

Context, history often lost in outside media interpretation of Gaza situation

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The Hebrew Bible, or the Tanakh (as it's called in Hebrew), was written almost exclusively in the land of Israel and serves as the foundational document of Judaism. Judaism as depicted in the Bible focuses on life in the land of Israel and, despite the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. by the Romans and the subsequent forced exile of most Jews from the land, the land of Israel always remained central to Judaism and Jewish identity.

During the almost 2,000 years of exile from Israel until modern technology and political circumstances made a mass return feasible, Judaism continued to see its life in the diaspora bound up with a future in the ancient homeland. Since so much of those 2,000 years in the diaspora included much persecution of Jews, the attachment to the modern State of Israel as a haven for the Jewish people is particularly strong.

About four months ago, I made reservations on El Al Israel Airlines to visit Israel for two weeks from July 20 to Aug. 3rd. At the time, of course, I had no idea that I would be there during a war. The primary purpose of my trip was to see family and friends because it had been eight years since my previous visit.

The first time I had been to Israel, I was 8 years old and arrived by ship from New York, a trip similarly planned around family. My parents were from Poland, and of those few family members who survived the Holocaust, most of them lived in Israel. Between my first and current trip, I had lived in Israel for five years and visited on a number of other occasions.

What you experience inside Israel is very different from what one is exposed to in the media outside its borders. At the same time, while inside Israel you have exposure to how the world media covers the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

Tragically, the peoples of this region are not strangers to war and violence. Almost every day I was in Tel Aviv, the sirens warning of incoming missiles sounded. We had 90 seconds to go to the closest shelter. We ran to the shelter and waited until we heard the explosions of the "Iron Dome" intercepting the incoming missiles. The louder the sound of the explosion upon impact, the closer the missile was to where we were. There were other times during the day when we would hear the explosions of interception without having heard a siren because the missiles were not coming in to Tel Aviv itself, but rather toward smaller cities around it. But we could still hear the intercepted missiles explode. After the explosions we heard from our shelters, we'd wait for the debris to land, because the debris of missiles caused serious injuries.

Afterward, life continued mostly as usual, at least in the cities not closest to the borders. While watching the news about the situation in Gaza, which completely preoccupied the Israeli channels, during the course of the broadcasts you would hear announcements interjected over the news programs of where in the country sirens warning of incoming missiles were going off.

The closer you live to Gaza, the less time you have to run to shelters. The people in Sderot, for example, which is right near the border, have 10 or 15 seconds. They've been living like that since Israel left Gaza in 2005, Hamas violently took power, and thousands and thousands of missiles have been launched.

Throughout Israel, when houses are constructed, they're built with shelters. I went out to dinner with my cousin and she looked around to ascertain where we would run if the sirens went off during our meal. We were eating in a popular Arab-run restaurant on a main thoroughfare in Tel Aviv. The next night I was walking with another cousin on a pedestrian walkway on top of the Carmel mountain section of Haifa with a view of the Haifa harbor, the Mediterranean and the coastline to the north, and we would hear young Israeli Jews speaking Hebrew and young Israeli Arabs speaking Arabic. From this depiction you might think that peace reigned in the Middle East, but, in truth, everyone was very aware of the conflict.

In Israel in "normal" times, there is always an enormous amount of political debate with many parties represented in the Israeli Knesset (Israel's Parliament) from Communist and far left Zionist parties and Arab Israeli parties to centrist parties, religious parties, and right wing Zionist parties.

In contrast to earlier times, when you might find half a million people united behind Peace Now protesting the government's policies in the West Bank and Gaza, now the Jewish population was unusually united in seeing Hamas as holding the Palestinian people hostage, using civilians as human shields, building tunnels to invade Israel instead of using those materials for schools and shelters, etc. As Israeli citizens were well aware of the tragic death of innocent civilians, they saw this as the result of cynical policies of Hamas that valued martyrdom of its populace over saving lives by regularly using civilians as shields for their combatants.

It is hard not to lose hope in a solution to a conflict that has continued for over 80 years. But another thing that foreign media neglects is the over 100 organizations in Israel working on reconciliation between Israel and Palestine. The voices of moderation and mutual recognition too often get drowned out in the media by the extremists, but there are people on both sides of the borders who work toward fulfilling the vision of the prophet who walked the land of Israel over 2600 years ago declaring that "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they study war anymore."