



Jewish Community Center of Paramus  
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## **A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner**

Friday February 2, 2024 ~ Parsha: Yitro

### **Thinking Critically and Rationally About Civilian Casualties in Gaza**

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Since the brutal assaults initiated by Hamas on October 7, plunging Israel into war in Gaza, I must admit that I have thought about little else. Indeed, since October 7, almost all of my Shabbat messages have dealt, in one way or another, with the events in Israel.

When I write to the congregation and share these messages, knowing that you are also following the events closely, I always try to share ideas and information that is different than what you are reading and seeing. I want to share with you what I've been thinking about and learning, so that it might add to your understanding of the events in Israel as well.

Today, I want to talk about one of the most difficult and ugliest aspects of Israel's campaign in Gaza. We know that Israel initiated this campaign in response to the events of October 7. We receive different reports from the "experts" as to the success or failure of Israel's military response so far. But one thing is sure. The campaign has caused the death of thousands of Gazans. And that is regrettable, terrible, and sad.

**FULL STOP!**

We certainly grieve at the loss of all innocent life. Knowing that there is collateral damage in all military campaigns is of little comfort. So, we need to talk about the toll that the war is taking on the people of Gaza, and analyze it. And we need to do so differently than those who accuse Israel of war crimes, genocide, or who infer that because there have been more Palestinian deaths than Israeli deaths, then Israel is in an inferior moral position. What do the high numbers of Palestinian deaths actually mean, and how should we, as Jews who support Israel, and as Jews who understand the value of all human life, respond when we read of them?

We are regularly told that there have been 26,000 Palestinian deaths in Gaza since October 7. I believe that number deserves both context and analysis. Like you, I have no way of independently confirming or assessing this number. But what I do know is that all these figures come from the Gaza Ministry of Health, which is controlled by Hamas, as is everything else in Gaza. We know from past conflicts that the number of casualties reported by Hamas has been far from accurate. Indeed, as several sources have recently suggested, if we are quick to repeat the numbers provided by Hamas, we should be no less willing to believe Israel's claims that it has killed 9000 Hamas terrorists, which of course puts the number provided by Hamas in a different light. None of this is to say that there is not actual suffering or that civilians have not been killed. But relying on information supplied by an organization committed not only to Israel's destruction, but the murder of Jews is unfair and unreasonable. Hamas is not a dispassionate source of critical information. The eagerness that this number has been bandied about by news agencies, who know full well the extent of Hamas control over every institution in Gaza is itself another example of dishonest reporting about the current conflict. And an evil one as well.

Earlier this week, I read an important article by Major (retired) John Spencer, the chair of urban warfare studies at the Modern War Institute at West Point, and himself a decorated veteran who served two tours in Iraq. As opposed to us civilians, who obviously react emotionally to the horrific scenes we see on a regular basis, Colonel Spencer has provided a scientific and dispassionate assessment of Israel's response to the Hamas attacks and the issue of civilian casualties. He concluded that Israel has taken more measures to avoid needless civilian harm than any other nation that's ever fought an urban war.

He makes the bold statement that Israel has taken precautionary measures that even the United States did not take during our recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

He wrote extensively of how Israel provided days and even weeks of warning as well as time for civilians to evacuate multiple cities in northern Gaza before starting its air and ground attacks of urban areas and has continued this practice. No other military

in history had ever implemented any of these practices in war before.

He demonstrated another first in the history of warfare that Israel initiated to prevent civilian casualties. Israel distributed actual military maps and urban warfare graphics to assist civilians with day-to-day evacuations and alerted them to where the IDF would operate. This is unprecedented. But somehow everyone expects this of Israel.

Those of us who have been following the conflict are familiar, and likely proud of these warnings and policies. They have saved lives. Lots of them. Even Israel's enemies admit this. But for our purposes today, there's one particular point that Major Spencer makes that we need to understand. Israel is fighting a war involving synchronous major urban battles. No military in modern history has faced tens of thousands of urban fighters in more than seven cities using human shields and hiding in hundreds of miles of underground networks, purposely built under civilian sites, while simultaneously holding hundreds of hostages.

The battlefield conditions in Gaza are unprecedented and that's why civilians are being killed, despite Israel's amazing efforts to prevent them. It's ugly, brutal, heartbreaking and true at the same time. If Hamas retains its ability to perpetuate war and violence against Israelis, not only will this war have been a failure, but will guarantee, yes, guarantee future such conflict. Hamas has made that clear. As time passes, sadly, public sentiment has turned from sympathy to hostility with regard to Israel. The reports of large numbers of civilian casualties are the cause of that. So, we need to keep focused on what this mission is all about, why victory is so important, and at the same time, recognize what Israel has done to prevent civilian deaths.

Major Spencer concluded, "To be clear, I am outraged by the civilian casualties in Gaza. But it is crucial to direct that outrage at the right target. And that target is Hamas."

As the young people say, let's not get it twisted. This is not a war against the Palestinian civilian population. It is a fight for the safety of the people of Israel. It's a time for critical and rational thinking, not emotional responses that will only get more Israelis and Palestinians killed.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner