

**“Israel Update”
Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz**

January 8, 2009

Dear Friends:

Many of you have written to me with loving concern about our well-being and the war unfolding in southern Israel and Gaza. Moreover, you have written movingly about the extent to which you are pained by the media coverage on CNN, in the *New York Times*, and other outlets. I want to reassure all of you that my family and I are well, though like all Jews these days, we are walking around with heavy hearts.

No one ever wishes for war, but it is also naïve to think that one can eschew military conflict at all costs. For years now, Israel has been dodging mortars and rockets lobbed from a terrorist regime in the Gaza Strip. As the head of the Eshkol Regional Council, Hayyim Yellin pointed out on Israeli news this afternoon that Hamas deliberately launches much of its salvo of rockets between seven and eight in the morning—precisely the time at which Israeli children are going to school. These rockets are aimed indiscriminately at a civilian population, so one must conclude that Hamas is seeking to kill as many people as possible.

Sirens sound all over southern Israel—Netivot, Sderot, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Beersheva, and in recent days, Gedera. This morning, we awoke to the news that four katyushas fell on northern Israel—on an assisted living facility in Nahariya—but thankfully all the residents were in the middle of breakfast. Had they been in their rooms, they would have fallen victim to these Lebanese rockets. When missiles such as these are launched, Israelis have thirty seconds to run to bomb shelters or to some other “protected” locations. How long is Israel supposed to tolerate this ongoing barrage? Would any other country in the world have sustained such attacks without some serious response?

While I am one who continues to believe wholeheartedly in the need for a Palestinian state that lives side by side and in peace with Israel, I cannot remain silent in light of the additional media siege under which Israel finds itself today. “Crime against humanity” and “genocide” are just two of the terms that have been bandied about to describe the Israeli campaign against Hamas. Such attempts to apply this language to the present situation represent a dangerous distortion of history and reality.

It would seem that the world’s conscience awakens selectively. Where has this moral judgment been while rockets indiscriminately fell on southern Israel? Why weren’t European leaders (who live, or should live daily, with the weight of the Holocaust on their shoulders) up in arms over this brutal attack on Israeli civilians? And if Arab leaders care so deeply about human life, why didn’t they issue a unified message from Cairo, urging Hamas to cease its terrorist activities immediately?

Israel, for its part, is engaging in serious soul-searching right now. While some are urging the path of negotiation and diplomacy, there is a consensus right now for continuing the military response to undermine the entire terrorist infrastructure of Hamas. Many Israelis are asking how it is that Israel can realistically cede more territory, namely in the West Bank, if we will see a repeat of Lebanon and Gaza—that is to say, the smuggling of weaponry into these territories by Iran. Many are now concerned with the possibility of rockets and mortars falling on Israel's heartland—Tel Aviv, Bnei Brak, Ra'anana, and the entire central region of the country could be exposed to a terrorist assault.

As the Israeli people battle for peace, security, and (long overdue) recognition of Israel's right to exist, there is no place in the world I would rather be at this moment. Here I can show my love and appreciation for what this country is all about.

I have been encouraged to see the extent to which American Jews are demonstrating in support of Israel. This is the time for all of us to raise our voices—in the public square, in the media, and on the Internet. And even more than that, this is the time for Jews to show their solidarity by visiting Israel.

Thinking of all of you here in Jerusalem,

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz