

Encountering Peace - A Personal Note of an Israeli Peace Activist During the Gaza Rockets

What does an Israeli peace activist do when the rockets are flying and the bombs are falling?

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I have been going to demonstrations since I was 12 years old – that was 51 years ago. I can easily say that I have participated in hundreds of demonstrations. But I hate demonstrations. They frustrate me. I think in all of these years, there was only one demonstration that I recall that left me feeling empowered – that was after the Sabra and Shatilla massacres in 1982.

I have demonstrated for peace and human rights. I have demonstrated against war and military adventurism. I have demonstrated for social justice and I have demonstrated for a better environment. At demonstrations, I meet a lot of people that I know and it is often nice to catch up with old friends and colleagues, but when it is over, I usually feel that nothing has changed and the demonstration had no impact. More often than not, I go because if it is an important cause, then it is essential that the number of demonstrators be significant. But to feel empowered and to have political and social efficacy, I need to do something more concrete.

During recent years, in the absence of any peace process and any chance of helping to create a peace process, I have focused on building successful, cross-boundary Israeli-Palestinian partnerships. That, too, has become increasingly difficult with the passing of time and the constant deterioration in the state of affairs between the two peoples. Nonetheless, I push on and do what I believe in.

I suppose I live in a kind of schizophrenic reality. Just yesterday I met one of my Palestinian partners in Halhoul, just north of Hebron. I parked my car in front of the Halhoul city hall and joined him in his car. The streets were filled with young kids getting out of school early after ceremonies were held in the schools to commemorate their founding father Yasser Arafat. Many of the kids had the famous black and white keffiyeh draped around their shoulders.

We continued from there to the new industrial area in the city of Tarkumiya where we visited eight large factories to spark their interest in integrating solar energy into their enterprises. Most of these factories spend a fortune on electricity. They pay the Tarkumiya municipality, which buys the electricity from the Israel Electricity Company. We can sell them clean energy that will save them a lot of money, helping the Palestinian economy and

increasing Palestinian independence. This work is built on partnership, trust and improving the lives of real people.

From Tarkumiya, after about five hours of visiting the factories, we went for a late lunch in Hebron. On the way from Hebron back to Halhoul, I bought some freshly made flat bread. My car was waiting for me in the now empty Halhoul city hall parking lot. We stopped at a bicycle shop on the way out of Halhoul that I visited last week, because my youngest son is shopping for a new mountain bike and the shop owner said that he expected to have some new models by the end of this week. He didn't get them yet.

THIS IS ALL so normal – except that nothing about it here is normal. Israelis don't go wandering about Hebron and Halhoul, or eating lunch in a new shwarma place in the middle of the Hebron business district, or visiting factories in Tarkumiya. The abnormality of it all was driven home while driving home to Jerusalem. As I passed the Al Aroub refugee camp, I saw the deployment of a large number of Israeli soldiers gearing up to enter the camp. Before I reached Jerusalem, I heard that the soldiers killed a young, unarmed Palestinian man in the camp. I saw the video footage later and heard both sides of the story of what happened, and how the young Palestinian man was killed. Tragedy in a tragic reality.

This morning, I drove to Givat Haviva in the North, where I was invited to lecture to a group of high schools students at the Givat Haviva International School. This school is made up of 11th and 12th graders – 25% from Israel, 25% from Palestine and 50% from about 20 other countries. Truly a remarkable group of young people. This week, they are engaging in a several day intensive seminar about the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Today's panel, in which I participated, was organized by an Israeli and a Palestinian student together. The panel included four Israeli experts – two from the Right and two from the Left (you can guess which side I was on).

On my way to Givat Haviva, as soon as I got in my car leaving Jerusalem, I heard the news of the Israeli assassination of the Islamic Jihad commander and his wife in Gaza, the attempted assassination of the Islamic Jihad commander in Damascus (not succeeding in killing the target, but killing his son) and the barrage of rockets from Islamic Jihad once again falling on Israel. I heard about all of the schools and places of work in Israel from Tel Aviv southward being closed as a precautionary measure taken by the Israeli army and government. And I had to go to speak to high school students about peace.

A COUPLE of nights before, I spoke at the annual Rabin memorial event at the Beit Yisrael pre-army academy in Gilo, Jerusalem, composed of a large group of pre-army religious and secular Jews. There I spoke on a panel with the head of the academy, an Orthodox rabbi who served as a combat officer in the army for decades, and a well-known right-wing political activist who has lived his whole life in the settlement of Kiryat Arba next to the Palestinian city, Hebron. It was a very challenging task to speak about peace with our Palestinian neighbors in that context with that group of young Israelis.

This evening, I concluded by speaking to a group of American Jews from Vermont on an Israel Experience trip with their synagogue. Tonight was their last night after a 10-day intensive trip all around the country. Today, they were supposed to visit the communities around Gaza, but that was canceled because of the "security situation." As I am writing this column, the Red Alert keeps flashing on my phone as rockets are being shot at Israel from Gaza, and I see on my Facebook and Twitter feed that my friends in Gaza are being bombed

by Israel.

A close friend in Gaza just chatted with me that she is scared – she lives on the eighth floor of a 10-story building in Gaza City. The noise of the exploding Israeli bombs is frightening and she said that she doesn't know what she will do if she has to run – there is no safe place to run to in Gaza. Without any ability to allay her fears, I said that I wished she could stay with me in Jerusalem where she would be safe. She replied "some day!" I said "inshallah."

This is the definition of insanity. Someone from the Vermont group asked me as the final question to give a one-sentence line – the most important thing they should take back with them from my talk. I thought for a moment and said – we are all not going anywhere. Millions of Israelis and millions of Palestinians are not picking up and leaving. We will also continue to live here, and eventually we will get back to the table and talk. When we do that, I hope that we will have learned the lessons from all of the mistakes we have all made that got us to this situation. Until then, I will continue to work to build partnerships across these conflict lines in the interests of all of us – on both sides of the lines.

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*Gershon Baskin is a political and social entrepreneur who has dedicated his life to the State of Israel and to peace between Israel and her neighbors. His latest book *In Pursuit of Peace in Israel and Palestine* was published by Vanderbilt University Press and is now available in Israel and Palestine.*

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