

Gaza and Shoes

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The incursion into Gaza is painful to witness. No human being of any degree of sensitivity can be unmoved in the face of human suffering, even when it is self-inflicted. No I do not approve of much of Israeli policy, but I simply cannot understand why, given its vulnerability, Gaza's masters insist on provoking Israel into retaliation. I can only assume that, to fanatics, human life is so dispensable that they simply put a public relations campaign above suffering. Similarly, I do not understand why Israel claims such incursions stop the rockets, or think they might, when they don't, any more than concessions do.

There might have been a time when you could have argued that dissident groups bent on undermining Hamas were firing rockets into Israel. But everyone now knows the Hamas controls the Gaza strip, so that argument cannot wash. Even Abbas, even Egypt asked Hamas to stop firing them.

Let us assume that it is entirely Israel's fault that the Gaza strip is in the state it is. Let us ignore the fact that Israel offered to rebuild Gaza after 1968, but was warned not to because the Arab world wanted to keep it as a festering sore and bargaining chip. Let us ignore the fact that Israel voluntarily withdrew its armed forces. Let us ignore the constant raining down of rockets and the repeated threats from Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and almost everyone else in the Arab and Muslim world, as if threats were always just empty words. What is it in a culture's mentality that sacrifices children and adults by inviting, provoking retaliation, knowing full well that retaliation is a blunt weapon and innocents will be caught up in it? What is it that justifies putting bomb factories and rocket launchers in residential areas?

This apparent primitive desire to show that one refuses to make any concessions to peace, simply speaks of blind, irrational hatred that can never be appeased. One sees it on both sides. The blind Cyclops staggering around, determined to inflict damage regardless. The mentality of token opposition is nowhere better illustrated than in the Iraqi chappie who [threw his shoes at George Bush](#).

The shoe has a long, long history in the Middle East of association with shame. Just look up the Book of Ruth, Chapter 4, where taking off a shoe is associated with relinquishing responsibility. Even today in Jewish law, when a man refuses to perform the [Yibum](#) ceremony of marrying the childless widow of his brother, a ceremonial shoe is removed and thrown to the ground as part of the Halitzah ritual. But ceremony is one thing. Actually throwing to hurt is another matter.

In the world most of us live in, symbols are reminders of much more important issues and ideas. But in a primitive world, where other methods of resolving conflicts have failed, the gesture, the words, even the acts of defiance,

like throwing stones, are even more important. They are reminiscent of a child blindly returning to the attack against a bigger more brutal bully who is simply stronger. Instead of thinking of other ways to tackle the problem, the child simply hurls himself again and again at the tormentor until he is either too bloodied or tired to continue. Edward Said, the Palestinian academic said that throwing a stone over the Lebanon border at Israel was remarkably therapeutic. Therapy is one thing. Causing your own side immeasurable suffering is simply inhuman. But that is what Hezbollah and Hamas do in principle, as a strategy.

The man who threw his shoes has become a hero in the Arab world, where stone throwing is the only act of opposition most people can aspire to. A Saudi businessman is prepared to pay \$10 million for one of the shoes that made an American president duck. We in more civilized countries laugh at the event. But it does illustrate this Middle Eastern passion for launching missiles where the gesture means more than the results.

Hamas makes a point by showing it can emulate Hezbollah and fire rockets into Israel at civilian targets. Yet equally frustrating is the certain knowledge that no matter what Israel does the fanatics will continue. Hamas and Hezbollah have so far rejected any peace deal. Saudi Arabia might be in favor it, but they cannot stop the rockets! I hope this current campaign will solve the problem but I'm not confident. On the other hand the excessive Israeli retaliation against Hezbollah, widely proclaimed a failure, has so far led to a quiet Northern front.

Public opinion in much of the world's media, for various ideological reasons, chooses to deny Israel the right to protect its citizens in ways that any other sovereign state, anywhere else in the world would consider the least of its responses. Indeed, in Israel itself Left-Wing protesters demonstrate against Israel protecting itself.

I am proud that Israel is such a free society in which such views can be openly expressed. I happen to side ideologically with those who believe Israel should give up land for peace. But only if there will be peace. For as long as its primary enemies now, Hamas and Hezbollah, do not even consider peace, so long as they fire rockets at Israeli civilians, for the life of me I cannot see what alternative Israel has. If someone throws a shoe at me today, he might fire a gun tomorrow. I'd certainly retaliate to protect my family. I'd be crazy not to.

I have always believed that only an American presence on the ground can ensure peace. Most other powers have shown themselves biased against Israel's interests and the UN cannot be taken seriously. If Obama really wants to be a different president, then the troops he wants to send to Afghanistan should be in Gaza, to deter both Hamas and Israel equally. Otherwise this pointless agony will continue.