

Rosh Hashanah Day I - 2014

Four guys are standing on a street corner...an American, a Russian, a Chinese man, and an Israeli...

A news reporter comes up to the group and says to them:

"Excuse me...What's your opinion on the meat shortage?"

The American says: What's a shortage?

The Russian says: What's meat?

The Chinese man says: What's an opinion?

The Israeli says: What's "Excuse me"?...

The joke is funny because everyone knows how difficult it is for the Israeli to say ", excuse me."

And once again this past summer we learned how that is exactly what the world wants and expects Israel to say, over and over again.

Excuse me, for defending our citizens from relentless rocket attacks.

Excuse me, for acting in defense of our citizens the same way any other country in the world would not only be expected to act, but would be praised for doing so.

Excuse me, for doing what is necessary to protect our population and at the same time be certain that the threat of this attack is removed to the best of our ability.

Excuse me, for wanting the ancient homeland of the Jewish people to continue to be the only Jewish state, and the only state in the entire Middle East committed to democratic principles and equality for all its citizens.

Excuse me, for thinking that although we are Israelis, the world still sees us "only as Jews" who of course have always been the object of worldwide hatred.

Excuse me, for not always living up to the higher standard the world sets only for Israel, which in essence is of course, a double standard.

The Middle East continues to be one of the world's most dangerous areas.

Israel has known this since before 1948.

Now the United States increasingly finds itself in the middle of this unstable part of the world, and can't figure out whether to more fully engage, or retreat.

Right now the United States is well aware that something has to be done, at least to stop Isis before this part of the world blows itself up.

What exactly to do, and how to do it is a problem Israel has encountered for a long time.

Now the US seems to be caught in the same predicament.

For all these reason and more, I want to spend some time today speaking in support of Israel after what she and her citizens had to endure this past summer.

Operation protective edge was a complicated and very dangerous military engagement which perhaps changed very little in the long run.

But by now it should be no surprise to you that I choose not to concentrate so much on the political aspects of the war against Hamas.

Instead, my desire is to look back on this most important summer and to review first what we have learned, second, how what we have learned makes a difference to us, and third, how we can be of support to Israel.

There is much that we have learned, ***once again***, because most of it we knew before.

Hamas, at least in the short run does not care about its citizens and will always place them in the way of Israeli firepower to claim, and try to prove, that Israel attacks innocent civilians.

But, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu so accurately stated – we use missiles to protect our citizens, and they use citizens to protect their missiles.

But when I think about the war this past summer, what I think about most is the Iron Dome, and how effective and life-saving it was for the Israeli population.

Imagine how differently the war would've played out had the Iron Dome not been as successful in combating the threat of Hamas rocket attack?

I mean we're talking about huge success - how many Israeli civilians were actually killed by rocket attack – three?

And Hamas has the audacity to claim it won the war.

Of course we join with Israel in mourning the loss of 66 soldiers who died defending the holy land of our people.

And yes this is a great loss, especially to their families, but let us not for a moment think that even this loss of life for Israel, as sad and as difficult as it is, served anything other than an important and necessary victory over an intractable enemy.

But without the iron Dome, it could've been quite different.

**Here is an interesting piece of trivia regarding Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile defense system.**

Some of the missile's components were derived from a toy car sold by Toys"R"Us.

So what is the iron Dome exactly – well I really don't know, but you know me well enough to realize that won't stop me from talking about it anyway.

The iron Dome is not exactly an impenetrable shield created around the state of Israel – it only works that way.

The little I know and understand is that when a rocket is launched from Gaza, and it appears to be heading toward a vulnerable target, Israel launches an antimissile rocket aimed to destroy and annihilate the attacking rocket before any damage is done to a populated area.

The enemy is threatening and attacking with dangerous and lethal weapons.

And, the goal is to destroy the weapon before any serious harm is inflicted.

Let us just for a moment, move away from the battlefield of Gaza and Israel, and turn to the battlefields of our own individual lives.

I hope and trust you agree this is worthy of concentration and investigation on this day of Rosh Hashanah.

And for the moment, instead of calling the enemy Hamas, let's refer to it as "Roah Ha-Gezra - usually, but inaccurately translated as, the evil decree."

Long ago I realized, as have so many others, that this term, which is found in the "Un'taneh Tokef" prayer we will soon recite, does not mean, "the evil decree."

It actually means, the evil of, or the severity of, or the harshness of, the decree.

Our Machzor Lev Shalem translates the phrase as "... the power to transform the harshness of our destiny,"

The enemy is always there, always attacking, always ready to inflict harm.

Israel has its enemies – Hamas and others, and we all have our own internal enemies, which are also quite powerful and persistent.

If we didn't, we wouldn't be coming back here every year.

So the question is how do we deal with the enemy, how do we combat "ro-ah Hagezyrah – the harsh threat of evil ready to attack us?"

What is the iron Dome of protection and safety that Judaism prescribes for each and every one of us, in our own psychic and spiritual battles of life?

And the answer is clear, as stated in the prayer we will soon recite –

U'Teshuvah, U'Tfilah and Tzedakah - it is repentance, prayer, and righteousness,

Ma-aveereen at Roah HaGezayrah - which avert, deflect, if not remove the severity of the attack.

That sounds like what the iron dome accomplished for Israel this past summer.

Essentially, what the prayer and our tradition is telling us is that, “Things will happen in the coming year which we have *no ability to prevent*.”

Some of us will get sick.

Some of us will grow poor.

We *will* be afflicted, physically, emotionally, psychologically.

For some of us, everything will be great.

And some of us may not be even among the living this time next year.

It is inevitable.

But God’s promise to us **is contained in those three words -- Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedaka**: if we live a life of wholeness, exemplified by awareness of the world, being in relationship with it, and taking actions that make justice manifest, then whatever our fate is, we will be able to tolerate it.

We will be able to understand it and accept it as *what must be*.

It may be painful, we may not like it, but we will know it is necessary in the greater scheme of our existence.

This is the iron Dome of our religion, of our faith in God, and it works to help us, most of the time.

Like the Iron Dome which protected Israel in operation protective edge by attacking the enemy's weapon prior to the infliction of serious damage, so will repentance, prayer and righteousness keep us protected from the harshness of some of the evil in the world, most of the time.

Thank God Israel was able to use the iron Dome of protection this past summer, and thank God that it worked so successfully.

Thanks to the United States for its support in helping to fund the iron Dome.

And thank God that we have our own iron Dome of repentance, prayer and righteousness – Teshuvah, Tefilah and Tzedakah.

Hopefully we are indeed taking advantage of these modes of protection:

it seems that we are doing so as today we are here, beginning the 10 days of **repentance**, of teshuvah, the season of turning to God in an attempt to distance ourselves from sinfulness and wrongdoing.

And, we use the wisdom and traditional words of our ancestors in **tefila**, in prayer, so that we judge ourselves not only by that which is modern and current, but also by that which has proved itself eternal by withstanding the test of truth throughout the ages.

All of this of course leads us closer to performing acts of **tzedakah**-righteousness, which ultimately help ourselves in addition to others.

Each year, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah we take some time, usually separate from my sermon to encourage you to invest in Israel in the form of Israel bonds.

This year, I purposely speak about Israel now in order to connect this investment opportunity directly to the message of Rosh Hashanah.

This year, in appreciation, in admiration, in gratefulness for the success of Israel's iron dome, and as a parallel act of utilizing Judaism's spiritual/religious iron Dome, let us, on this day of repentance, and at this time of prayer, perform this act of Tzedakah-not charity, but righteousness.

Investing in Israel bonds is not charity – it is the right thing to do, for us and Israel, just as the United States government investing in the iron dome is not charity, it is the right thing to do, for the United States and Israel.

Let me tell you a story which helps explain why it is so important to connect to Israel with the investment of Israel Bonds

One of my colleagues who spent much of the summer in Israel, and who couldn't leave exactly when planned, started to feel somewhat trapped.

This came across as he was telling an Israeli friend how unique this trip to Israel had been -- the funerals of the three boys, the sirens and bomb shelters, the experience of visiting a family of a lone soldier during the shiva for their son and brother.

There were so many emotions and experiences that were different than the many other times he had visited in Israel.

The Israeli friend said it reminded him of an often-told joke about a guy named Shmulik who was walking along Ben Yehudah in Jerusalem when he suddenly had a heart attack.

His heart stopped, and as the medics tried to revive him, his soul went to heaven.

When he arrived in heaven, he found truly an ideal place!

A beautiful five star hotel, several swimming pools to choose from, an all-you-can eat buffet with every food imaginable.

It was, in a word heaven.

Just as he began to relax and enjoy himself, the medics succeeded in restoring his heartbeat, and his soul returned to the "world below."

When he woke up, he announced, "I am no longer afraid to die.

I have seen heaven, and it is a wonderful place.

While I hope to live a long life with my family and loved ones, I know I have nothing to fear!"

Unfortunately just a few months later, he once again suffered a heart attack, and this time they could not revive him.

He again went to heaven, but when he arrived, it was totally different.

No five star hotel. No pools. No buffet.

He complained loudly -- "I demand to speak with the management!"

Suddenly God appeared. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes," said Shmulik, "Indeed there is!

Last time I was here, everything was great!

Five star hotel! Beautiful pools! Fabulous buffet!

Now I'm here, and nothing, nada, efes!"

Well, said God, "I'm sorry you're disappointed.

See, last time, you were here as a tourist. This time, you're here to stay."

Visiting Israel as a tourist is usually quite wonderful.

And so is living there, much of the time.

But the two are very different.

Israel Bonds helps to bridge the gap between those of us who love Israel and are here,

and those who Live in Israel, and are there.

The iron Dome may indeed be a necessary weapon, of defense.



Once again I emphasize that it is difficult to imagine this past summer in Israel without it.

But ultimately, we have to hope it will be a weapon which on the one hand we should never disregard, but on the other hand, not need to use so much in the future.

I personally am not that optimistic, but our tradition, if we look ahead just two weeks, tells us we must be.

Two weeks from today we begin the holiday of Sukkot.

And the main symbol of this holiday, the symbol which bears its name, is a symbol not of defense protection, but rather a symbol of ultimate trust.

The Sukkah provide shelter, even though it is in no way as physically formidable as the iron Dome.

The iron Dome is necessary at a time of war, and we hope its effectiveness will eventually lead to a time of peace.

And that time of peace, is more aptly symbolized with not an iron dome, but with a Sukkat Shalom, a tabernacle of peace.

And so, despite the difficulties, the tribulations, the danger, the deaths of this past summer, nevertheless, on this new year, let us look only two weeks ahead to the Sukkat Shalom.

Baruch Atyah Adoni – Blessed are you HaShem,

HaPorays Sukkat Shalom – Who spreads the Tabernacle of Peace

Aleinu, v'al kol Amo Yisrael – over us and over all the People of Israel

V'al Yerushalayim – and over Jerusalem.

V' Nomar – Amen!!