

B'midbar 5781
In the Wilderness
Rabbi Betsy Forester

Our *parashah* opens the Book of B'midbar and the narratives of our ancestors' desert wanderings, thus: Take a census: Count the males, aged 20 and up. The *parashah* speaks in military language even when describing the civilian quarters, describing exactly how the entire nation camps by division, each under its flag, and how they march, by their standards, in position, and troop by troop.

In the part of the world we now call the Middle East, groups of people have counted heads over and over again, numbering forces for military and tax purposes and counting the dead, in an endless attempt to define where one family ends and another begins and to link facts on the ground to beliefs about sacred destinies and national aspirations.

The week just past was terrifying in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. On Wednesday, I watched a live broadcast and saw with my own eyes the interception of 4 Hamas rockets over a Tel Aviv neighborhood by the Iron Dome. And then another, that hit. Today, I hope to open a space to hold our concerns and hopes at this difficult time. I affirm that our kahal makes room for a range of perspectives and beliefs. There is much to say and even more to ask at a time like this. We will have more conversations after today. I am sure that there is much we can learn from each other.

I will spare you the task of teasing out about my own position. Here it is: I have two homelands: Israel and the United States. Both are incredibly beautiful and founded on principles I hold dear. Both, I believe, perpetuate systems of inequality in deeply destructive ways and with heartbreaking results. I am not an expert on Israel, but I have lived there briefly, twice, visited many times, and studied her history. I will always be in relationship with Israel. I have significant personal ties to the people and to the land itself. I will always want to support and defend Israel as our Jewish homeland and a force for Jewish safety in the world, and I suspect that I will be quite troubled and guardedly activist in speaking out about her moral and spiritual failures well into the future, even as I praise her outstanding achievements. To me, killing civilians is a moral outrage and a war crime that can never be justified. A sovereign state must defend its citizens, and I am glad that Israel is capable of doing that--especially as the mother of an Israeli citizen who has spent much of the past week in bomb shelters. I hope that gives you a sense of where I'm coming from.

In case you've missed it, here are the main points of what's happening over there:

Hundreds of rockets have been fired into the heart of Israel by Hamas, in acts of pure terror aimed at civilians in their homes, schools, and businesses. These rockets are more dangerous than those regularly lobbed into the area closest to Gaza. These rockets are terrifying. Israel is responding to the onslaught with strikes against the Palestinians, with casualties at least six times larger than Israeli casualties. Predictably, Israeli strikes have been met by international calls for a "proportional response to terror." Along with our horror at the loss of life, we should also bear in mind that while the Iron Dome prevents untold loss of life and destruction of property in Israel, it creates disproportionality of casualties. The Dome is 90% effective. Outside of the obvious deterrent to Palestinian casualties--don't shoot rockets into Israel--there is no Dome in Gaza or the West Bank. They also lack the civilian infrastructure of shelters and air raid sirens that Israel has put in place to prevent loss of life. And, Hamas places its military apparatus among civilians. Palestinian casualties will be much higher because of those factors alone.

My daughter, who lives outside of Netanya, has been running to the bomb shelter in the middle of the night this week. So has Hilda Fine, our Talmud Torah teacher, who wrote to Beth Copelovitz from her Ashkelon home on Tuesday: "There have been at least 270 rockets fired at Ashkelon alone. The house that was destroyed is two houses away from Ilana (her daughter). We run to the shelter constantly. The difficulty is that at the start of the siren one has 20 seconds to get downstairs. I am getting a lot of exercise!

Why is this happening?

What sparked this conflict is multi-faceted and nebulous, because it's a flash point. As former Israel Ambassador Dr. Michael Oren said in a briefing, "there cannot be a 7-second sound bite." But there was a "perfect storm." The year, Ramadan fell on the eve of Yom Yerushalayim, the day that celebrates the "reunification" of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War when Israeli forces retook the Temple Mount. The combustible coincidence of those two holidays followed weeks of violence between Israeli Jews and Palestinians and clashes between Palestinian young adults and police in East Jerusalem, after the unexplained, two-week fencing off of the Damastic Gate plaza, where Palestinian young adults have gathered for years during Ramadan.

Arab violence and unrest on the Temple Mount led to an Israeli police response inside the Al Aqsa mosque, a spiritual and PR nightmare of rubber bullets and stun grenades.

Additionally, there is an ongoing problem in the neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan involving evictions and pending evictions of Palestinians. Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan are politicized areas that have been used in this way for more than a decade to create facts on the ground, displacing Palestinians from homes where they have lived for decades in order to expand the borders of Jewish-occupied Jerusalem. The eviction claims concern decades of unpaid rent, a narrative with its own complications and challenges.

Tensions were heightened in Sheikh Jarrah by right-wing Jewish youths who marched there from Kikar Tzion chanting “Death to Arabs” and physically assaulting Palestinian residents, in an organized hate event sponsored by Lehava, a violent Jewish extremist organization--an event that left more than 100 Palestinians injured and close to two dozen hospitalized.

All of this, while a disunited Israeli society has failed to produce a stable government after 4 rounds of elections. Hamas and other radicalized elements saw an opportunity.

But the critical factor probably is politics within the Palestinian Authority. Knowing that he would lose to Hamas, the Palestinian Authority’s President, Mahmoud Abbas, now completing his 16th year of a 4-year term, once again delayed the election among his people. He blamed the delay on Israel, which is what he does, and which plays better for him politically than to blame it on Hamas. The Palestinian people in the West Bank and in Gaza are furious at their own government and at Israel. Widespread corruption and broken politics abound within the Palestinian structure. Younger adults have not been able to vote for leaders who might have made their lives much better.

Hamas, not getting the election it wanted, seized the opportunity to elevate itself among its peers and picked a fight with Israel, first with rocks and fireworks, and then with rockets. The rocket fire began in Jerusalem and moved quickly to other population centers in the heart of Israel, a new Hamas tactic that caught Israel off guard militarily and in morale. Israelis are suffering, at least 5 have been killed and at least 30 more injured.

Israel’s Iron Dome keeps Israelis mostly safe but it also serves terrorists. Hamas’s tactic is to shoot rockets in order to prompt retaliation, which causes fatalities and property damage in Palestinian territories. This serves a media, diplomatic, and legal strategy of delegitimizing the State of Israel and its actions taken in self-defense. This tactic is not unique to Hamas. Other Palestinian factions jockey for respect and internal power in this way.

There are more details and points one could make. We could talk about Iran's backing of Hezbollah as well as Hamas, or about the significance of antisemitism in anti-Israel behavior.

There are Palestinian intellectuals and journalists saying the current escalation is all about--and only about--internal Palestinian politics and has nothing to do with Sheikh Jarrah or the Mosque. And, there are Israelis who are saying, well, it's not *not* about Sheikh Jarrah, either.

I have noted with interest the growing number of rank-and-file Israelis, especially those who made Aliyah and are part of communities much like ours, who are speaking out against systemic injustice toward Palestinians by the Israeli government. Politicians are in on it, too, of course. On Wednesday, Defense Minister Benny Ganz said that the internal divisions within Israel are "no less dangerous than Hamas." Statements like the following, from op ed writer David Horowitz, can be found in major Israeli print and online media: "The explosion of Arab violence against Jews is, among other factors, a consequence of decades of government neglect in much of the Arab community. Crime has long run wild. Poverty, alienation from the state, a pervading sense of discrimination--all this and more constitute fertile ground for extremism, hatred, and violence. And that's without factoring in identification with the Palestinian cause." And this one, by op ed writer Leah Solomon: "The reality for Palestinians has been awful for decades and has only worsened. Israeli control over nearly every aspect of their lives, focused solely on ensuring Israeli security and expanding Jewish settlement and hegemony--while almost entirely abdicating responsibility for Palestinian security, well-being and rights--has created an utterly untenable situation. While violent resistance is absolutely condemnable, it is sadly unsurprising after decades of discriminatory policies, separate and unequal systems of law, and tremendous suffering. Nor is it surprising that the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are inextricably part of the Palestinian people, have joined in the fray. And we, the Israeli side, have most of the power. Had our elected officials chosen over the past seven years of relative calm to strive toward a better future, there were countless ways to have improved the situation for all. And had we--Israeli citizens and Jewish supporters of Israel--taken advantage of the relative peace to place this issue at the center of our national and peoplehood agenda, our leaders would have been forced to listen..."(JTA, 5/14/210).

While former Ambassador Oren was speaking to folks like us in a briefing from his Tel Aviv area home, air raid sirens went off and rockets were visible in the sky behind his window. His interview team, from their homes in other parts of the country, also began to come under fire. Before signing off abruptly so they could get to shelter and contact their families, this is what Dr. Oren wanted us to know: "Remember 1967. They thought

they were gonna destroy us. They won't destroy us. This country's strong. We're strong. You be strong where you are too. Defend us, we'll be okay, and we love you."

And I would say, speaking for myself, I will support you in believing that Israel must be decisive in protecting its citizens from a genocidal terrorist organization dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel and every Jew who lives. Every Jew. One only needs to read the official charter or the horrifying rhetoric of Hamas's senior officials to see the reality. I want, and I believe we need, a strong Israel. And, with power comes responsibility, and because I love Israel I will ask more questions and hold Israel accountable to critique where it is deserved. The many facts in support of Israel can all hold true for me without also giving Israel carte blanche. A friend, Conservative Rabbi and long-time Jerusalemite Ed Snitkof, definitely someone I'd call "moderate," posted on FaceBook, "God help us. Not because of Hamas. We will deal with that. I fear for our soul as a nation."

Whatever its immediate causes, the current clash may be emerging as a moment of reckoning for a country that many see as imploding from mistrust and hopelessness. But those crying out for a better Israel have not given up hope. They cry out *because* they hope for better and believe it is still possible. So do I.

Here we are, B'midbar, in the wilderness, where we actually spend most of our lives. I would love to know how you are feeling and what you think about these issues. If the situation continues to be charged as it is now, I hope we will be able to arrange communal opportunities to share our views and concerns and learn from one another. It is so important that we learn to listen and hear different views.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote, "Not all those who wander are lost." Along with my prayers for an end to the current violence, I pray for the discernment to know and the courage to name where we, who have wandered the globe, have gotten lost in our own country, and for a renewed vision that earns us our right to live on that beautiful, sacred land.

Jerusalemite Conservative Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum co-wrote a prayer with Sheikah Ibtisam Machameed. The prayer envisions the children of Isaac and Ishmael living together in holiness. In the midst of all of the tensions, Rabbi Tamar gathered together a group of Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the Old City of Jerusalem to pray together. (Can you imagine?!) I invite you to pray that prayer with me now:

God of Life

Who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds

May it be Your will to hear the prayer of mothers

For you did not create us to kill each other
Nor to live in fear, anger or hatred in your world
But rather you have created us so we can grant permission to one another to sanctify
Your name of Life, your name of Peace in this world...
[We weep] for parents holding their children with despair and darkness in their hearts...

And with my tears and prayers which I pray
And with the tears of all...who deeply feel the pain of these difficult days,
I raise my hands to you: Please, God, have mercy on us
Hear our voice that we shall not despair
That we shall see life in each other,
That we shall have pity on each other,
That we shall hope for each other.

I will conclude with the words Psalm 122, verses 6-8, set to a melody I learned from
Israeli singer-songwriter Chava Alberstein. You can find the words in *Siddur Lev
Shalem*, in the far left margin of page 201.

שאלו שלום ירושלים, שאלו שלום ירושלים
ישליו אוהבין
יהי שלום בחילך, שלום בארמנותיך
למען אחי ורעי אדברה נא שלום
למען אחי ורעי אדברה נא שלום בך

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.