A Congregant’s View

The Sentinel welcomes opinion pieces from Sinai members. The following was submitted by Deborah Achtenberg in response to articles in the February bulletin. It reflects only the author’s opinion. Opinion pieces, regarding this topic or others, must be submitted to the synagogue office, or the Rabbi, by the 12th of the month prior to the desired month of publication.

Thanks to Myra and Jake for initiating a discussion of Israel’s recent actions in Gaza. Jake points out that Israelis have a right to exist and defend themselves; Myra that the occupation is wrong. I want to make a different point.

In my opinion, those of us who care about Israel—both the state of Israel and Jewish people more broadly—cannot show our ahavat Yisrael, our love of Israel, by simply agreeing with whatever Israel does. Israel can make mistakes. Sometimes our love must be tough love. This, I believe, is one of those times.

I believe the extent and manner of Israel’s actions in the recent Gaza operation were inappropriate and wrong.

But, you may say, doesn’t Israel have a right to defend itself? Yes, of course. And I condemn the Hamas targeting of civilians. However, we must recognize as well that Israel put Gaza under blockade, and a blockade is itself a form of warfare. It is not surprising that blockaded people—people denied food, water, and medicine—engage in violent response, nor that they dig tunnels.

Moreover, I am distressed that hundreds of civilians—many of them children—were killed during the Gaza operation. The silence is ringing with their voices. I cannot believe that the level of civilian casualties was necessary or that it was right.

The result of the extreme actions in Gaza, so far, is to strain—perhaps to the breaking point—Israel’s relations with friends and potential friends in the region. Already, Turkey has become distant and Palestinian moderate, Sari Nusseibeh, President of Al Quds University in Jerusalem, has questioned whether the peace process aimed at a two state solution is possible any longer.
And now, in the Israeli elections, Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu comes in third, with widely reported polls of Israeli high school students suggesting that around a third of them favor him—Lieberman who calls for loyalty oaths for Arabs and Jews who disagree with Israeli government policy; Lieberman who counts Meier Kahane among his influences and once was a member of the outlawed Kach party. We, as diaspora Jews who know the benefit of political protections may have experience to contribute to our Israeli cousins as they debate the necessity of human rights.

Finally, I am disappointed with the unqualifiedly positive position Eric Yoffie, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, has taken on the Gaza operation. In Britain, Tony Bayfield, head of the Movement for Reform Judaism and Danny Rich, chief executive of Liberal Judaism, along with other Jews, called for an immediate ceasefire during the operation as well as for the permanent lifting of the Gaza blockade. I feel closer to their position than to the one taken by Yoffie on our denomination’s behalf. I feel closer, too, to the position of J Street (not AIPAC) and the position of Israelis who have expressed doubts about the Gaza operation—Israelis, such as writer, David Grossman, political science professor Neve Gordon of Ben-Gurion University, and philosophy professor and former chair of B’Tselem, Anat Biletzki of Tel Aviv University.

These are important times for the future of Israel and the Jewish people. If Hamas and Israel do not begin talking, if Palestinians and Israelis do not begin considering proposals and begin moving in the direction of peace, the facts on the ground, including expansion of the settlements, may cause time to run out on a solution—and we who call ourselves liberal Jews may regret we did not speak up to keep things from spinning out of control at this crucial stage.

– Deborah Achtenberg

TEMPLE SINAI affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism

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