

**CHOOSE LIFE:
ASARAH B'TEVET, 5769**

By Jonathan Boyd

Today, January 6, is *asarah b'tevet* – the 10th of Tevet – the day, according to tradition, that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar began his siege of Jerusalem, an act which ultimately ended in the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and the first exile. We still mourn this chapter from our past; it is a sad and desperate moment in the Jewish year when it is difficult not to feel drawn into the pessimism and tragedy of this and other similar episodes in Jewish history. And when that pessimism is fused together with the images from Gaza that are flooding our television screens, it becomes even harder not to despair. Despair for the Israelis who have had to live for so long with the almost daily missile attacks from Gaza, and despair for the Palestinian civilians whose lives have been decimated by the sheer force of Israel's military action. It is surely impossible to be an authentic Jew and to fail to be impacted by the suffering of the Palestinian people, and I fear for those of us whose hearts remain hardened to the TV images. To quote a well-known midrash, we do not sing when our enemies are drowning. Nevertheless, I stand alongside Israel in this conflict – I understand its conundrum, its fears, its motivations and its actions – and I maintain my long-held belief that when it goes to war, it surely does so far more out of necessity than desire.

So when this latest conflict in Gaza began, I adopted my default position. That position runs as follows: Israel wants, above all, to resolve this conflict. It has tried everything it possibly can to make peace with the Palestinians. Its first strategy was to hold onto the occupied territories as a bargaining chip for peace

with the Arab nations on its borders. That failed as far as the Palestinians were concerned – their response was to inflict terror upon Israelis throughout the 1970s, followed by a lengthy and bloody *intifada* in the late 1980s. So Israel tried to negotiate a bilateral agreement with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority. That also failed. Progress was made with the Oslo Accords, but when push came to shove – when the Palestinians were offered the Gaza Strip, the vast majority of the West Bank plus compensatory land on the Israeli side of the Green Line, and East Jerusalem as their capital – they responded with a second *intifada*, even bloodier than the first. So Israel tried a third strategy, not directly related to the Palestinian conflict, but highly informative nevertheless: to cede control of previously occupied southern Lebanon to a third party, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as demanded under the terms of a UN resolution, in the hope and expectation that it would keep Israel's northern border quiet. But that failed too. Under the watchful but largely impotent eyes of UNIFIL, Hezb'allah constructed an intricate network of tunnels and bunkers, and stockpiled thousands of missiles all pointed in Israel's direction, some 4,000 of which were deployed to great effect in the conflict in summer 2006. So Israel tried a fourth strategy. Forget bilateral agreements, forget third-party interventions, forget negotiations of any kind, just give up territory. Israel pulled out of Gaza in 2005, a bold political move which could have caused civil war in the country, in the hope that maybe, just maybe, if the Palestinian leadership was actually given a strip of land, it might take the opportunity to start to build a peaceful nation, and thereby demonstrate to the world that it can act responsibly when given the chance. But yet again, that didn't work. Since the disengagement from Gaza, Hamas has sent thousands of rockets into undisputed Israeli territory, causing untold physical and psychological damage to the Israelis impacted. The feeling in Israel in summer 2006 and the feeling in winter 2009 seems to be much the same. Nothing works. We can't hold onto the territory, we can't negotiate with

the Palestinian leadership, we can't bring in a third party to ensure a lasting peace, and we can't just unilaterally withdraw. And given all of that, we are left with only one more possibility. To fight. Not because we think that will work as a long-term strategy either, but because we have no choice. Every-so-often – every two to three years or so – we will have to fight, not because we believe that fighting will solve the conflict (we know it won't), but because we have to manage the conflict in this way from time-to-time before it becomes completely unmanageable.

The realist in me accepts this analysis. I know the history of the conflict. I know the contours of the land. I know what Israel means to the Jewish People, and what it has meant to us for thousands of years. And I know enough about Hamas and other similar Islamic extremist organisations to recognise that this has become a religious rather than political affair for them, and their hatred of Israel – and Jews in general – runs terrifyingly deep. I don't believe that Hamas wants to make peace with Israel, and I don't believe it has any interest in the two-state solution. I believe its solution is one state, run in accordance with its own understanding of Islamic law, in which Jews are at best 'tolerated,' and at worst, persecuted, oppressed and murdered. As abhorrent as it sounds, the realist in me knows that Hamas not only wanted this conflict, but wanted Palestinian civilians to die in it, because they know that Palestinian deaths increase both Palestinian militant extremism and international sympathy for the Palestinian struggle. What better than an Israeli airstrike on Palestinian homes to ensure that another generation of Palestinians grows up with hatred in its heart? And what better than an Israeli airstrike on a UN school in Gaza to ensure that public opinion throughout the world moves a little closer towards the Palestinian cause? So it has goaded Israel with missile attacks for year after year – particularly since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 – in the hope that Israel might finally react. Even the accusation that Israel never truly withdrew from Gaza

because it continued to control its borders, ports and airspace doesn't hold much water. There is truth in it to be sure, but the fact is, with Iranian support and Egyptian blindness Hamas managed to smuggle countless rockets and rocket launchers into Gaza. It could have opted to smuggle other things through the tunnels – like textbooks, computers, or agricultural supplies for example – but for Hamas, Israel's death has always been prized over and above Palestinian life. That, I believe, is the harsh reality of this conflict, and we would do well to remember it.

All of that stated, realism must always be tempered by idealism. And the very existence of the State of Israel, and perhaps Judaism as a whole, represents above all the triumph of the idealism of what is possible over the realism of what is current. A Jewish State was an impossible dream throughout almost two thousand years of Diaspora existence. A Jewish State was widely regarded as an impossible dream at the turn of the twentieth century when the Zionist movement began its pursuit of Jewish nationhood. And a Jewish State was surely viewed as an impossible dream as the gas chambers and ovens of Auschwitz and Treblinka worked overtime. Yet just three years after the end of the terrible chapter, a Jewish State was born.

Similarly, Judaism's narrative runs from slavery to freedom, from despair to hope, from ruin to redemption. It shuns death at almost all cost – the preservation of life trumps more or less everything. "Choose life, so that you and your children may live" says Deuteronomy. It is possible to construct an argument that maintains Israel is choosing life right now, opting to fight precisely in order to allow the Israeli civilians of Sderot and Ashkelon to be allowed to live. But the terrible images of blood-stained, lifeless Palestinian children, overwhelms that position. The realist in me recognises that this "collateral damage" (a sickening phrase) is a necessary price to be paid for life to be maintained in Israel, but the idealist in me refuses to accept the inevitability of this

reality. There has to be another way.

I don't know what that other way is. I see no alternative to the pathways that have already been tried and failed. Yet there is such a thing as a Jewish heart, and it is one that refuses to celebrate either the death of ourselves or our enemies, and that upholds the right to life wherever and whenever possible. There is also such a thing as a Jewish head – a *yiddische kopf* – that prides itself on its capacity to solve insoluble problems, and that wins Nobel prizes out of all proportion to our population size. These are dark, terrible days in the land of our dreams, soaked in pessimism, despair, ruin and death. It is easier to accept the reality that war is the only option open to us, than to struggle to find a new, unseen pathway to peace. It is easier to recall the destruction of Jerusalem by our enemies on *asarah b'tevet*, than it is to remember that *Tu b'Shevat* – the beginning of spring and the new life it brings – is just over a month away. It is easier to hear the warning sirens in Aviv Geffen's song *Hamilchama Haba-ah* (the next war), than the promise to the little girl in Yehoram Gaon's song that this will be *Hamilchama Ha-acharonah* (the last war). But that's not us. It never has been, and it never should be. If there is one positive that comes out of this awful Gazan winter, let it be this: that we resolve to strengthen our Jewish hearts and use our Jewish minds to finally solve this conflict. Maybe then we will at last be able to choose life, not just for us, but for our neighbours too.

The writer is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in London, and a former Planning Director of MAKOM.



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