



Rosh Hashanah 2006

“LIFE IN A FALLING ROCK ZONE”

by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Shanah tovah. Happy New Year. Welcome. As I have done in past years, I have opened our High Holiday services with a brief message intended to set a mood and a context for our celebration and observance. In general, my Rosh HaShanah talk has had a light tone, with some humor thrown in for good measure. My message on Yom Kippur has been a bit more serious. This year, the pattern is reversed. The latest war between Israel and Hezbollah may strangely already feel like old news, yet because of it we are inclined still to enter this holiday season with heavier hearts.

This past summer, while the city was overwhelmed by its sweltering heat wave, our family was enjoying a beautiful week in the slightly cooler Adirondacks. As you may know, the weather there is unpredictable and we always tend to pack for several seasons. It can dip down to the 40s and also go up to the 90s. This year we just had the heat and even reluctant swimmers found the lake water alluring.

One night, we also had a thunderstorm that surpassed in ferocity and fury any I could recall. For nearly four hours the sky was lit up with lighting flashes and the thunder was so violent that it shook the house. Our beds actually vibrated and we were pounded by several inches of rain. Every so often it seemed like the storm was passing, and then it came back with a resurgent strength as if to say, don't get too comfortable, it's not over yet. Remarkably, no trees were hit and the power line wasn't cut. In my youth, that was common place, and we would have to dig out candles for light. Even more remarkable, the three little children in the house slept through it all. They were spared this violent act of nature.

But I was awake for most of it, dazzled and awed at times, actually scared and shaken at others, and very grateful to be inside. And I could not also help but wonder what it must be like to live in a city or a country under a barrage of rockets and missiles and bombs bursting all around you without any clear end in sight.

The Israeli-Hezbollah war was about two weeks old and the images of war and destruction were clearly on our minds. I had already begun a first draft of these remarks, not knowing how many revisions I might need to make as events unfolded between then and now and whether, when we would convene today, this would be a time of war or a time of peace.

It is easy to speak politics and political strategy – especially in this period of postmortem recriminations. We have all read, more or less, the same papers and op ed columns. Thanks to the internet, we had easy access to the foreign press as well.

But as I formulated my thoughts I found myself focusing more on feelings than ideas. It is far harder to face the conflicting feelings of anguish and anger, despair and thirst for retribution, not to mention anxiety and fear that have overwhelmed us, confused us, and left us searching for reasons to be hopeful.

A recent message from Israel talked of living in a post-trauma state, not just as individuals, but as an entire society. “We are,” says the writer, “a community picking up the emotional pieces, learning to breathe easy again, to expect – and to get – a full night's sleep again.” “The goats on the goat farm,” she adds, resumed their pre-war levels of milk yield just as soon as the sirens and explosions died away. Stress levels went down and milk yields shot up. It was an instant cure. Not so for the rest of us. Perhaps the real problem is that this war ended with no real closure and the healing process will have to include an acknowledgement that the next round may not be far away.”

It has all been very draining and depressing, maybe even more so after the ceasefire was voted into place but not yet enacted, wondering if it would even take hold and what good it would do.

In one instance I have felt very protective over Israel – and responded sympathetically to emails from friends and colleagues whose lives were at risk, whose sons and daughters were newly conscripted and fighting for their lives. One friend wrote, “It’s hard to listen to the news hoping the person they are going to mention is not one you know. It’s also hard to be aware that this is what we have become hopeful for.” And in the next moment I found myself thinking not just of Israelis but of the Lebanese, who must have feared the same information, perhaps ten-fold or a hundred-fold more. I was and am also gravely troubled by the loss of innocent Lebanese lives, innocent civilians cut down by the force of indiscriminating bombs. But I also asked myself, what happens to innocence in a time of a war? Is it even a valid concept?

According to one web blog I read, the jihadists cynically redefined the term of innocence to suit their own needs in a handy win-win formula.

Point One: If I kill you, I win.

Point Two: If you kill me, I am a martyr. I win big.

Point Three: There are no innocents in the land of my enemy. If I kill infants, the elderly, pregnant women, even on purpose, I win.

Point Four: When my enemy kills innocent civilians in error, even his own allies condemn him for brutality. I win.

I am also reminded of the 1973 Yom Kippur War

when I was just starting my senior year in college and we stopped going to classes to organize activities to support Israel. An entering student came to us and said, “It’s not fair. I’m not ready for a war yet. I’m only a freshman.” But we, more experienced seniors, were? And I’m reminded, as all of us are, of 9/11, which we will address later today, and how classes of even younger children witnessed the events of that day that stole away their innocence.

I read about proportionality and Israel’s excessive use of force and feared that Israel had lost any sense of restraint and could only bring down more harm on itself. And then I read about how Israelis themselves, unified in their fight against an unambiguous enemy, called for even more force and feared that they would only bring down more harm on themselves if they didn’t finish the job properly. Others, of course, struck a middle chord – defending Israel’s initial response but soon said it had gone too far.

I heard people talking about “moral anguish” and wondered how much that’s an issue for soldiers when their own lives are on the line – or is it a feeling reserved for the politicians and generals who send those soldiers to battle knowing that some will die, or is it a term that we use to describe our view from the sidelines, and the inner turmoil we have between hating war and also rooting for victory. And what is victory anyway? Golda Meir, the former prime minister of Israel, once said, “It is true we have won all our wars, but we have paid for them. We don’t want victories anymore.” Well, there was no victory this time, but this still did not come without a steep price.

And I heard people talking about “moral outrage” with such a fury that I felt my own anger rise up in the face of their ferocity. When peace lovers get into a shouting match it is time to take cover.

Of course, I heard people talking about Jewish values and how Jews don't wage war this way and I felt angry that we hold ourselves to a level of accountability that we don't expect of others. This is an easy criticism to make of all parties, but we reserve it most sternly for ourselves, even if some, or most of the condemnation is deserved.

Where does this excessive self-criticism come from? I think it originates from a stance of self-protection. Better that we should criticize ourselves first before others do. We fear that any form of Jewish fighting, short of a noble Entebbe rescue and a heroic Six-Day war, is bound to incite more anti-Semitism. We want to disassociate ourselves from those Jews – not us – who waged the immoral war. Of course, the implication is that if only Israel had

waged a war fair and square – whatever that means – then it would have been acceptable, but even then, I'm sure that vast numbers of people, Jews among them, would still not have come to that conclusion.

And of course I thought, quite candidly, that I have absolutely no first-hand experience with any of this myself and have been blessed – yes, blessed – with innocence and naivete on these matters. I don't really have a clue what it is like to be under fire whether in battle or under siege of incoming rockets and missiles. My closest experience is a frightening summer thunderstorm. I suffered my anguish and helplessness relaxing by the shore of a country lake, far, far away from the killing fields.

And so on our return trip home from the Adirondacks, when I saw a sign that said "Fallen Rock Zone", I thought, that makes sense if this is pointing to some scenic overlook where rocks had once fallen, but we know that what it really should say is "Falling Rock Zone." But who would consciously drive through such a scary place? Who, for that matter, wants to live in a "Falling Rocket Zone" or a "Falling Missile Zone"?

In one instance, the sign said "1/2 mile ahead", which was a kind of relief, giving a promise that the danger would be over soon. But another sign didn't have that limiting qualifier. All it said was be careful, but for how long, no one knows.

When will peace come, can we dare to hope for solutions? How do we not become calloused and truly jaded? How do we keep optimism alive?

Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." That's a good humanistic point of view. Change starts with us. Hope starts with us. We can make a difference in our own lives. We can become an influence in others lives.

Golda Meir, who I quoted earlier, had another saying, "You cannot shake hands," she said, "with a clenched fist."

Let this be a year of opening our hearts.

Let this be a year of reaching out.

Let this be a year of starting with ourselves.

Im lo machar, macharatyim. If not tomorrow, then the day after, let the soldiers put off their uniforms, let bells ring, and let each use his hands and her hands to build peace.

Once again, Shanah Tovah.