however we can.

That doesn't mean we have to agree with everything Israel does. It does mean Israel counts on us to stand up for Israel's right to exist as a Jewish State and do everything in our power to support its success.

This is what I learned on my summer vacation in Israel: There are still miracles. Israelis are incredibly resilient and do much to make us proud. And they need us now more than ever.

We live in uncertain times. We have intractable enemies who seek not just to destroy Israel but to reshape the world in their image. It is in times like this that the Jewish People have held onto the hope that however dark the times or difficult the challenges we face, better days will come as long as we remain faithful to God and our traditions, stand by each other, and stand up for the values that distinguish us as a light unto the nations. That is why the founders of Israel chose *Hatikvah*, “The Hope,” as Israel's national anthem. Please rise and sing it with me. The words were placed on your chairs.

*Kol ode balevav P'nimah -
Nefesh Yehudi homiyah
Ulfa'atey mizrach kadimah
Ayin l'tzion tzofiyah.
Ode lo avdah tikvatenu
Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim:
L'hiyot am chofshi b'artzenu -
Eretz Tzion v'Yerushalayim.*

May God continue to protect Israel and our People and may we do all *we* can to make the hope come true the we will someday soon enjoy a secure and lasting peace for Israel and the entire world. And let us say, Amen

ⁱ "Iron Dome Operator: God Moved Missile We Couldn't Hit," *Israel Today* (Aug. 3, 2104),

<http://www.israeltoday.co.il/Default.aspx?tabid=178&nid=24811>. The original story in Hebrew: Israel Skolnick, סג: עני הרמה של הטיל לעבר שכונת מגדלי עזריאלי • מדהים July 29, 2014, <http://www.kooker.co.il/>

ⁱⁱ Agency France Press, <http://www.businessinsider.com/50-days-of-war-in-gaza-may-cost-israel-dearly-2014-8>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.jta.org/2014/07/28/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/report-amas-planned-rosh-hashanah-attack-through-gaza-tunnels>.

^{iv} E.g., Michele Chabin, "Gazans found aid-worthy, but not Hamas," *USA Today* Tues, Aug 12, 2014, 7A.

^v Ari Yashar, "Largest US Protestant Church Votes Again on BDS " *Arutz Sheva*, Israel National News.com 6/17/2014; <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/181840#.VBDttPldW8M>; Laurie Goodstein, "Presbyterians Vote to Divest Holdings to Pressure Israel" *The New York Times*, June 20, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/us/presbyterians-debating-israeli-occupation-vote-to-divest-holdings.html?_r=0.