



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
Congregation Beth Tikvah
304 E. Midland Avenue ~ Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

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Why Would Anyone Attack a Hospital?

Dear JCCP/CBT family:

On March 19th, Israel began a multi-day attack on Shifa Hospital, one of the largest hospitals in the Gaza strip. As you might imagine, many observers quickly criticized Israel for this. After all, why would anyone attack a hospital?

Why indeed.

Since the war began on October 7th, Israel has been placed in the terrible position of fighting against a terrorist organization, whose very charter not only calls for the eradication of the state of Israel, but the murder of Jews as well. For the 17 years that Hamas has (for lack of a better term) ruled the Gaza strip, it has built a terrorist army with tens of thousands of fighters, constructed hundreds of miles of tunnels, deliberately choosing to build them under schools, hospitals, and even under the headquarters of various international organizations including United Nations facilities. It has siphoned off or outright stolen at least 60% of international aid that has flowed into Gaza. It has initiated five major conflicts with Israel, and has shot tens of thousands of rockets and missiles into Israel's central and southern region, causing death and destruction. It should be noted that each of these major conflicts ended with a ceasefire, a ceasefire that Hamas would regularly break or violate. Perhaps that might explain why Israel views any talk of a ceasefire, or a "permanent ceasefire" whether offered by its enemies or even allies, with such resentment, if not outright contempt. Indeed, there was a ceasefire in place on October 6th and we see how well that worked out for the people of Israel and Hamas' commitment to maintaining it. There was a ceasefire in place that allowed for 100 hostages to be returned to Israel in

December, and Hamas violated that one also. Any new ceasefire will only provide Hamas an opportunity to rearm and regroup, and then, when conditions are favorable, to wage war again.

So why attack a hospital? International law stipulates that while a medical facility is a protected site in conflict, it loses that status if it is used for military activity. And that's been Hamas' strategy since its inception. It stores weapons in private homes and in schools and hospitals. It attacks Israel from within civilian population centers and hospitals, and then uses civilian casualties to score propaganda points against Israel, especially in the western world.

And that is the context with which we need to understand Israel's assault of Shifa Hospital. Sadly, the hospital was once again being used as a forward area for Hamas' attacks because Hamas mistakenly believed that Israel, fearing world opinion, would refrain from targeting it. This has turned out to be one of Israel's most successful operations against Hamas since the war began, with the elimination of hundreds of Hamas terrorists, and the capture of over 500, including senior and mid-level commanders. An unnamed Hamas official even told Lebanon's Al-Akhbar newspaper that the significance of the commanders detained or killed during the Israel Defense Forces' ongoing operation at Shifa Hospital should not be underestimated.

Instead of reflexively criticizing Israel for this raid, which of course under normal circumstances would be an unforgivable war crime, a reasonable observer should ask: Why is it that there were so many Hamas operatives at this facility in the first place? And what other nation in the midst of a war would be expected to simply allow enemy forces to operate in a hospital with impunity?

I am not exactly an impartial observer of these events. I unambiguously stand with Israel, and I refuse to be swayed by the propaganda of Israel's enemies or the ambivalence of some of Israel's fair-weather friends. Like many of you reading this article, I have concerns about Israel's current government, and I wrote about them extensively in the year that preceded October 7th. I am worried about a growing public rift between the Israeli government and the Biden administration, a perfect example of

which was the terrible decision last week to refrain from vetoing the United Nations resolution calling for a ceasefire without the release of the hostages. That was a clear message to Jerusalem and despite the best attempts of government spokesmen to play down the significance, nobody in Washington or Jerusalem is buying it. And even as we recognize our own fears and concerns, we must acknowledge the terrible human suffering and loss of life among the people of Gaza. To make that statement is not an abandonment of Israel, but rather to recognize that Hamas' terrible and criminal decisions and Israel's legitimate responses have been an absolute tragedy for all. That's why this war must come to an end, and the sooner the better. But it will only end when Israel destroys the war making power of Hamas, just like our own great nation removed the war making capabilities of the Nazis in WW II. Sadly, Nazis still exist. But they no longer rule Germany. Israel must be allowed to achieve the same.

Let's remember that next time your neighbor or your favorite news source implies that Israel attacked a hospital without cause, or fails to acknowledge the contempt for human life that animates everything that Hamas does.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner