

Resa Davids' Letter from Israel

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Resa and Rabbi Stanley M. Davids

The time for analysis is past. There now is a fairly widespread understanding as to why Hezbollah chose this moment in time to attack Israel . Iran and Syria truly expected to profit politically and diplomatically, and they certainly had not predicted that Israel would react as strongly and as effectively as it has. Israel's inexperienced Minister of Defense and its technocrat Prime Minister seemed ripe for being pushed around. The United States was so enmeshed in its wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan that it clearly would not have the will to stand strongly alongside of a victimized Israel . These fundamental errors in judgment have resulted in the deaths of hundreds and the displacement of perhaps a million civilians in both Israel and Lebanon .

And we are now awaiting the launch of a serious and intensive ground assault by Israel that will send its troops across the Green Line and into Lebanon itself. This battle will not be easy. For 18 years Hezbollah has been building a highly effective subterranean military command and control system that has proven to be both highly professional and deadly. The Israeli Air Force has not been able to deal a knockout blow to Hezbollah because the system of bunkers and underground cables is carefully camouflaged – becoming visible literally only when one suddenly confronts a steel door hidden among dense brush.

The land war will be very costly. Hezbollah has buried fields of 'tank killer' mines throughout the border area, and its bunkers are booby-trapped. The timid and criminally indecisive Lebanese government refused to take responsibility for this extensive preparation within its sovereign borders for an assault on Israel – and UNIFIL, the UN Observer Force, simply is too hampered by procedural restrictions to do any good at all.

Resa and I will be participating in an Emergency Solidarity Mission of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organizations starting Sunday evening, July 23rd. We will take careful notes and share what we have learned with you by the end of this week. For now, then, some random impressions from "Israel at war."

*At least four radio stations were given permission to be both active and silent on Shabbat. Orthodox families are thus able to leave their radios on during the Sabbath without any sound being produced – unless the government needs to make a security announcement. A terrific accommodation that reflects how Halacha can be flexible if the rabbis choose to allow such to happen.

*Our synagogue, *Kol HaNishamah*, ordinarily has two services on Friday evenings because of the large number of tourists who are drawn to the congregation and to its charismatic rabbi, Levi Kelman. There was only one service this week: tourists are disappearing.

*At *Shira Chadasha*, the egalitarian Orthodox synagogue that Stan attends Shabbat mornings, an announcement was made that the congregation will support and assist all of the families of those

soldiers mobilized for reserve duty. Baby sitting, care for aging parents, help with notifying employers, etc., will be provided by volunteers. As we listened to the announcement, we came face to face with the reality of the call-up that had begun on Friday.

*Every Shabbat morning, as part of the Torah Service, there is a prayer for the State of Israel and a prayer for Israeli soldiers. Usually those prayers are recited quite perfunctorily. This morning there was a tangible *Kavvanah*, an intentionality that reflected what was going on up north. Sons and daughters and fathers and mothers are being assembled on the front lines. Our prayers allow us to stand along side of them.

*There is a news story about Roy Bass who was surfing in the Mediterranean on late Friday morning. Roy emerged from the water for a Popsicle break and checked his cell phone. There was an "Order 8," an emergency call up. Four hours later, the 27 year old computer programmer had joined thousands of other reservists on emergency active duty. Thousands of others have volunteered to be activated.

*A new poster is up all over town. It shows an Israeli flag and just two words: *Chazak V'Ematz*: Be strong and of good courage. Even the posters are praying.

*Stan's first cousin, Dvori, called on Thursday afternoon and said that she would arrive in our home on Friday. Her husband, Micha, remained on their kibbutz – Kfar Masaryk, just north of Haifa. The only ones left on the kibbutz right now are the older men who are trying to keep the factory going, and youngsters in the mid-20's who are caring for the fields and livestock. All of the parents with small children have left; all of the elderly have been evacuated. The kibbutz has become a ghost town. She is lonely.

*We listened to Dvori's stories for hours. She told us of the constant sound of the warning sirens around Haifa; the explosions of missile strikes four or five times a day; and the shaking of the ground as a target is hit

*Dvori received word while she was with us of a friend of hers, a nurse who refused to leave her Haifa hospital responsibilities. This friend was riding to work on a bus on Friday when the sirens went off. The bus driver immediately stopped his vehicle and ordered everyone to enter the nearest shelter. Just after the last passenger stepped out of the bus, it was hit and exploded in flames. Now Dvori's friend is a patient in her own hospital, suffering from shock.

*A snap survey of those who have endured the more than 1600 missile strikes surprisingly shows that Kibbutz members, even as the very notion of Kibbutz is fading from contemporary history, are showing themselves to be more resilient under pressure than city dwellers. Why? Because these kibbutz members live an ideology that binds them in mutual help with others; they believe that their living on the soil of Eretz Yisrael is a mission, not merely a livelihood.

* Residents of the north are becoming good listeners. Rabbi Edgar Nof of Haifa remarks that there is a comfort to the sounds of fighter planes and helicopters heading north. But those air raid sirens are deeply troubling – and the task of determining how close a missile strike was by listening for the sound of the explosion is profoundly unnerving.

*The Torah portion this morning speaks of two and one-half of the tribes of Israel telling Moses that they have found rich land outside of Israel – so that they don't want to go into the Land. Moses asks them if they really think that their brothers can be involved in a war to create their homeland – and THEY can simply watch from the sidelines. A deal is quickly struck, and all of the tribes will fight for the Promised Land shoulder to shoulder....and when peace is secured, the two and one-half tribes can go to the territory of their choice. I hope that during today's war, our brothers and sisters outside of Israel are doing all that they can to support those who are prepared to give their lives for this Land. Nobody has the right to be a passive by-stander. **Everyone can do something to help. Check the URJ and/or the ARZA websites for suggestions.**

* Haifa University and the Technion are closed. The hospitals in Haifa have suspended chemotherapy therapy for some cancer patients. Life cycle ceremonies sustain our Reform congregation in Haifa , *Or Chadash*, and the cancellation of more than a hundred such celebrations is shattering the congregation's budget.

*Resa got into a cab Thursday morning. The cabby's radio was on. And then there were the sounds of war as Resa, transfixed, heard both the sirens and the explosions in Haifa 'live.'

*During the Intifada, whenever there was a *Pigua*, an 'incident,' the cell phone systems overloaded. We are at war. Periodically the internet servers are collapsing because of impossible overload. It has been intermittently impossible for many days to log onto the English website of the daily newspaper, *Haaretz*.

*CNN and several other media outlets are conducting online surveys regarding whether Israel was justified in attacking Hezbollah. We are getting frantic, mass-mailed requests for us to vote. We do, of course – but to what avail?

*The Israel Progressive Movement has opened its doors and resources to families from the north. Other movements have been a bit more parochial. NFTY has launched a Tikkun Olam project among its teen travelers currently in Israel , distributing gifts of sweets for children living in bomb shelters and packages of clothing and toiletries for active duty soldiers as well as arranging hospital visits. We are proud of us.

Resa and I both have no doubt as to that for which we now yearn: A shattering of the status quo ante; the insertion of an international force on the Lebanese side of the border, capable of keeping Hezbollah far removed from Israel; the return of our kidnapped soldiers; crippling diplomatic action against both Iran and Syria – and as little loss of life as possible.

More later. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem .

MICHTAV M'YERUSHALAYIM – 2nd addendum

August 4, 2006

Resa and Stanley Davids

Tisha B'Av has come and gone. Stan went to the Kotel Thursday morning to recite Lamentations for a second time. The day was hot and clear, the crowds were moderate, and he relished the opportunity to find a private corner in front of the Wall for reflection. 1936 years since the Second Temple was destroyed. 61 years since the Shoah shuddered to a close. 58 years since the Jewish people re-entered history by establishing the State of Israel. And more than 3 weeks since Israel's tenth war started with the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers and the utterly unbearable reality of a massive Hezbollah build-up in southern Lebanon. There was a great deal to think about.

Some 30 new IDF recruits were gathered midway toward the Kotel in a military-style circle that morning: everyone was crouching, as if prepared to leap up when given an order. A guide was talking with them with great animation. Stan drew nearer to listen – and heard the story not only of Jerusalem's destruction but about the privilege to be serving as Israel's *Chazit* or front-line against destruction ever again befalling our people.

Lebanon and Gaza are where the *Chazit* is the most explosive; but there is an *Oref* as well, the home front, where Israelis have also shown remarkable courage, fortitude and determination ... unwavering determination, despite the more than 2000 rockets and missiles that have struck the country.

But today, Friday, August 4th, was a different kind of a day for us. Clutching the special delivery notification in his hand, Stan showed up at the requested hour in front of our post office, had his identity card checked, and signed for the envelope. Tearing it open, he found his Israeli passport, the very last stage in becoming an Israeli citizen. Resa had received her passport several months ago, because she actually has been in Israel almost two months longer. And now it was over. No more hoops to jump through. No more documents to fill out. No more waiting.

When Stan registered at the Interior Ministry three days ago, the intake person asked him incredulously: "Why are you doing this? Your temporary passport has two more years to run ... and the formal passport will cost you 240 *Shekel*?" He had just smiled, shrugged and said that he couldn't stand the limbo which he had been in. He wanted to be a fully accredited citizen.

Then we looked up at the wall of the official's cubicle: there was a picture there of three young men in uniform. We asked her if they were her sons. She nodded yes and said softly that all three were in Lebanon right now. She then turned her radio up, as it was exactly 9 AM, and together we listened to the news.

The war will be coming to an end in the next few days, at least that's what the talking heads are saying, and it will soon be time to analyze all that has happened, to figure out what was won and what was lost – and to start guessing about what comes next. In the spirit of such a discussion, we'd like to put together some bullet points about how we feel. NOT about what the absolute

truth is – but just what we feel. In this way our perspectives will be fully available for challenge in the coming months.

1. We believe that the war was inevitable, that it probably should have been launched several years ago when the Hezbollah build-up was visible to all.
2. We believe that this war is the opening skirmish in what will be a succession of other armed conflicts between radical Islam and the West.
3. We believe that this war is a new, asymmetrical war, between a nation state and a highly organized, extraordinarily well-funded and sophisticated terrorist community – community, not just a gang of thugs.
4. We believe that Israel fought this war as an American proxy, and that Hezbollah fought this war as an Iranian proxy. The key point was to test out methods of combat, much as the Spanish Civil War was a run-up to World War II, a testing grounds for weapons and theory.
5. We believe that therefore the challenge of proportionality thrust at Israel is a red herring, for Lebanon was a full participant in every aspect of the violence because it supinely allowed Hezbollah to develop its own mini-state in South Lebanon. We agree with the perspective that whoever knowingly harbors my enemy has become my enemy. For this, there is a price.
6. We believe that the comment by Israeli researcher Gidi Grinstein as reported in a New York Times essay by Steve Erlanger is correct: “At the end of the war, they’ll have a narrative and so will we. It’s all about perception.” Victory is as victory is asserted to be. We will all be looking to create a balance sheet. Hezbollah miscalculated Israeli determination. Israel miscalculated Hezbollah’s fighting capability. Iran miscalculated America’s determination. Syria just miscalculated.
7. We believe that there will be no clear victor here – but Israel can come away from the nightmare with one very important plus: It has reasserted its deterrent capabilities and the unyielding strength of its *Oref*. This fact in itself will shield Israel from a HAMAS assumption that a few more suicide bombers or Qassams will make the Jewish State pack up and move to – where? Israel is here to stay.
8. We believe that there is a great gap of understanding of the stakes here between the Jewish community in the United States and in Israel. We both have been exposed to comments such as, “You are too close to things to be objective.” A fascinating charge. Clearly, getting the news from CNN, Fox, The New York Times – and even overseas editions of the Jerusalem Post, Haaretz and Yediot is a more reliable way of discerning what is happening – than feeding and housing refugees from the north, than sitting with the families of kidnapped soldiers, than hearing bombers overhead, then picking up a Katyusha fragment still warm from its explosion, encountering myriads of people who talk about what life has been like in the shelters, speaking with 18 year olds as they clean their weapons one last time before heading directly across the border.
9. We believe that in this particular case, President Bush DOES get it. And when did we EVER think that we would say that! This war is in every possible feature a major expansion of the extremist Muslim assault on western democracy. However we got to this point is of little significance, because this is where we are whether we like it or not. And no death blow was struck – because this war is likely to continue its spread across much of the globe – from Mumbai to London, from New York to Paris. In a few years, there

may well be those who will look back at 2006 as the strange beginnings of what had become a world-wide conflict.

10. So all of this is OUR narrative. Each of us will be shaping our own. And now we move from narrative to response:
11. We believe that we must carefully and diligently struggle to frame and conduct ongoing conversations with three crucial populations: our teenagers; our undergrads; our younger adults from ages 25-35. We dare not wait until a new Jewish Population Survey tells us that these populations have been further alienated from Israel because of their lack of understanding as to what the stakes were in this war. We don't have a chance of imposing OUR narrative upon them, but we need to show them that we trust and respect them and that we wish to maintain serious dialogue with them.
12. We believe that Jewish tourism must take a dramatic upswing in the very first month after the war is stopped. Tourism IS Zionism. And everyone understands what each full tour bus will mean to a deeply troubled Israeli post-war economy. American Jews must see themselves as part of the *Oref*, and as such they must be willing to inconvenience themselves, to re-arrange their lives, so that they can be a true source of strength to the *Chazit*. Not next year. Now.
13. We believe that at every level American Jews must become active in advocacy – expressing thanks to the Bush administration, contacting all Members of Congress, writing letters to newspapers, entering into dialogue with Christian clergy and neighbors.
14. We believe that it is crucial to contribute to the URJ/ARZA emergency fund, to help our congregations stagger back from the incredible costs that they have borne. We are in awe of what the IMPJ community has achieved in reaching out to all Israelis and offering every conceivable kind of support. Part of what the *Chazit* can do is to help meet the costs.
15. And – now here, don't be surprised – we believe that American Reform Jews ought to be affiliated with ARZA in all of its endeavors. Reform Zionism is collectively expressed through ARZA.

We have our passports. We have been present for this war. We return to the United States on August 13th. We will hug our children and their spouses and our grandchildren and relish and enjoy every moment we share. Then we will return to India for three weeks before returning to our home here in Jerusalem during Sukkoth. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.