

Sara Roy on the Israeli Assault of Gaza

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I hear the voices of my friends in Gaza as clearly as if we were still on the phone; their agony echoes inside me. They weep and moan over the death of their children, some, little girls like mine, taken, their bodies burned and destroyed so senselessly.

One Palestinian friend asked me, "Why did Israel attack when the children were leaving school and the women were in the markets?" There are reports that some parents cannot find their dead children and are desperately roaming overflowing hospitals.

As Jews celebrated the last night of Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights commemorating our resurgence as a people, I asked myself: How am I to celebrate my Jewishness while Palestinians are being killed?

The religious scholar Marc Ellis challenges us further by asking whether the Jewish covenant with God is present or absent in the face of Jewish oppression of Palestinians? Is the Jewish ethical tradition still available to us? Is the promise of holiness – so central to our existence – now beyond our ability to reclaim?

The lucky ones in Gaza are locked in their homes living lives that have long been suspended – hungry, thirsty, and without light but their children are alive.

Since Nov. 4, when Israel effectively broke the truce with Hamas by attacking Gaza on a scale then unprecedented – a fact now buried with Gaza's dead – the violence has escalated as Hamas responded by sending hundreds of rockets into Israel to kill Israeli civilians. It is reported that Israel's strategy is to hit Hamas military targets, but explain that difference to my Palestinian friends who must bury their children.

On Nov. 5, Israel sealed all crossing points into Gaza, vastly reducing and at times denying food supplies, medicines, fuel, cooking gas, and parts for water and sanitation systems. A colleague of mine in Jerusalem said, "this siege is in a league of its own. The Israelis have not done something like this before."

During November, an average of 4.6 trucks of food per day entered Gaza from Israel compared with an average of 123 trucks per day in October. Spare parts for the repair and maintenance of water-related equipment have been denied entry for over a year. The World Health Organization just reported that half of Gaza's ambulances are now out of order.

According to the Associated Press, the three-day death toll rose to at least 370 by Tuesday morning, with some 1,400 wounded. The UN said at least 62 of the dead were civilians. A Palestinian health official said that at least 22 children under age 16 were killed and more than 235 children have been wounded.

In nearly 25 years of involvement with Gaza and Palestinians, I have not had to confront the horrific image of burned children – until today.

Yet for Palestinians it is more than an image, it is a reality, and because of that I fear something profound has changed that will not easily be undone. For how, in the context of Gaza today, does one speak of reconciliation as a path to liberation, of sympathy as a source of understanding? Where does one find or even begin to create a common field of human undertaking (to borrow from the late, acclaimed Palestinian scholar, Edward Said) so essential to coexistence?

It is one thing to take an individual's land, his home, his livelihood, to denigrate his claims, or ignore his emotions. It is another to destroy his child. What happens to a society where renewal is denied and all possibility has ended?

And what will happen to Jews as a people whether we live in Israel or not? Why have we been unable to accept the fundamental humanity of Palestinians and include them within our moral boundaries? Rather, we reject any human connection with the people we are oppressing. Ultimately, our goal is to tribalize pain, narrowing the scope of human suffering to ourselves alone.

Our rejection of "the other" will undo us. We must incorporate Palestinians and other Arab peoples into the Jewish understanding of history, because they are a part of that history. We must question our own

narrative and the one we have given others, rather than continue to cherish beliefs and sentiments that betray the Jewish ethical tradition.

Jewish intellectuals oppose racism, repression, and injustice almost everywhere in the world and yet it is still unacceptable – indeed, for some, it's an act of heresy – to oppose it when Israel is the oppressor. This double standard must end.

Israel's victories are pyrrhic and reveal the limits of Israeli power and our own limitations as a people: our inability to live a life without barriers. Are these the boundaries of our rebirth after the Holocaust?

As Jews in a post-Holocaust world empowered by a Jewish state, how do we as a people emerge from atrocity and abjection, empowered and also humane? How do we move beyond fear to envision something different, even if uncertain?

The answers will determine who we are and what, in the end, we become.

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