

**Ralph Seliger's talk on Israel, Gaza, and the Palestinians.
Given at TeleTefila.com 5-22-2021.**

I'm a practitioner of what anti-Israel people call "both-sides-ism"; I acknowledge concerns on both sides of Israel-Palestine issues. But at bottom, I'm still a pro-Israel liberal Jew who has attended more World Zionist Congresses than I remember (probably three or four) and was recruited by Lisa Gittleman, then of the West Side Minyan, to begin my activism in 1982, with a group called Americans for Progressive Israel. And I've had a modest career as an editor and writer, beginning in the 1990s, mostly concentrating on Israel and Jewish-related subjects.

This conflict began as a politically-charged real estate dispute. There was a Jewish community living in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem on land they purchased in 1876, when it was part of the Ottoman Empire, to be in proximity to the tomb of Shimon HaTzadik (Simon the Just), an ancient rabbi. This community of several hundred Jews were forcibly expelled by the Jordanian army when it conquered the Old City of Jerusalem in 1948.

In 1956, the Jordanians settled 28 Palestinian refugee families in new homes built in a part of this Jewish-owned area that had not been built upon. The details of the legal dispute are too complicated for me to discuss or even fully understand, but the upshot is that 300 Palestinians face eviction, a decision now being appealed before Israel's High Court. [What fuels the sense of injustice is that pre-1948 property claims are being considered for Jews, but there's no such consideration for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian families who could make claims for properties they've lost.]

In the meantime, this Arab neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah has been subject to aggressive moves by ultranationalist Jewish activists for years, attracting protests by Palestinians and their Jewish supporters, and counter-protesters. [I've seen a BBC news clip with a religious nationalist Israeli confronting an Arab woman who protests that her property is being stolen; he responds: "If I don't steal it, someone else will."] This latest pending eviction has caused demonstrators and counter-protesters to clash violently, apparently including instances of police violence.

Tensions from these pending evictions have joined with other factors making a "perfect storm": masses of Muslim worshippers for the conclusion of Ramadan and Jewish nationalists massing for the annual "Jerusalem Day" flag march. I'm not sure of the exact sequence, but at some point the following happened: Israeli police cut the wires to the loudspeaker used at the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, so as not to disturb a speech below by Israel's President Reuven Rivlin, Palestinians threw rocks and firecrackers upon Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall, and Israeli police responded with stun grenades and rubber bullets.

This is when Hamas got into the act, with rocket barrages to demonstrate solidarity. Over less than two weeks, Hamas fired over 4,000 rockets into Israel, with many hitting Tel Aviv and locations to the south. 90% were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome defense, but 10% of 4,000 means as many as 400 dropped on Israeli territory. 12 in Israel were killed, including two children. About 240 Palestinians have died, including 65 or more children.

What has made matters worse is that the conflict has spilled into Israeli towns, especially places with mixed Arab and Jewish populations, like Lod (where Israel's main airport is located), Akko (north of Haifa) and Jaffa, part of Tel Aviv -- with Jewish and Arab gangs going after each other's people, individual Jews and Arabs have been caught and beaten, cars burned,

businesses shattered. Some say that extreme right-wing groups were bussing Jewish gangs into Arab neighborhoods.

This was the fourth war between Israel and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, Hamas seized control in 2007. Israel launched ground invasions in 2009 and 2014, and it fought only with air and artillery bombardments in 2012 and this year. In 2014, the ground invasion cost about ten times the losses of the past two weeks.

Hamas has to bear its share of moral responsibility for launching thousands of rockets to provoke Israel's devastating response. But Israel needs to realize what this does to Israel's standing in the world (and the US) and (sadly) to the security of many Jews around the world. We've already seen incidents of antisemitism in London and elsewhere directly linked to this war. I understand that a Jewish man was even beaten in Times Square.

The estimated damage to the Gaza Strip will cost more than a quarter of a billion dollars, while damage to power and water infrastructure has obstructed access to water for 800,000 or more people. Over 70,000 Gazans are now homeless, many schools, hospitals and clinics have also been destroyed or seriously damaged. This when the world aid community has finally just completed a two billion dollar reconstruction of the damage inflicted in 2014; in fact, an official was just completing a report summing up this effort when this new war broke out.

Israel was NOT wrong in responding militarily; what concerns me is the devastation wrought upon innocents. I know that Israel has shown restraint in some ways (e.g., those warning calls), but the world sees sickening pictures of tremendous damage and suffering.

When Hamas provokes Israel into responding this way, it wins politically. Without knowing the answer, I have to wonder if Israel could have responded less overwhelmingly and still have hurt Hamas -- with less damage to civilians.

On a final note, one of the other casualties of this war was the likely formation of a coalition of parties -- right, left and center -- which would have formed a government without Benjamin Netanyahu at its head for the first time since 2009. The key would have been the participation of a conservative Islamic Arab party. Instead, one of the right-wing parties started negotiating with Netanyahu, because its members were refusing to accept an Arab party as a partner, even a very conservative one, after this war. So now the expectation is for Israel to engage in a fifth round of elections, after more than two years of failing to form a stable majority coalition.