

# Kol Nidre 5767

Rabbi Keith Stern

Last December, a group of Beth Avodah families went to Israel. For most of the intrepid travelers, it was their first time in the Holy Land. We all had such high expectations; a genuine excitement hovered over us like a huppah. And we were not even a bit disappointed. Our first destination: Haifa. After getting to our rooms at the Dan Carmel and washing up a bit, we regrouped for dinner in the dining room. Imagine our delight, not only with the great feast laid out for us, but with the panoramic view of Haifa that glittered below the hotel's big windows. The harbor and the docks and all its cranes and storage facilities, as well as the many ships anchored offshore, waiting to be unloaded and reloaded. What could be more beautiful than this, I thought. What better sight for a group of tired Americans than the lights of the harbor?

Our trip was truly fantastic. I cherish the time we spent together, in the sun, in the rain, all over. The mood in Israel was so positive and upbeat. In Jerusalem, the major pedestrian mall on ben Yehudah St which was a ghost

town during the Intifada was jammed with tourists. It was lively, bustling with activity. The restaurants were full, the hotels were full, and life was good. Every city we visited was filled with construction cranes. For the first time in years, there seemed to be a revitalized Israel, regaining confidence and vigor.

I asked my long time pal Jimmy, a Yerushalmi, a Moroccan Jew and a maniacal cab driver how things were going. I expected a long description on how business had picked up and how good it all was again. But with a wrinkled brow he quietly said, “Bein tayim, hakol beseder”, “For the time being, everything is ok.” “What do you mean, for the time being?”, I asked. He put his fingers to his lips. “Mahar uli yesh shemesh. Uli yesh geshem. Uli yesh mabul. Ata mavin oti?” “Tomorrow it may be sunny. Or it may rain. Or there may be a flood. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I did. I do.

The flood burst on July 12<sup>th</sup>. War. Again.

“Israel tried to avoid this war, to the point of endangering its most basic credibility. For months Israel allowed Palestinian groups to shell Israeli towns on the Gaza border with virtual immunity. And for six years Israel turned away as Iran supplied Hezbollah with thousands of long-range rockets and built a vast infrastructure literally yards away from the Lebanon border.” (Yossi Klein Halevi)

When Hezbollah kidnapped Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, enough was enough. Israel launched an air assault, seeking to destroy Hezbollah and return the 2 Israeli soldiers home.

Without hesitation, Hezbollah unleashed a barrage of what ended up to be 4000 rockets against Israel’s northern cities, each and every rocket aimed at civilians, each and every rocket intended to kill, or to maim, or to terrorize.

Morale in Israel was extraordinarily high at the beginning of the struggle.

There had not been such a sense of unity and common purpose for years.

This absolute sense that the war was for a righteous, justifiable cause spread, and for the first time in a long time, it was as if the world had awakened

from a foggy hangover to clearly perceive who the good guys were and who were the bad guys.

Listen to this: “This war was inevitable as the Lebanese government couldn't bring Hezbollah within its authority and make it work for the interests of Lebanon. Similarly leader of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas has been unable to rein in the Hamas movement. Unfortunately we must admit that in such a war the only way to get rid of 'these irregular phenomena' is what Israel is doing. The operations of Israel in Gaza and Lebanon are in the interest of the people of Arab countries and the international community.”

Who wrote this? Ahmed Al Jarallah the editor-in-chief of the Kuwaiti newspaper Arab Times!! It's hard to remember, but very early on, no one, not even France! questioned the righteous and the necessity of this war. On July 19<sup>th</sup>, Ehud Olmert, Israel's prime minister, and his minister of defense, Amir Peretz, had approval ratings above 75%. Even the EU supported Israel at the commencement of hostilities. On September 21<sup>st</sup>, Prime Minister Olmert's approval rating was 22%, and Defense Minister Peretz's rating was 14%.

What happened? What went wrong?

The initial air strikes were highly successful: In just 39 minutes on the night of July 12, the Israeli air force destroyed most of Hezbollah's Iranian-made Zilzal long-range rockets, which were believed capable of hitting Tel Aviv. Over the next few days, the air force reduced Hezbollah's Beirut headquarters to rubble, destroyed weapon stores and killed dozens of elite Hezbollah fighters. But it soon became apparent that incessant Hezbollah rocket fire from mobile launchers could only be stopped by a large-scale ground operation. This did not materialize until the last few days of the war. Hezbollah was able to continue firing more than 100 rockets a day at Israeli civilians in the North and claim victory on the grounds that Israel had been unable to stop the Katyushas.

Military analysts and ex-generals were highly critical of the failure to order an early large-scale attack, and reservists returning from the front complained of confused orders, a lack of confidence in their superiors and shortages of food, water and equipment.

On the home front, over a million Israelis were displaced from northern cities and towns. Those who could not temporarily relocate in a hotel or an apartment or with friends in the south languished in poorly maintained shelters.

Lots and lots of questions have come to the surface. Was it wise to rely so heavily in the first days on air power alone? Was it sensible to introduce ground troops in dribs and drabs and to delay for weeks the call-up and introduction to the battle of reserve units? If, after three full weeks of battle, Israeli troops were still fighting for control of Lebanese villages within eyeshot of the border between Israel and Lebanon, something seems to have gone wrong. And then there's the intelligence failure: Was the size of the Hezbollah storehouse of rockets not known beforehand? The depth of the Hezbollah bunkers? And, most of all, the evidently professional training and ferocious devotion of the Hezbollah fighters?"

This war has been so demoralizing for Israel. This war doesn't even have a name. No one knows what to call it. The 2 soldiers kidnapped on the northern border that we went to get are still being held. And Hezbollah still exists, its presence in the life of Lebanon even more pronounced.

I'm sure that I am not alone in having felt just about every emotion there is as the war exploded onward longer than anyone initially anticipated: anxiety, outrage, shame, relief, sorrow, and on and on. Every emotion, and very substantial confusion. From day to day, I did not know whether to hope for a decisive victory in battle or for an immediate cease fire. I remembered Leonard Fein's observation some years ago. He said, "There is the kind of Jew who detests war and violence, who believes that fighting is not "the Jewish way," who willingly accepts that Jews have their own and higher standards of behavior. And not just that we have them, but that those standards are our life-blood, are what we are about.

And there is the kind of Jew who thinks we have been passive long enough, who is convinced that it is time for us to strike back at our enemies, to reject once and for all the role of victim, who willingly accepts that Jews cannot afford to depend on favors, that we must be tough and strong.

And the trouble is, most of us are both kinds of Jew."

I am that Jew, riven right down the middle, equal parts righteously waging war and relentlessly seeking peace.

On the one hand, I felt so much anger and righteous indignation during the war. The talk of Israel's disproportionate response to Hezbollah's relentless missile attacks made me crazy. For Hezbollah, the murder of innocents, in Israel and in Lebanon, was its strategy. The hawk in me is not embarrassed by Israeli power, or by its use against this particular enemy. I noticed that some people who denounced the loss of life on the Lebanese side of the border were reticent to acknowledge the loss of life on the Israeli side of the border. Perhaps more Israeli deaths would have restored a perverse kind of moral parity. A part of my Yiddische neshumah wanted retribution, wanted to see our enemy stamped out like we were commanded to destroy Amalek. When innocent people suffered and died in Lebanon, their deaths were more attributable to Hezbollah's cynical practice of setting up offices, weapons caches and tunnels in heavily populated areas than to Israeli bombs.

On the other hand, what about the children? I know that after the infamous Qana bombing, the number of children's deaths were exaggerated. I know it was a partially staged event by Hezbollah after the fact. "Save your sympathy," Naomi Ragan writes in Haaretz, "for the mothers and sisters and girlfriends of our young soldiers who would rather be sitting in study halls learning Torah, but have no choice but to risk their precious lives full of

hope, goodness and endless potential, to wipe out the cancerous terrorist cells that threaten their people and all mankind. Make your choice, and save your tears.”

As Leonard Fein wrote, I prefer to believe that we do not ration our tears, that whoever bears ultimate responsibility for the death of innocents, we are not indifferent to the anguish of bereaved parents or of new orphans. I prefer to believe, and to embrace, those who see the television reports of the rubble and the remains and shudder — and yes, even cry. And I know that the Torah the young Israeli soldiers are learning teaches that the lives of the others, too, are precious.”

This Jew who stands before you today, composed of equal parts of din, strict judgment, and rachamim, loving compassion, has struggled to come to terms with this war and the paradoxes that have buffeted my soul.

I actually wrote a few folks, reporters for the Wall St. Journal, the New York Times, and the Israeli paper, Haaretz. I asked them, if you were me, what would you say to end an Israel sermon? They answered that luckily they didn't have to worry about that and wished me well. But Shmuel Rosner,

from Haaretz said, “I have no idea of anything positive to say, I just have the general optimism which makes me think that we shall overcome.”

Eventually, we will have to talk to each other. Eventually, the leadership of the Palestinian people must acknowledge the truth, that there is no future for a Palestinian state without recognizing Israel. Israel will never be pushed into the sea. The Palestinians will never fade away. Eventually the leaders of the Israel will recognize the utter futility of maintaining the current settlements and the construction of new settlements. Eventually the moderate Arab nations, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Dubai, and others, will not only view Israel as a significant ally against the onslaught of Islamist jihad, but will act on that knowledge through various forms of support, subtle, but present. Eventually Israeli military strategists will agree that there is never a good enough reason to use cluster bombs. Eventually Palestinian mothers will not send their children to blow themselves up along with the children of Israeli mothers.

In the meantime, people will die. How many more must die, I cannot know, but I hope it is a number that is falling. In the meantime we stand by Israel.

We are not afraid to support Israel even when to do so is unpopular and

politically incorrect. We write letters to the editor defending Israel when those on the Left assail Israel's legitimacy. We aren't afraid to speak up when we believe the Israeli government has made a poor decision, because that is what a democracy deserves and demands.

We come to Israel's side. We show up at rallies and picnics and forums for Israel. We include giving money to Israel as one of the highest priorities of our tzedakah. You'll see outside that there are some options available.

There are Israel Bonds, which are a direct investment in Israel's economy. Your support today will yield you monetary benefit in the future. Look at the information that is available. Steve Aronson will be glad to tell you much more about it. We're directing money raised for Israel during this period to 2 sources, the Jewish National Fund and the CJP Emergency Israel Fund. JNF's Operation Security Blanket will go to rehabilitate the forests burned out by Hezbollah rockets by purchasing fire equipment. It will go to building secure roads so that Israeli children can travel in dangerous areas more securely. 100% of the money will go directly to Israel. There are no administrative costs. The other half of the funds will go to the Union for Reform Judaism in Greater Boston, in partnership with the CJP Israel in Crisis Fund. 100% of the money will go directly to Israel. There are no

administrative costs. The money will go directly to Congregation Or Hadash and the Leo Baeck Educational Center in our sister city of Haifa. Both funds assure me that the money is only used to mitigate war damage related projects and services. So dump coins in the jug outside. Throw in paper. Throw in checks made out to Beth Avodah and in the memo write simply Israel.

What else can you do? Beth Avodah is going to Israel again. Come with us. Block out Dec 20 to Jan 1<sup>st</sup>. We will show our support the best way possible – by showing up. And once there we will show our solidarity by filling the rooms, the restaurants, the stores. Israel needs us, and we must respond.

That is our challenge for this High Holiday season, even if we've been bruised or beaten, even if Hezbollah is not defeated, even if Syria and Iran still menace. The challenge is to remind ourselves that we've been through dark days before, and each time we've emerged into the light.

We've suffered extraordinary losses in the past, and we've regrouped to rebuild. We've known despondency in the past, but we have always found our way back to hope." [Daniel Gordis]

Nachman of Bratslav once said, "Don't despair. If you believe you can damage, believe you can repair." We will move forward from this place and we shall work to achieve repair.

When our Beth Avodah group got in our tour bus and headed down the mountain from the Dan Carmel to the Leo Baeck School, we had a gorgeous view of the Mediterranean. It was a little cloudy, but we did not care. It began to rain, mist really, when someone gasped and said, "Look!" There stretching from one end of the sea practically into our bus was a beautiful double rainbow. The rainbow of course is God's peace sign. It was an indication to Noah that God would never again snuff out the world as happened in the Great Flood.

We could use a rainbow now. Some sign that all will be well. In the meantime we work for peace, we pray for peace. Machar uli shemesh, uli

geshem, uli mabul. Tomorrow whether it's sunny or rainy, or whether it  
once again all hits the fan, we stand by Israel.