



Eyeless in Gaza



By Marty Kaplan

First I saw a young protester telling a CNN reporter in Trafalgar Square, “Every single day, as soon as we turn on the TV, we see children there die in the hospitals, adults dying, children dying on the floor. Why, why, why? Why do children have to die? Why do innocent children have to die on the floor? Why?”

And I thought, She’s right, those children in Gaza are innocent, every human life is precious, civilians aren’t combatants. Doesn’t everyone deserve basic human rights like food and water and life itself?

But then I thought, Where was she when 80 or 90 Hamas rockets a day were raining down on Israel? Where were all the television cameras when innocent children in Ashkelon and Sderot were being maimed and killed?

But then I saw pictures of massive devastation in Gaza on the front pages of the newspapers, and I thought, What good does it do if Israel appears to act like its enemies?

But then I heard Shimon Peres tell George Stephanopoulos that Hamas “did things which are unprecedented in the history even of terror. They made mosques into headquarters. They put bombs in the kindergartens, in their own homes. They are hiding in hospitals.” Where were all the people of Gaza rising up in outrage when Hamas used them as human shields?

Then I heard Palestinian negotiator Hannan Ashwari say that Gaza was a secondary issue, that the real imperative was to reach a lasting political agreement, not a temporary military outcome, and I thought, She’s right, there will be no peace and security for Israel unless a viable two-state solution is reached.

But then I read a blog by *Atlantic* writer Jeffrey Goldberg recounting his interview with Nizzar Rayyan, the Hamas leader who was killed by Israeli bombs last week. “This is what he said when I asked him if he could envision a 50-year hudna (or cease-fire) with Israel: ‘The only reason to have a hudna is to prepare yourself for the final battle. We don’t need 50 years to prepare ourselves for the final battle with Israel.’ There is no chance, he said, that true Islam would ever allow a Jewish state to survive in the Muslim

Middle East. 'Israel is an impossibility. It is an offense against God... You [Jews] are murderers of the prophets and you have closed your ears to the Messenger of Allah.... Jews tried to kill the Prophet, peace be unto him. All throughout history, you have stood in opposition to the word of God.'"

And I thought, How can you negotiate with people who reject your nation's right to exist, and whose version of religion calls you a murderous race? If someone claimed that the best way for America to deal with Bin Laden is to reach a political agreement with al-Qaeda, I'd say that they're nuts, that there can be no negotiation or accommodation with people lusting for a final battle to rid your people from the earth.

But then I heard an Arab diplomat railing against Israel's continuing tolerance of illegal settlements, and I thought, As long as Knesset coalition governments are dependent on ultra-Orthodox parties who have no respect for the law, how can anyone expect Arab moderates to gain enough political power for Israel to negotiate with them, when Israeli moderates can't muster that clout either?

Then I reminded myself that the people of Gaza overwhelmingly voted for Hamas in a democratic election, and I thought, What good is democracy, if it can put terrorists in charge of governments?

But then I read that tens of thousands of Israeli Arabs in the Israeli town of Sakhnin had rallied against Israel's Gaza offensive, and I thought, What Middle East nation except Israel would ensure that anti-government protesters had the right to hold such a demonstration?

And then I remembered reading that former Israeli army chief Moshe Yaalon warned Israelis not to delude themselves about Israel's Arab population, that Israeli Arabs - a fifth of Israel - constitute a potential fifth column.

Then I saw a Telesaker Institute poll saying that 95 percent of Israeli Jews support Operation Cast Lead against Hamas. But then I saw a Rasmussen poll saying that while 44 percent of Americans think Israel should have taken military action against the Palestinians, 41% say it should have tried to find a diplomatic solution - essentially a tie, within the poll's margin of error. And I wondered, How long does diplomacy have to keep failing, how many bombs have to keep dropping, before self-defense finally trumps talk?

I wish I didn't believe that the events now unfolding in the Middle East are too complicated for unalloyed outrage. I wish the arguments of only one side rang wholly true to me. I am the first to accuse myself of paralyzing moral generosity — the fatal empathy that terrorists prey on. But ambivalence is not the same as moral equivalence, and holy war, no matter who is waging it, makes my flesh crawl.

In Milton's poem *Samson Agonistes*, Samson - blinded, in chains — cries out, "Promise was that I / Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver; / Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him / Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves." But when Samson shows the strength to shun Delilah, God restores his power, enabling him to pull down the temple and kill the Philistines, though along with himself.

What makes *Samson Agonistes* a tragedy is the self-destruction that victory entails. I passionately assert Israel's right to exist in peace with its neighbors and within secure borders. But I can't help fearing that its military success in Gaza, should it come, will also entail a tragic cost.