**War in Lebanon: Where Are We Going?**

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Sometimes the reality of the world interrupts and intrudes on our plans. That is what has happened to me this week, as I have scrapped the sermon I prepared for this evening in order to talk about, reflect, and share my deep and profound fear, concern, sadness and anger at the situation in the Middle East, as Israel is now not only fighting in Gaza, but is engaged in a war with Lebanon in response to the unprovoked, heinous and outrageous act of Hezbollah crossing Israel’s sovereign border, killing and abducting Israeli soldiers, and now raining missiles into northern towns, including the unprecedented reach into Haifa. Israel has the right and responsibility to defend its citizens and Hezbollah is a terrorist group of thugs and madmen with no purpose in life save for destruction and murder. I feel that this is a separate situation from Hamas in Gaza, such that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves the attempt to create a two-state solution so that Israelis and Palestinians can finally live side by side in relative peace. Sadly, the Hezbollah action now completely shifts the focus off of that, even as the Gaza battles continue to rage and the hope for negotiations, let alone a peace agreement, are all but dead, again. And Hezbollah does not care about this at all, which is the great irony, for in their actions, they are doing the most harm to their own brothers and sisters, showing once again the total disregard for the Palestinians that seems to pervade the greater Arab world.

So, what is there to say tonight? Where is my help to come from in times of trouble? The psalmist says to look to the mountains, our help will come from God, the maker of Heaven and Earth, the creator and sustainer of peace. So, I look to the mountains, and I pray for guidance and wisdom. What I have tonight are more questions than answers, save for the request and demand for an immediate ceasefire, pullback and ramping down of the current violence, which will only happen if the United States government steps in and negotiates, or dictates, a ceasefire. I am deeply angered that we have let the past two weeks in Gaza, and now the escalation with Lebanon, take place without any intervention by the President or Secretary of State. We have seen tepid calls for restraint, scripted repetitions for both sides to cool off, while saying that of course Israel has the right to defend itself. But where is our leadership? Why is the president not going himself, or sending Dr. Rice, as the leaders of the free world and the supposed best friend of Israel, in order to step in and stop war? I find this reprehensible and unacceptable and I would urge all of us to be contacting our representatives, as I have today and for the past weeks, on a daily basis, calling for a high level envoy to broker a ceasefire, and then negotiate the return of the soldiers. All other talks of peace are on hold until the current violence stops. And make no mistake, this is the worst it has been in years, and the new Israeli government, with Prime Minister Olmert and Defense Minister Peretz both untried in military action, needs our help to navigate the response to the current provocations. Our prayers are with the families in Israel that are suffering deeply, losing loved ones to these horrific rocket attacks, and with the IDF soldiers battling for their lives and the life of the State of Israel. Among some of the people I work with, on the board of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, we talked about how much we actually miss the leadership of Ariel Sharon, as hard as that is for someone like me to say.

I feel clear that he would not be responding to the current situation with as much overwhelming force and military invasion as we are seeing. But, he is no longer available, even for counseling. May the leaders of Israel, I pray, be finding counsel in someone, anyone, who can tell them that a war with Syria, and God forbid Iran, is not in their best interest, nor is in the interest of the entire world. Yet, I fear that the maniacal leader of Iran, and the lack of any leadership in Syria, are pushing for and actively seeking a war with Israel, which will ultimately lead to a war with the U.S., hence spawning another world conflict, only this time most of the major players are nuclear powers. The Armageddon battle that all the fundamentalists seek is being initiated through these provocations and we must not be baited into playing out their devious desires. I fear that the silence of our government speaks volumes to the point that this president, in some way, shares those Armageddon visions. Lets pray that I am wrong.

When I look to God, to the mountains of peace, I am seeking to remind myself that shalom is what we are called upon to seek. I am seeking to remind myself that revenge, hatred and violence is not the way of God, no matter what certain Biblical verses tell us, including this week’s parsha and the actions of Pinchas, the one who killed two people out of passion and vengeance for God. The rabbis teach us that even though the literal reading of the text seems to praise Pinchas for his behavior, even offering him the covenant of peace and the priesthood, we should understand that God gave him that covenant in order to reign in his violent tendencies, in order to teach him a better way to act. War will never bring an end to hatred, only peace will. War will never solve the problem of violence and destruction, only peace will. Where are the voices of Dr. King, Rabbi Heschel and the great prophets of Israel who called us to reach for a higher, more holy way of being? Where are the voices of Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein, who found ways to change their lives from soldiers to statesmen, from enemies to neighbors? Where are the voices of reason and rational, helping our loved ones under siege to make the best decisions possible? I stand with those who condemn Hezbollah and know that Israel must act to defend itself; yet, I also stand with those people, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, who are calling for the leaders of the world to help Israel not get drawn into Iran’s bait of a regional showdown, one that can only end with devastating results. In this polarity, filled with fear, despair, sickness and pain, I pray for hope, light, love, reason and vision.

May we see an end to this current escalation, a return of the soldiers and a massive reengagement toward rebuilding for the future. We can only hope that the damage caused in the past two weeks, and the damage that will ensue in the coming days, is not too much to overcome.

I call on each of us to be praying for Israel in this time of peril. I call on the Christians and Muslims to be praying for their people, in the name of peace. And may all of our prayers meet in the universe of the Holy One, and unite against the walls of hatred and violence. May the lives of all those lost be for a blessing and may we see a day, this week, when the current war and bloodshed ceases. Amen, kein yehi ratzon, may it be God’s will.