

Shelach June 5, 2010 / 23 Sivan 5770

This morning I would like to take a few moments to share some reflections on Israel's response to the flotilla headed for Gaza. I think that this is an issue that has weighed heavily on our hearts and minds as Jews. I want to sort out some of our emotions, reiterate some of the facts, and suggest a plan of action.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, "We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done." I believe that this is precisely the disconnect between how we felt as Jews this week on one hand, and caring citizens of the world on the other. As Jews we don't want to think of ourselves as capable of war crimes, terrorism, or even deadly assault. And so when the world accuses us, for Israel is US, of such things, judging us on what was done, it hurts. It sears our conscience as Jews. Other people have no problem with war, with killing, with taking innocent lives, but for us as Jews, it is an existential problem. And that is precisely why it is so important to understand how this is simply not the case. We need to call a spade a spade. What happened on that one boat of the flotilla (and remember, 5 boats were boarded without incident) is being called in Israel by its proper name: The Lynching. Israeli soldiers were lowered into a lynch mob. They were the attacked, not the assailants, and that makes all the difference in the world.

As the soldiers repelled down onto the ship they were immediately repelled with lethal weapons - steel pipes, wooden clubs and knives. The attack on the soldiers is the most important piece of information, yet the New York Times reported the very clear video evidence- you can watch it for yourself on You-Tube, as merely supporting an Israeli "claim". The Times then quoted Greta Berlin of the Free Gaza Movement calling the Israel version a lie. By equating the two, the Times seemed unwilling to differentiate between black and white video evidence and a defensive, verbal denial.

The weaponry chosen by those on the boat was deliberate. They had steel pipes, wooden clubs and knives knowing full well that this would make them seem like Davids to the Israeli Goliath. Of course, Israel had no intention of using deadly force and restrained from using overwhelming firepower. They had paintball guns!

But let's step back and ask a more basic question: Why would a group of so called journalists and intellectuals initiate a violent confrontation with the Israeli military? What did they expect would happen? It seems suicidal! But we know why they did it. They did it because goading Israel into military conflict is THE primary tactic of Hamas and its supporters. It's what prompted Hamas to fire thousands of rockets into Israel until Israel finally retaliated with its bombardment of Gaza, drawing world condemnation. It was huge P.R. victory for them. The flotilla is the same thing. It is a "win-win" situation for Hamas. If Israel allows the ships in, as so much of the world seems to want, then it not only risks arms being smuggled in (remember the Carine A that Israel stopped with 50 tons of Iranian weapons headed for Gaza?!), but it undermines all the efforts of the Quartet. It makes takes away any leverage of the E.U., the US, and Russia - who have demanded that the blockade stay until Hamas meets its obligations of recognizing Israel and honoring past agreements, might have had. If Israel lets the ships pass then Hamas wins. They waited out the

Quartet and they got what they wanted. But, it's a win in the other direction as well. If Israel blocks the ships and harms anyone, Hamas knows that Israel will be censured by the West because, as we know, civilian casualties are always Israel's fault.

Why did the people on the ship initiate a violent confrontation the second soldiers came onto the boat? Because, ultimately, they were determined to damage the Israeli enemy, even at the cost of their own lives. This is a refrain that is all too familiar. But this time, the goal was not to kill as many Israelis as possible. The goal of these activists was to damage Israel's reputation in the eyes of the world media. So their weapon was not a bomb belt. Their weapon is the media and, quite frankly, they know how to use it better than we do. They know that we live in an age of instant information, that media wars are won in broad daylight. Israel's taking the ship in darkness, hoping to avoid confrontation backfired big time. The only press coverage was after the fact and the only side of the story that was played was that of the so called "victims".

The media looks for simple sound bites, for pictures that are worth a thousand words. They don't want to know that the organization that bought and stocked the boats is tied in with Iran. They don't want to think that Turkey sponsored the ships because it wants to ally itself with the Iranians, which is why it offered, with Brazil, to broker a deal to let Iran keep its uranium. That's too complicated. The fact that Israel pledged to pass on all the humanitarian aid, which it allows through on a regular basis anyway after inspection, that's of little relevance either, because it is not flashy, it's not media manipulative, it's not newsworthy.

Were there mistakes made on Israel's part? For sure. Just go on any Israeli news website and you'll read all about it. But just because Israel played right into the hands of media manipulators, does not mean we need to be manipulated.

This week's Torah portion puts it rather succinctly. The Jewish People were about to go to war, to take on their greatest challenge. Twelve spies went out and 10 of them came back saying the job would be more than tough - it was impossible. Why? Because they let themselves be defined by their enemies. They said, "We felt like grasshoppers and that's how we must have looked to them". We know how the enemies of Israel want us to see ourselves. We know they are adept at swaying public opinion. We cannot let them sway ours. Arm yourself with facts. Read, learn, study, listen. Come June 17th and tell our Congressman, John Adler to push for the truth. He'll be speaking here at Beth El, dialoguing with us. He has a voice on Capitol Hill, and so do we. "We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing", and we are indeed capable of helping Israel. The loss of life is tragic. So are the injuries to Israel's soldiers, including serious head wounds. But most tragic of all is that the world is so willing to be blinded to what's really going on. We have the responsibility to speak the truth and live up to our potential as advocates for Israel, now more than ever.