**[Reflections on the Israel-Lebanon War](http://btvshalom.org/btvshalom.org/resources/spitzer.shtml)m**

**Rabbi Toba Spitzer**

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As the weeks and events have unfolded since Hezbollah guerrillas first killed and abducted Israeli soldiers in a cross-border attack, I have experienced a gamut of emotions and responses. Surprise at the extent and intensity of the initial Israeli response; shock and concern at the sight of rockets falling in downtown Haifa and other Israeli towns; deepening dismay and profound sorrow at the daily reports of death and destruction on all sides. As winnable military objectives become less and less likely, as Israel and Hezbollah become locked in an incessant cycle of retaliatory violence, and as an increasing number of innocent civilians on both sides lose their lives, I believe we are once again witnessing the inevitable results of an attempt to settle a dispute at the point of a gun—or a rocket launcher.

There are many ways to approach this issue. Once can make arguments about the justification for Israel’s attacks, and the realpolitik aspects of dealing with Hezbollah. There are the ethical and legal issues involving the targeting of civilians in war-time. Or one can simply sit in the presence of so much human suffering and feel deep pain and despair. How to respond? What to say?

My own responses stem from many parts of who I am. I have lived in Israel, have friends and family there, and feel a profound connection to that land as a Jew. I am fearful for and concerned about the Israelis in the line of fire, and I am deeply worried about the growing anti-Israel sentiment that this war has engendered around the world. I grieve for the Israelis killed by Hezbollah rockets. And because it is the Jewish nation, one founded on beautiful ideals, I am upset and saddened when I see the Israeli military engaged in operations that I consider unnecessary and at times immoral.

I am also a person who works to nurture a sense of compassion and an open heart. From that human place, I am deeply pained by the news of hundreds of Lebanese dead and the thousands more unable to receive aid or escape, and feel great sorrow at the environmental devastation caused by massive oil spills on the Lebanon coast. I fail to comprehend the cynicism of Hezbollah fighters who endanger their own people by making their neighborhoods their launching pads. And as an American, I am concerned and angered that the massive mistakes our government has made in Iraq—and in dealing with the Muslim world in general—have created the conditions that spurred this current conflict and put Israel in danger.

As a religious person, as someone who takes ethics seriously, I am disturbed by those who either cynically accept the notion of “collateral damage” as a necessary and inevitable part of war (what an Orwellian term! Such “damage” means the killing and maiming of innocent human beings), or who argue that the ethical nature of an action depends solely on the motives of the actor, not the results of the action. Jewish ethics, universal ethics, demand that we examine the results of our actions, intended or not. When innocent civilians in neighborhoods far from Hezbollah rocket launchers become targets, when refugees attempting to flee the fighting are killed on the road, when aid organizations are unable to deliver relief due to aerial bombardments—these are both tragic and preventable events. The fact that Hezbollah intentionally targets civilians does nothing to erase that truth. If Israel, and Jews in general, become unable to distinguish between legitimate acts of war and ethically problematic—even immoral—acts, than we have truly lost our way.

As a rabbi, I think about what teachings come from this experience, and what this means for the Jewish community as a whole. I am not learning the same lessons as a number of my colleagues and many others in the Jewish community. I do not believe that the entire world, or even the entire Arab and Muslim world, is bent on the eradication of Israel or the Jewish people. Hezbollah’s rhetoric is both vile and frightening, but its military capacity is limited. It is highly doubtful that either Syria or Iran are interested in an all-out war with Israel. I do not deny that Muslim extremism and anti-Semitism are real—and dangerous—forces in the world today. But any attempt to defuse their power will not be won through the killing of innocent citizens of Lebanon. Quite the opposite: the current war has served only to gain Hezbollah respect in quarters that bore it little good will a few months ago.

Instead, I am learning, once again, of the folly of the human propensity to believe that that which displeases or frightens us can be eradicated, wiped out, made not to exist, if only we apply enough force. This was the magical thinking that led the Bush administration into war in Iraq, and which governs the current “war on terror”: the notion that an amorphous “enemy” can be simply wiped out. This is the fantasy which fuels the anti-Israel rhetoric of Iranian leaders and Hezbollah. Surely we Jewish people are the best evidence that a group of people—no matter how despised, no matter how enormous the violence used against it—cannot be removed from existence by force. On the flip side of that equation, the Nazis too were not “eradicated” in that war—they were defeated, and then Nazism itself lost its power. So, too, we have to accept that that which is frightening and threatening to us cannot be eliminated through the simple application of military force.

Extremists of the Hezbollah sort feed off of extremity; war and devastation are their life-blood. Israel’s response to this most recent provocation has been a gift to Hezbollah, not a deterrent. Might a more targeted & limited Israeli response to the original Hezbollah attack—as Israel has responded in the past—have prevented the rain of rockets on northern Israel? It is impossible to know now. Yet while Israel, like every nation, has the right to defend itself, this current campaign may have instead seriously weakened Israel’s security in a number of ways—from exposing the limits of its conventional army against a guerrilla force, to the tidal wave of negative feeling engendered across the world by the bombing campaign in Lebanon (not to mention, of course, the increasing death and dislocation within Israel as a result of the ongoing cycle of retaliation). I fear the results if the current campaign widens into an even fiercer war.

There are many who argue that the only response to evil and hatred is force—and that the alternative is to allow oneself to be destroyed. They would argue that those of us who are skeptical of military solutions to socio-political problems are, at best, naïve.

In response, I offer the wisdom of the Torah, in its recounting of the most dramatic response to human evil in our mythic history. According to the book of Genesis, humanity in the generations following Adam and Eve became so violent and degraded that God came to regret that human beings had ever been created. As a solution, God decided to flood the entire earth, wiping out all living creatures in an attempt to start fresh with one righteous man, his family, and their arkful of animals.

Yet after the flood receded, God again had a change of heart. In one of the more intriguing passages in the Torah, God says to God’s self: “Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind, ki yetzer lev ha-adam ra m’n’urav—for the inclination, the urging, of the human heart is evil from its youth” (Gen. 8:21). God, here, is quite the opposite of naïve. In realizing that there is a fundamental propensity for violence and evil in human nature, the Holy One decides that ongoing cycles of destruction would be pointless. Instead, the Torah embarks on a story of God’s grand journey to contain, shape, and elevate the human heart—to come into relationship with human beings through the mechanism of the covenant so as to control the worst of human impulses, and enable the best of human potential.

We human beings are created b’tzelem Elohim, in God’s image. May we learn from God’s example and avoid the misguided trap of thinking that the currents of human evil can simply be washed from the earth if sufficient force is applied. May we instead apply ourselves with all the power of our hearts and minds to the long-term project of creating a world in which fear and anger no longer propel the actions of individuals and of nations.

In the short term, I urge our own government to work with the international community for an immediate ceasefire, in order to attempt to resolve this crisis with intelligent diplomacy, the installation of an international peacekeeping force, and renewed support for the democratic Lebanese government. I pray that we in America, we in the Jewish community, can be a positive force for true peace in Israel and in Lebanon, and can help hasten an end to this fruitless war.