

Every September, when the kids return to school and we begin our busy schedule of programs, I look forward to reconnecting with those of you I haven't seen in a while. Among the first questions we ask each other is “how did you spend your summer?” In past years, I have had no trouble answering this question. I would readily volunteer that we have taken trips out west for sightseeing and to visit family, that I worked on my garden, that we enjoyed the beaches and going into the city. But this year, I find myself hesitating. Yes, we did take a short family trip, I went out to see my father, and we enjoyed some local attractions. My cucumber harvest exceeded my expectations. But the real answer to the question, however, is that, like many of us here, I spent most of the summer worrying about Israel.

Our anxiety began when three Jewish teenagers were kidnapped in June. Tensions rose when the boys were found murdered and Hamas began firing round after round of rockets from Gaza into Israel. These were not just the relatively crude rockets of past attacks. Hamas targeted major population centers like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and even managed to disrupt flights from Ben Gurion Airport for a day. Meanwhile, we learned that Hamas had constructed dozens of tunnels from Gaza into Israeli territory in preparation for large scale terrorist attacks on Israel. Israel responded at first with massive air strikes designed to destroy Hamas's missiles, tunnels and command and control operations. Despite the devastation, Hamas rejected or broke numerous cease fire arrangements.

During this time, I got into the habit of waking up every day and checking to see how many missile attacks had taken place overnight, and which cities were targeted. Some people I know even went one step further and downloaded an Israeli red-alert app that sounded a warning every time a missile launch was detected. Fortunately, Israel's Iron Dome Missile Defense System intercepted almost all the missiles that might have done damage or taken lives. But life in much of Israel had become a constant exercise in vigilance, with frequent trips to bomb shelters. I worried for my friends who were living in or visiting Israel. I worried about tens of thousands of Israeli soldiers who were already in harm's way. I worried about Israelis, especially in the South, whose lives were disrupted day after day. And , of course, I also worried about our planned congregational trip to Israel, which was less than a month away.

Then, Israel sent ground forces into Gaza. Unlike previous military actions, this one did not end quickly. Day after day, Israeli soldiers were killed in the line of duty. It quickly became clear that Hamas was not trying to win battles, but simply to murder as many soldiers as possible. My heart broke with the news of each and every young Israeli man or woman who was killed. Sixty-five soldiers died this summer, sixty-five of our brothers and sisters, including three Americans; Sixty-five young people who were somebody's children, who were among the best and brightest of the next generation. My heart also broke seeing the death and destruction among the civilian population in Gaza. The devastation and loss of life did not seem any less tragic to me, just because I knew

that Hamas deliberately put people and homes in harm's way, or that Israel tried mightily to avoid civilian casualties. And my heart broke with the failure of every cease fire attempt, because i knew it meant more bloodshed—and because the continued fighting put our trip to Israel, scheduled for august 10th, in jeopardy.

Ten days before we were scheduled to leave, with rockets still flying into Israel, our tour group held an emergency meeting. With a heavy heart, our group decided to postpone our trip until next summer; a good decision but a sad one.

Israel and Hamas finally agreed to a cease fire exactly one month ago. More than 4000 rockets had been fired at Israel. At least thirty-one terror tunnels had been discovered. Sixty-seven Israelis had died, and many hundreds of Palestinians.

To all appearances, life in Israel has returned to normal. People are starting to return to cities and towns in the south. Politicians are back to jockeying for positions in the next government. And everyone is taking a nice long weekend for Rosh HaShannah. But if we look deeper at what happened this summer, we see that some important changes have taken place in both Israel and the diaspora. Looking at these changes, and also at what has stayed the same, provides all of us who care about Israel with some important takeaways.

To begin with, we were reminded this summer just how strong, resourceful and cohesive a nation Israel is. For the first time, Hamas attacked Israel with sophisticated weapons, a multi-pronged strategy

and well-trained fighters. Israel found itself facing a formidable enemy on fighting on its home soil. But Israel prevailed; destroying much of Hamas's weaponry, crippling its leadership and demolishing its terror tunnels. Even more impressive, Israel accomplished all these things despite making a concerted effort to avoid civilian casualties. Israel took measures that, as far as I know, have never before been used to minimize the death toll for non-combatants; including setting off warning shells, placing cell phone calls and sending text messages to announce that an attack was going to take place, and even air-dropping leaflets to show Palestinians safe areas to take refuge. It is unfortunate that so few people outside of Israel seemed to understand or appreciate the lengths to which Israel went to avoid civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, in Israel, Israelis found a way to keep their lives and their economy going even while under constant attack. Israelis adapted to the constant warning sirens and dashes to shelters with same resilience that has carried them through so many other difficult times. And amazingly, Israelis across the political spectrum united together in solidarity during the attacks. For the most part, partisan bickering was replaced by expressions of support and unity from the far left to the far right. All in all, this summer's crisis served as a reminder of just what a remarkable country Israel is. I am sure that for many of us, Israel's show of strength, resilience and unity evoked a tremendous amount of pride and renewed our appreciation of the miracle that is the State of Israel.

We also learned again this summer that our strong, vocal support

for Israel makes a difference. All over the world, from London to South Africa to Ecuador, anti-Israel rallies drew large, angry crowds. Some of these rallies spilled over into violent attacks against Jew and Jewish institutions. It almost seemed as if the whole world had turned against Israel.

But here in the United States, things were different. Yes, there were anti-Israel demonstrations. But there were many more pro-Israel rallies. These rallies, including three that were held right here in our own community, drew thousands of people, from all sectors of the Jewish community and beyond. Here in New York, politicians and civic leaders lined up one behind the other to address the rallies. We know that our voices were heard in Washington, where support for Israel right to defend itself against Hamas's attacks was strong throughout the crisis. Congress overwhelmingly passed numerous resolutions in support of Israel's actions, and additional funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system. In spite of some well-publicized tension between the White House and the Israeli government, President Obama repeatedly expressed his support for Israel's right to defend itself and its actions in Gaza. Our leaders know how strongly we, the American Jewish community, support Israel. And they continue to hear our voices even when the rest of the world seems to have turned on Israel. Israelis heard our voices too, and knew that they were not alone in the struggle against Hamas. If there is one thing we should definitely take away from this summer's events, it is the importance of continuing to speak out for

Israel in the future.

It may have seemed that this summer's crisis was simply round three in the battle between Israel and Hamas. But the Middle East has changed in the last few years. The conflict between Israel and Hamas is no longer taking place in isolation. Hamas, in particular, is part of a spectrum of Islamic extremists that includes Hezbollah, jihadists, ISIS and even Iran. These groups now wield tremendous power in the Middle East. And as different as these groups are in orientation and ideology, they share a common goal: the destruction of Israel.

Hamas spent years preparing for this summer's attacks. Hamas diverted a tremendous amount of building material intended for construction of homes and businesses in Gaza and built a large network of terror tunnels instead. Meanwhile, Hamas, with help from other Islamic extremists including Iran, smuggled enough sophisticated weapons into Gaza to supply several thousand fighters. Even as many people in Gaza lived in poverty and squalor, Hamas poured its resources into planning a massive attack, possibly for the first day of Rosh HaShannah. Ultimately, Hamas hoped to radicalize Palestinians on the West Bank and open a two front war. The goal was to kill as many Israelis as possible, and to make life in Israel increasingly untenable. Hamas viewed this operation as the first of a series designed to ultimately eradicate Israel. It hoped that other Islamic extremists, like Hezbollah would eventually join the battle.

For Israel, then, this summer's operation in Gaza was more than

just an anti-terrorism action. Israel was fighting for its life. Yes, Israel was still stronger and better equipped than Hamas. But in no way was Israel's response to Hamas's missile and tunnel attacks disproportionate. In the first place, Hamas unleashed tremendous force against Israel. Only Israel's iron Dome prevented mass devastation across the country. More importantly, Israel was not just fighting to stop an immediate threat. Israel was fighting to cripple, and hopefully disarm an enemy actively seeking its destruction; an enemy actively supported by other Islamic extremist groups and countries. If the United States can, in President Obama's words, act to “degrade and destroy the ISIS threat” which is five thousand miles away, how much more imperative is it for Israel to degrade and destroy the Hamas threat that is right on its border. This threat must now be seen in the context of the new realities of the Middle East. The fight against Hamas is part of a larger fight against Islamic extremism. And that fight is now taking place on three of Israel's international borders. Israel's situation is much more precarious than it was when Hamas took over Gaza in 2007. And Israel must act more decisively to ensure its security.

Here in our own communities, we need to take this new reality into account when we talk about Israel. Over the summer, I was proud to see that a broad spectrum of Jews stood up in support of Israel. The usual tension between the right and left mostly gave way to a united front. And that's reassuring. We need to know that we will all stand with Israel in a time of crisis, no matter what we think of a particular Israeli government

or its policies.

The time for spirited debates will come again soon, if it is not already here. And when it does, I hope that those of us on the left, on the right, and in the middle, approach these debates with humility. Those of us on the left, myself included, need to recognize that the threat of Islamic extremism complicates our long cherished idea of a two state solution. Much as we might hope for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, we have to recognize that that state could easily be radicalized if the wrong group comes to power. In addition, we have to acknowledge the very real threat Islamic extremists pose to Jordan, and could pose to a Palestinian state from a radicalized Jordan. These new realities don't rule out a two state solution. But they do demand some very strong guarantees for Israeli security. On the other hand, those on the right need to recognize the inherent instability of the status quo. Palestinian frustration fuels Hamas and other extremist groups. And the growth of Hamas, in turn, strengthens the influence of Islamic extremists, including Iran. Somehow, we need to prevent the situation from getting worse; and that may well mean finding a way to work with more moderate Palestinians and the Arab countries that support them. Most important, we need to all recognize that there are no easy answers. Our old formulas for peace and security don't work in the new neighborhood Israel lives in. We must join with our brothers and sisters in Israel to search for new ideas.

Even as we look for a new perspective on Israel, we have to work to

correct the warped perspective on Israel so often presented in our media. We learned once again this summer just how damaging media bias can be. I have always been skeptical of claims that the media is biased against Israel. I never canceled my New York Times subscription in frustration. I seldom write angry letters to the editor about Israel coverage. For the most part, I have dismissed others' concerns as hypersensitive, part of the mentality I reject that anyone who criticizes Israel is an enemy of Israel or an anti-Semite. But very quickly, this summer, I began to tune out the American media in favor of Israeli sources. The inherent bias in the coverage of the events in Gaza made me angry. Reporters insisted on "balanced reporting"--matching every claim by an Israeli spokesperson with an answer from a Palestinian sources, no matter how disingenuous the answer. This methodology gave the impression of two siblings squabbling, instead of a sovereign nation defending itself against a terrorist attack. Hamas's causality figures were reported as facts; even though later investigations by the BBC and the NY Times found that the number of civilian deaths was greatly exaggerated. Reporters also failed to reveal the extreme censorship that Hamas exercised on the media in Gaza. It turns out that there was plenty of evidence that Hamas used civilians as human shields and stored and fired missiles in schools and hospitals. Reporters in Gaza were simply too intimidated by Hamas's threats to tell us what they knew.

At the same time, Israel's actions were relentlessly scrutinized and every possible flaw highlighted. In a chilling article in the Tablet, former

AP reporter Matti Friedman describes how major media outlets single out Israel for negative attention.

Israeli actions are analyzed and criticized, and every flaw in Israeli society is aggressively reported. In one seven-week period, from Nov. 8 to Dec. 16, 2011, I decided to count the stories coming out of our bureau on the various moral failings of Israeli society—proposed legislation meant to suppress the media, the rising influence of Orthodox Jews, unauthorized settlement outposts, gender segregation, and so forth. I counted 27 separate articles, an average of a story every two days. In a very conservative estimate, this seven-week tally was higher than the total number of significantly critical stories about Palestinian government and society, including the totalitarian Islamists of Hamas, that our bureau had published in the preceding three years.

This pattern, Friedman notes, held for reporting about the war in Gaza as well.

There are many factors that contribute to the media's obsession with casting Israel in a negative light. Friedman suggests that one of these factors is the vestige of Christian anti-semitism that remains in Western culture. He may be right. Certainly, we saw this summer how

powerful a force anti-Semitism still is in Europe. Though some of it was driven by recent Moslem immigrants, thousands of native Europeans used the conflict in Gaza as a chance to show their hatred toward Jews. After this summer's events, it is clear that we need to strengthen our support for our fellow Jews in Europe who have been targeted by anti-Semitic attacks. It is also clear that we need to renew our battle against media bias and demand that Israel be covered the same way that any free democratic nation is covered. Israel should get no more attention, negative or otherwise, than Spain, Sweden or Australia. Unlike Hamas, we are not demanding a whitewash; just fairness, accuracy and a sense of proportion in a world where Israel represents only a tiny fraction of humanity.

For the moment, life is back to normal in Israel. We hope and pray that it stays that way during the coming year. In spite of everything that happened this summer, I am optimistic. Our tour group is determined to go to Israel next summer. We plan to leave for Israel on August 16, 2015. We are expecting a wonderful and safe trip. There is still time to join us.

In the meantime, we have much to do in response to last summer's events. We need to find a way to maintain that united coalition that stood with Israel during the crisis. We need to make engagement with Israel an even higher priority. Continuing to create opportunities like our Israel Trip and our collection for Lone Soldiers can help bring us together in support of Israel, no matter what our politics might be. We should continue to encourage individual travel to Israel as well. I would love

some more help in finding constructive ways for our community to engage with Israel. If you would like to help, please let me know.

We also need to find ways to help younger Jews feel more connected to and supportive of Israel. This is a difficult challenge. Somehow, we have to help young Jews hear Israel's story amidst the constant negativity of the media and the strident voices of campus activists. Supporting and encouraging our young adults to take advantage of the Brithright program and other Israel programs will certainly make a difference.

Finally, we must resolve to maintain our commitment to Judaism's highest ideals even when our enemies threaten Israel's existence. It's hard to forget the chilling cell-phone recording of Hamas kidnappers singing and cheering as they killed Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaar, and Eyal Yifrach last June. Terrorist de-humanize their victims; it makes them easier to kill. This summer, we saw terrorists in Gaza de-humanize their friends and neighbors as well; callously placing them in the line of fire. In the course of defending itself, Israel killed hundreds of Hamas fighters. Hundreds of civilians were killed as well. We, as Jews, do not take these deaths lightly. Human life is sacred. When we kill, even in self-defense, it is a tragedy. Hamas may want to kill every Israeli, every Jew. But we cannot be dragged down to that level. Even though we are targets of hatred, we must denounce hate in our communities. Even though we have come under attack, we must reaffirm our desire to live in peace. We must nurture the dream of co-existence even in this darkest of times; so

that we do not lose sight of our ultimate goal. So that one day, when the time is right, we can find partners who will work with us to ensure the existence of a peaceful, secure, and democratic Israel that can be a driving force for a safer, saner and more prosperous Middle East.