

YOM KIPPUR MORNING – 5775
Hamas

More than thirty years ago, I read a magazine article by a novelist named Herb Gold. He had run into a non-Jewish acquaintance, at a dinner party, who was so happy to tell him about someone she was speaking with, who had read an article about a professor saying that there was proof that there never was a Holocaust during World War II. It turns out it was just a Zionist conspiracy to get sympathy.

He resisted the temptation to get into a public discussion with her, but later invited her to go out and see a French film together with him. She was unaware that the film was the graphic, but highly-acclaimed, French Holocaust documentary “Night and Fog.”

As she sat silently during the 32 minute film, tears ran down her cheeks. After the film, without a word, she ran to the car and was still crying when she got out of the car and went into her home.

A few months later, Herb Gold ran into the woman at an academic dinner and she greeted him enthusiastically. She again began talking about the myth of the Holocaust. This time, he confronted her. “Don’t you remember that film we saw together, “Night and Fog?” She was puzzled, saying that she had no recollection. “If I went to a movie with you, surely I would remember, wouldn’t I?”

Sometimes, truth confronts us and we simply refuse to let it in. This summer’s events in Gaza and Israel, for example, inspired enormous passion. Emotion, however, is rarely an adequate replacement for accuracy. The classic saying is “if the facts are on your side, argue the facts. If the facts are not on your side, pound the table.”

On Rosh Hashana, I spoke about the constant media pounding of the table regarding Israel’s so-called “occupation of Palestinian land.” This past summer, the media pounded the

table frantically and often inaccurately regarding the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

The war, itself, was hardly a surprise, since Hamas has been firing thousands of missiles and rockets at Israel for more than a decade. However, once Hamas organized the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers, the people and government of Israel had had enough.

So have I. Israel faces every day smack in the middle of a region of despots and dictators. Israel endures the threat of a 9/11-like catastrophe virtually every month, from neighbors sworn to its destruction. Nonetheless, Israel has built an oasis of intellect and culture, a nation on the cutting edge of technology and science, which promotes a vibrant democratic spirit, the same values which America holds dear.

Three and a half years ago, I offered a history course as part of our Adult Education program. Our usual Adult Education offerings attract around a dozen people. I was stunned when

this six-week course attracted forty people to the first session, with the overwhelming majority continuing through to the end. It was so satisfying that so many people understood that history really matters, that one cannot plan a successful future without understanding the past. This is especially the case in The Middle East, where so much is based on interpretations of history.

This summer, I grew so frustrated with so much of the media's coverage of the war between Hamas and Israel that I began watching FOX News. And once I got used to seeing female anchors dressed like they were going to a cocktail party, I noticed that there was little difference in the quality of the reporting and analysis, as compared to other cable networks. Some reports were of high quality, others were adequate and several were rather embarrassing, no different from CNN or MSNBC. Still, it was good to see someone supporting Israel and pointing out the flaws in the reporting, rather than simply providing a game-like tally of people killed on both sides.

Any accurate news story deserves to be told, whether or not you or I care for the contents. However, when reporters rely on self-serving information provided by terrorists, it is irresponsible, at the very least, to present that information without revealing its source.

Israelis live with the reality of the events around them. They see and hear it constantly and they can separate the wheat from the chaff. Most of us who live nearly six thousand miles away are not as well versed. As a result, millions of Americans rely on entertainers like Jon Stewart to be their primary source for news.

The inability to clearly report the reality in Gaza this summer led one of Israel's most prominent, left-wing doves, the acclaimed author Amos Oz, to protest. He asked "what would you do if your neighbor across the street sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire at your nursery?" "And what would you do if

your neighbor across the street digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or in order to kidnap your family?”

With the exception of much of the Arab world, the rest of the world has grown to sympathize with the Jews . . . as long as we are dead. The world cannot stop paying homage to the Jews of the Holocaust . . . now. However, when we Jews seek to defend ourselves from those who would destroy us again, we are accused of being murderers, even as the rockets fly over our heads.

During the lifetimes of everyone here today, America and Europe have repeatedly bombed civilian populations, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. This past Tuesday, in response to reports that US-led air strikes against Islamic State killed many civilians, The White House acknowledged that the “strict standards that President Obama imposed last year to prevent civilian deaths from U.S. drone

strikes will not apply to U.S. military operations in Syria and Iraq.”

So it is a sin for Israel to defend itself against missiles fired into its territory, but America is justified in killing civilians thousands of miles away from American shores?

Israel responded to thousands of Hamas missiles by alerting Gazans with phone calls, text messages, warning bombs which did not explode and more before attacking a building housing terrorists or rocket launchers. Yet Israel is accused of committing war crimes?!

And among those criticizing Israel the most harshly for her behavior is Europe! EUROPE!!! The perpetrators of the biggest genocide in world history are criticizing those whom it could not murder fast enough less than seventy years ago. The definition of *hutzpah* is “unmitigated gall.” The epitome of *hutzpah* this summer was Europe!

Last Spring, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, the “moderate” Palestinian force in the region,

announced a unity government with Hamas, the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood which rules Gaza, glorifies terrorism, and vows to eradicate Israel.

Hamas was fully aware that its kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers, plus the continuing rocket attacks, would provoke an Israeli response. While Israel targeted terrorists, Hamas actively promoted civilian casualties, thus enabling it to show the world how “cruel” Israel was.

Most of you are familiar with the civilian shields, the phony casualty numbers, the pictures of victims of the war in Syria being passed off as Gaza victims of Israeli bombing. Though much of the media knew that Gazan schools, homes, hospitals and mosques housed rocket launchers, they were intimidated by Hamas into not reporting the information.

Despite knowing that the Hamas-provided information was often suspect, all of the networks continued to rely on Hamas for information. All of the networks regularly lumped all

Palestinian casualties together, though the numbers included terrorists and many Gazan victims of Hamas rockets and Hamas retribution.

I found the numbers count to be especially infuriating. This war was not about how many Israelis died vs how many Palestinians died. Every one of the four thousand Hamas missiles fired was an attempt to murder Israeli civilians. The fact that Israel had far fewer casualties than the Palestinians is a direct result of Israel taking defensive action against the rockets, while Hamas focused on bringing their casualties, real and fabricated, to the media.

From the Hamas military headquarters, located under Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, to the missiles fired from schools, mosques, hospitals and more, Hamas made every effort to maximize the civilian casualty numbers which would result from Israel's response to Gaza missiles. While Israel did kill five hundred terrorists, many civilians died after being ordered not to leave by their leaders.

Once the violence ended, the truth began to come out.

However, like a big headline in the paper, the subsequent retraction drew little attention. Though Israel's actions were largely justified, Hamas made more noise, their cause made for a better story and, for much of the world, it is the way the conflict will continue to be understood.

As Jews, we mourn the death of all innocents and there is no doubt that many innocent Palestinians died in Gaza, along with the innocent Israeli victims. On this Yom Kippur, we mourn the death of those innocents, we ask forgiveness, as a community, for any instances when Israeli actions, in the chaos of war, may have gone too far. However we also recognize that the civilians of Gaza were never targeted by Israel. By contrast, the civilians of Israel were always the target of the Hamas attacks.

Had Israel not invested in Iron Dome technology, it may have earned more of the world's sympathy. Maybe the sight of hundreds or thousands of dead Jews in the streets of Tel Aviv and elsewhere would have played out better in the media.

However, unlike the terrorist leaders of Hamas, Israel has always believed that the primary responsibility of a nation's leadership is to defend its people. The leadership of Israel used concrete and steel to defend its citizens with bomb shelters. The people of Gaza, however, could not retreat to bomb shelters, because their terrorist leadership never built them. Since Hamas believes that Gaza's citizens are more valuable as television props, the only underground building done in Gaza was for a military headquarters and the tunnels, dozens of which were specifically intended for terror attacks.

It is hard to believe that the leadership of Gaza would care so little about the welfare of the people of Gaza. Yet the Hamas focus is on their cause and the civilian victims are seen as necessary for that cause.

Of course, if one hates Israel, none of that matters. However, if one cares about facts, if one cares about "getting it right", all of that matters. There have always been those who hated Jews or hated Israel or both. Working with victims of abuse, one learns

that they sometimes are emotionally harassed into believing that they are the cause of their own abuse.

I speak out today because I do not want any of you to believe that Israel sought this war or that it was the aggressor. Israel constantly sought to stop the war, agreeing to repeated ceasefires, but Hamas refused to stop firing the missiles. What they were waiting for was one big Israeli mistake which would bring down the wrath of the world community on Israel.

The news media largely played along with Hamas, whether due to intimidation, threats, petro dollars or a historic bias. CNN has a lengthy and stormy history of biased coverage regarding Israel.

In the end, however, the reasons for the faulty news coverage should not obscure the fact that Israel's response was overwhelmingly proper. As it did during The Gulf War and at other times, Israel acted with more restraint than almost any other nation in the history of the world, which has been so ferociously attacked.

We Jews subject ourselves to a higher level of criticism.

Cancelled subscriptions to the New York Times are less important than always maintaining a healthy level of skepticism about everything we read and hear. We Jews do not accept blindly; we ask questions, lots of questions.

Sadly, this entire war is likely to end up being nothing more than a tragic waste of life, as no permanent solution to the problem of Gaza will result from this war. However, we can be sure that Israel and its supporters will face increased hostility around the world, including on college campuses this year, as a result of the reporting of the war. Now, more than ever, it is critical to be well informed in order to be able to respond.

There is no need for us to fear confronting the truth of Gaza, as opposed to the story of Gaza.

I take enormous pride in knowing how valuable Israel considers the lives of its people to be, in contrast to the culture of death promoted by Hamas and its allies. Just ask yourself how America would respond to someone firing twelve missiles into our territory? Then realize that Hamas has fired 12,000 rockets

and missiles towards Israel in the past decade. Far from being an aggressor, Israel is a model of restraint under attack. Those who launch missile attacks have no right to protest when their intended victim fights back.

In July, a non-binding, bi-partisan resolution was introduced in the House of Representatives to support Israel during the conflict. It passed unanimously, with 150 co-sponsors. This tells us that there is still some hope for the future.

And that is why we go forth from here, continuing to follow the words of the Torah “seek peace and pursue it.” At the same time, we advocate for Israel, our historic miracle on the Mediterranean. May the day come when, like Abraham and Isaac, Israel and the Palestinian people are able to walk together, in peace. Until that day arrives, however, let us never apologize for a strong Israel and may we always be among those who help to keep it strong. AMEN