

## Violence in Israel

### *Shabbat B'midbar 5781*

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Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was never going to be possible without armed conflict. Even God knows that: At the beginning of this week's portion, God commands Moses to take a census, only of males, "from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms," as the Israelites, liberated from Egyptian bondage, prepare to enter the Promised Land.<sup>i</sup>

As idealistic as the early Zionist settlers of the land were, they were not naïve to the likelihood of armed conflict. Col. Meir Pa'il, Ph.D., academic director of the Galili Center for Defense Studies, emphasizes: "From the time the modern Jewish community in Palestine became an entity [as early as 1870,] every Jewish town, neighborhood and farm faced the necessity of protecting itself. These defense organizations would eventually evolve into the Israel Defense Forces."<sup>ii</sup>

Idealism remains in the name of the Israeli Army: "Israel **Defense** Force" is a literal translation of the Hebrew name of a fighting force—army, navy, and air force—intended not to engage offensively, but only to defend the Jewish State. I am proud of my three nieces, and their husbands, who have honorably served in the IDF. My niece, Sarah Dollinger, was among the young officers charged with removing Jewish settlers from Gaza when Israel unilaterally disengaged from that territory in 2005.

We cannot know what Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was thinking when he masterminded the Gaza disengagement. He suffered a stroke shortly thereafter—and, though he lived for years, he never regained consciousness. We know that he was motivated by Israel's demographic problem: One of these days, there will be more Arabs than Jews between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. If all of the territory occupied by Israel in 1967 were kept under Israeli control, Israel would eventually be faced with either abandoning democracy or actually being the apartheid state it is already unjustly accused of being. Perhaps Sharon sought to prove that turning over any occupied territory to Palestinians was deadly dangerous. If so, he proved his point. On the other hand, perhaps he hoped that Gaza would thrive in peace alongside Israel, and more territorial concessions could be made for peace.

Shortly after Israel left Gaza, Hamas terrorists were elected to govern the territory. As my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman wrote from Jerusalem this week, “Hamas, like Hezbollah and Iran, will only be satisfied when the last Jew is either in the Mediterranean Sea or back in Europe ‘from where you came.’ We are at war with an enemy devoid of basic moral standards, a terrorist organization for whom any suffering of their citizens is legitimate so long as some Jewish blood is spilled. For Hamas, victory is measured by the extent of the pain they can extract, and not by any strategic advancement they achieve for their people.”<sup>iii</sup>

And today, Hamas is inflicting horrific pain on all the people of Israel—Jews, Palestinians, Druze, Bedouins, everybody. My colleague, Rabbi Dan Fink, shared a letter to American friends from his daughter, Rosa: “I’m sitting in the stairwell of my Tel Aviv apartment building at 3am with the sound of rockets exploding above my head. At this moment I am not thinking about who is right or which side is evil. I’m thinking that a rocket will shoot through the side of my apartment. I’m exhausted from the sirens ringing throughout the night.”<sup>iv</sup>

Ilana Kaufman, who heads the Jews of Color initiative, asks us to look at the Hebrew of the phrase usually translated “take a census” at the outset of this week’s Torah portion. That Hebrew is *se’u et ha-rosh*, literally, “lift up the head” of each one to be counted. Kaufman writes, “the instruction to ‘lift the heads of all’ is an invitation to know each name, each family, each Israelite.”<sup>v</sup> We cannot personally name every Israeli—and, more than that, every person in the region who is threatened by the violence. Still, we have an obligation: To know that dozens are dying, that hundreds are wounded, and that hundreds of thousands are in deadly danger. For me, and for many of you, they include friends, family, my rabbinic colleagues, and our partners at Congregation Bavat Ayin and throughout the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism.

And we must “lift up the heads,” also counting Palestinians, Druze, Bedouins, and others who are suffering. We rightly count, and grieve, children and other innocents who are killed when Israel must defend itself by attacking military assets which Hamas cynically places in the midst of civilian populations.

And we should not be afraid to acknowledge where Israel and Israelis have missed the mark. Make no mistake, the misdeeds of Israel’s government and police and of vile racist extremists are a pretext, not the cause, of Hamas’s bombardments. Still, in Jerusalem, Rabbi Hartman writes, “I am angry because we can do better... We have become so enamored with our power, that have forgotten

the rabbinic teaching that the truly powerful is the one who knows to control its use... The holy month of Ramadan is not the time to prove the extent of our control over Muslims, but to show our ability for self-control. It is not the time to intervene with the worship and celebration unless under the most extreme conditions, conditions that were far from being met.” Hartman adds that Israelis can “hide behind legal arguments that allow us to expel dozens of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem and settle Jews in their stead,” but his implication is clear: Israel should not do any of that. As Rabbi Hartman says, “I am angry that we are not striving to be better: smarter, more just, more hopeful, more visionary.”<sup>vi</sup>

Perhaps saddest is the violence in Israel’s mixed cities, where Jews and Arabs live side-by-side, often in the same apartment buildings. Jewish settlers from the West Bank have terrorized cities like Lod, lynching Arab citizens who have long been peaceful; and Arabs have retaliated against their neighbors, lynching Jews who had no connection to the terror. Don’t take it from me, but from Israel’s President, Reuven Rivlin, who cried: “We are dealing with a civil war between us without any reason. Please stop this madness. I beg of you. This country belongs to all of us.”<sup>vii</sup> When President Rivlin says “all of us,” he is counting, lifting up the head, of every citizen of Israel, Arab as well as Jew. Having committed his seven-year presidency to enhancing the citizenship rights of the twenty per cent of Israelis who are Arab, President Rivlin rightly fears that Israeli society is more fractured than ever.

Our Torah portion begins by envisioning the war required for the Children of Israel to inhabit their holy land. By contrast, the Haftarah, the accompanying prophetic reading foretells a time of peace. Hosea prophecies: “On that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, birds of the air, and with creeping things on the ground; I will remove the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and make them lie down in safety.”<sup>viii</sup> Tonight, let God be with Rosa and all the people, whatever their religion or ethnicity, sheltering in fear for their lives. Then, speedily and in our day, let this war, and all war, come to an end.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Numbers 1:1-3.

<sup>ii</sup> Col. Meir Pail, “Jewish Defense Organizations: The Evolution of Armed Jewish Defense in Palestine,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, [The Evolution of Armed Jewish Defense in Palestine \(jewishvirtuallibrary.org\)](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org).

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman, “I cannot just put my anger aside until things are quiet,” *The Times of Israel*, May 12, 2021, [I cannot just put my anger aside until things are quiet | Donniel Hartman | The Blogs \(timesofisrael.com\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/i-cannot-just-put-my-anger-aside-until-things-are-quiet/).

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Dan Fink, Facebook post, May 13, 2021.

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<sup>v</sup> Ilana Kaufman, "Counting Justly: Lifting Up Every Head," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, slated for 2021 publication by CCAR Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Hartman.

<sup>vii</sup> "Rivlin: Please stop this madness, it's civil war without reason," *The Times of Israel*, May 12, 2021, [Rivlin: Please stop this madness, it's civil war without reason | The Times of Israel](#).

<sup>viii</sup> Hosea 2:20.