

Thoughts From the Red Zone

By: Shira Reifman

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Tuesday:

I never log onto my facebook account, but someone has sent me a link that can only be viewed by clicking through facebook. When I log on, I smile at several people's status "My country is under attack. More than 100 rockets have been fired at Israel over the past 48 hours. Didn't hear about it? Don't worry, you'll hear about it from the world when we retaliate." It seems tongue-in-cheek. Israel isn't going to retaliate. It has endured missile fire for years and is currently worried about its Northern border with Syria.

Wednesday:

We receive a text message that rehearsals for Shabbat Irgun (B'nai Akiva's biggest shabbaton of the year, the culmination of a month's worth of activities and preparations) have been cancelled due to the security situation. We check the internet and discover that Israel has indeed retaliated by assassinating Ahmed Jabari, the chief architect of Hamas' terrorist activities against Israel. Bracing for Hamas' response, Israel cancels school and gan on Thursday for anyone living within 40 km of Gaza.

My five daughters all pile into the mamad to sleep. It is a fun "sister sleepover," but soon it turns contentious as some want to sleep while others want to talk. It is crowded and they are tired. It is after 10:00p.m. before they are all asleep.

Thursday:

Daniel is at shul and I am preparing to take Shadow for a walk. Suddenly, the air raid siren sounds. My daughters already know what this means. They immediately head for the mamad with me at their heels. Miryam, age 12, gets upset because I have left the dog downstairs. I promise that we will bring him into the mamad if there are further sirens. We hear huge booms. We sit in our safe room for the requisite ten minutes, reading Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast. When we emerge, my daughters are shaken. They do not want me to leave to walk the dog so I wait for Daniel's return.

Our community has organized an impromptu trip out of the red zone to the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem, a welcome diversion. 1500 local residents set out for the zoo in 30 chartered buses. At the zoo, a reporter interviews me about living within missile range. He wants to know if my family in the U.S. is worried about us. (Duh?!) He asks if the missiles make me want to return "home" to the U.S. "Just the opposite," I respond. "The missiles only strengthen my resolve to live in this Land."

The reporter interviews Miryam. He asks if she is scared to go home. She says she is nervous, but that home is home. She explains "in America we used to have snow days when we didn't go to school. Here we have war days."

When we get home we learn that three Israelis were killed by a rocket in Kiryat Malachi. Kiryat Malachi is the closest city to our community, a seven minute drive, and the place where we do our grocery shopping and other business. One of the victims is Mirah Sharf. The name seems so familiar to me, but I can't figure out why.

Friday:

Daniel and I are both horrified by the New York Times' coverage of Operation Amud Anan. Daniel writes a letter to the editor. Mary from the NY Times calls to verify that our community has been under fire. They publish the letter.

School and gan are still closed. Another mother organizes a parsha party. My 3rd graders refuse to walk by themselves. I walk them to the party and ask the host to call me when the girls are ready to leave. "Usually, I'm not so paranoid" I explain. He understands.

From my roof porch I see my neighbor leave in his army uniform. His wife and children are not home. They are probably in Tiberias with her parents, waiting for Abba to return safely from reserve duty. I email my friend. Her husband has also been called up. Our shul sends out an email that they are setting up an emergency committee to help women and children whose fathers and husbands have been called up.

My daughters are happy to idle the day away at home, but I prefer that they not experience more sirens than necessary and I bundle them into the car and head for Bilu Center, a nearby open-air mall that is outside of the red zone and has advertised that its kiddie rides and Gymboree will be free today for southern residents. I am overwhelmed by the generosity of friends, strangers and organizations. Already, we have received three Shabbat invitations from total strangers who live outside of the red line. We have been showered with offers of free daytrips and reduced hotel stays. The country is opening its arms to the children of the South.

While the girls bungee jump on trampolines, we hear constant booms in the distance. Uzi, the trampoline owner, explains that we're hearing the explosions in Ashdod. Two visitors from the North are surprised at how close the rockets are. A woman nearby shouts that there is a siren in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv. We all said it could happen, but we are in shock that it actually has.

On the way home we are stuck behind a massive flatbed truck carrying a huge tank to the front line. The truck moves slowly and I am in a rush to get home before Shabbat. We pass the tank and the girls are amazed by its size. They want to know how you go to the bathroom in a tank. I explain that there is a hatch in the bottom that can open to the ground. They laugh, but not because it is funny.

We return home an hour before Shabbat candle lighting. My husband hasn't finished cooking, the house is in chaos, and everyone needs to shower. My husband confirms that we missed several sirens while at Bilu Center. It was worth the late afternoon rush, I think to myself. We are cooking and cleaning like crazy. It is 20 minutes before candle lighting and we are trying to finish our preparations. My 7 year old is in the shower. The siren pierces the air. It isn't the pre-Candle lighting siren that gives

us a 20 minute warning. We race to the mamad. My daughter is in her towel with shampoo in her hair. We laugh with her. We worry that the schnitzel will burn on the stovetop and that the final dish won't make it into the oven with enough time left to cook. Daniel leaves the mamad a few minutes early to salvage dinner. The rest of us wait ten minutes and emerge from the safe room to finish what we can.

I light Shabbat candles and wait for the peace and tranquility to descend, as it always does. Before I finish the blessing, the siren sounds again. I grab the prayer text and we rush back to the mamad. My 12 year old is upset because Daniel is not in the mamad. We didn't leave the light on in the mamad because it is also a bedroom. When we pull the outer door shut and close the shutters, the room is pitch black. At first, the girls aren't scared. We sing lecha dodi together loudly. Then, one of the girls is petrified and turns on the light. (This will be rectified by a visit from the local Filipino later...)

Daniel returns from shul. He reports that it was extremely empty, as anticipated. Many have been called up to miluim. Others have gone to family or friends outside the red line. (Later, those who went to Jerusalem will report that they, too, heard a siren on Friday night and that they should have stayed home where at least they have a mamad in the house.)

We make Kiddush and hamotzi and start to eat. The siren sounds again. Back to the mamad. We know that we are relatively far from the Gaza epicenter, that my daughters' classmates from Ashdod and Kiryat Malachi are faring much worse. We live near the Tel Nof airforce base and the sound of jets is constant.

For the third night in a row, all five girls crowd into the mamad to sleep so that we don't have to wake them up in the middle of the night in the event of a siren.

Shabbat

There is no mamad in our shul and the girls are afraid to walk there and back. I wait for Daniel to return from the early hashkama minyan and then I walk the dog. Someone must be home with the girls at all times.

It is 8:00a.m. My 3 year old is musing while sitting on the toilet. "Ima, why isn't there an azaka (siren) now?" My heart sinks. Have the sirens already become such a part of her consciousness that she questions their absence? I tread lightly. "What do you mean, sweetie? We don't always have azakot, just sometimes." "I want there to be an azakah" she replies. "Why sweetheart?" "Because I want to be all together in the room." My heart soars and for a moment I nurture the hope that the warmth of our family and the power of community can turn traumatic memories into rosy ones.

The girls and I all daven. My 7 year old tells me that she is saying an extra chapter of Psalms to pray for the safety of the soldiers.

Homefront command has stationed dozens of soldiers in a gymnasium in our community. By now, they have called up 75,000 reservists. Stationed with us is a search and rescue unit. They want them close to the front, if necessary. Although our yishuv is generally closed to traffic on Shabbat, this is a milchemet mitzvah, an obligatory defensive war to protect the Land and People of Israel, so travel is permitted.

Some soldiers arrive on Friday. Others arrive in the middle of the night. By the time they wake up, there is a line of families waiting to host them – religious and secular soldiers – for Shabbat meals.

Shabbat passes quietly. We host a family of 8 for lunch and the children enjoy each other's company. The girls are too anxious to go to the park or play outside in the street as is their usual custom on Shabbat afternoon. B'nai Akiva's Shabbat Irgun has been cancelled due to the security situation. Homefront command does not want groups of more than 100 children congregating outside of a mamad. My daughter is extremely disappointed. I try to put it in perspective for her. I tell her that I understand how important this is to her, but that it will be rescheduled. Meanwhile, people are dying. She knows I am right, but she is still disappointed. She and her friends have been practicing their dance performance for weeks. They have been preparing to paint the walls and stay up all night and graduate to the next "shevet" in the movement.

My friend tells me that Mirah Sharf was a 26 year old, pregnant, mother of three, a Chabad emissary in India and that, strikingly, she was killed on the anniversary of the Holtzbergs' death. (The Holtzbergs were the Chabad emissaries in Mumbai who were murdered by terrorists last year.) All of a sudden, I realize why the name Mirah Sharf is so familiar to me. I am heading to India with my parents for two weeks and I have been in email contact with Mirah several times. When Shabbat ends I open my email and re-read Mirah's friendly invitation to come to the Chabad house when I am there. Now, her words are eerie and I am profoundly sad. I can't believe I have three emails in my inbox from the stranger who was just murdered in Kiryat Malachi.

The youth groups set up a "pinah chamah" for the soldiers stationed in the gymnasium. For bonding purposes, the army doesn't want the soldiers spread to different host homes, so families bring a constant supply of home-baked goods, hot drinks, and treats to the soldiers. The soldiers are overwhelmed by the support and love shown by the community. It is one of the times in Israeli life when religious and non-religious communities transcend their differences and appreciate what each has to offer the other.

My 9 year old's best friend sleeps over as she has so many times before. She awakens in the night and is scared. She can't sleep and is on the verge of tears. She wants to go home. For the first time ever, her father picks her up in the middle of the night.

Sunday

School and gan are still cancelled, but once again the community has organized a trip outside of the red zone for the children. Miryam goes to Jerusalem with her middle school and I accompany the younger four to Keftzuba, a children's Gymboree and funland. In the car, my 7 year twins debate whether this trip is really far enough out of the red zone to keep us safe. One argues that Iran has given Hamas missiles that can reach farther into Israel and that sirens in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv mean that Keftzuba is still in range. Her twin sister insists that the Iron Dome system can be deployed, if necessary, and that we will be safe at Keftzuba. I wonder if their 7 year old counterparts in the U.S. are talking about current events or Barbie Dolls.

In Keftzuba we meet youth from Sderot and Ashdod, as well as a group of adults with special needs who are all in wheelchairs. I wonder how long it takes them to get to the mamad. In our community, we have 64 seconds from the time that we hear the siren to get into the mamad before the rocket hits. In communities closer to Gaza, the amount of time is far shorter.

As the girls jump and play, I set up my computer and try to work – something that has been difficult these past few days. I think of the many thousands of other parents and employees who have been unable to work since Wednesday. My boss is understanding, but I feel the internal pressure of a workaholic to perform regardless of the circumstances. I succeed in writing 1.5 grant proposals.

From Keftzuba we head to Jerusalem for a performance of Anne of Green Gables (in Hebrew) at the Jerusalem Theater. The actors have donated a special show for children of the South. At the end of the show, one of the characters tells the children how happy the cast is to be able to do something to make the children happy. He encourages them and wishes them strength in the coming difficult days. While we are enjoying the show, tens of thousands of soldiers are amassing on the border of Gaza preparing for a possible ground invasion.

When we get home we see that three cement public shelters are being delivered on flatbeds. Hundreds of families, all former residents of Gush Katif, live in caravans in our community. The caravans do not have safe rooms so external, communal safe rooms are being delivered. I reflect on the irony of the situation. The families of Gush Katif left their homes so that Israel could have peace in Gaza. Now, seven years later, they live in Southern and Central Israel and are being fired on from their former home.

Miryam beats us home from Jerusalem. She says that we missed two sirens. Her younger sister hugs her and apologizes for getting home late so that Miryam had to be in the mamad by herself.

Monday

It is my turn to go to work and Daniel's turn to parent. Once again, he takes the girls on a community tiyul outside of the red line to a park in Modiin. They boat and get their faces painted. They get sparkly tattoos on their arms and they succeed in escaping their reality.

As I make the long, two-hour drive to my office in the North, I listen incessantly to galei tzahal army radio. It seems that the army had mistaken intelligence and bombed the wrong house, killing 9 women and children instead of the sought-after terrorist. High ranking officers are apologizing on the air. Mistakes happen in war, but the entire country feels deflated. Nobody, and certainly not the soldiers, want to kill civilians. I wonder if our Gazan counterparts are as upset by the civilian casualties caused by the rockets fired indiscriminately at civilian population centers. No matter what the answer to the question is, we hold ourselves and our army to a high moral standard and we don't want to make such mistakes.

On the way home from work, army radio reports that Tzahal successfully hit a building where four Islamic Jihad terrorists were meeting. Initial reports confirm that one is dead and we wait with baited breath for news of the other three. Hamas reports that only one was killed. The BBC reports that Israel

hit a media building that had foreign media offices inside. They neglect to mention the Islamic Jihad terrorists or the fact that the operation was very particular and targeted only the place where the meeting was being held, not the other media offices. Galei Tzahal takes a break from war-related reports to discuss the all-important soccer match results. The sports report is regularly interrupted by “tzeva adom” announcements indicating where missiles are falling. Are they kidding? Maccabi Tel Aviv at a time like this? CNN reports that more than 57% of Americans support the Gaza operation.

A friend calls to say that the community has received permission to resume school tomorrow. Children in communities closer to Gaza will remain at home. She is concerned because some of the children study in caravans that don't have a mamad. I speak to the principal who says that the classes will be relocated from the caravans to other rooms in the permanent buildings. She sends out a letter describing all of the additional security measures that the school is undertaking including missile drills, posting soldiers at the school, and limiting students' movement during recess. She asks me to translate it into English for all of the new olim who have just recently chosen to make Israel their home.

Talk of a cease-fire is in the air, but for now Israel and Hamas are not willing to meet each other's demands. If a cease-fire is not reached, a less popular ground invasion will proceed. We pray and we wait and we pray some more.

Tuesday

Today is my 38th birthday. The kids are going back to school for a shortened day. Routine is important. At school, they have two practice drills and every teacher runs a group therapy session with her class. They encourage the children to talk about how they feel when a siren sounds and what calms them down. After school, my daughter shows me her worksheet. She wrote that she feels scared, but also strong, victorious, and loved. She also emphasizes to me that, in addition to hugs and kisses, candy and extra time on the computer make her feel calm.

I pick my three year old up from gan. She tells us about the game they played. Whenever the ganenet yelled “Shamayim kchulim,” “Blue skies,” all of the children had to run to the mamad. They played this game throughout the day, giggling and enjoying their race to the safe room. “Grey skies are gonna clear up, put on a happy face.”

The siren blasts in the afternoon and I am relieved that all of my girls are home with me. Even when there is only 1-2 sirens per day, the uncertainty of when they will come puts me on edge. Can someone go out now? Can we run to the supermarket? Is this a good time?

I take the dog for an evening walk as a guise to get out of the house while my daughters set up the “surprise” bar-b-q and birthday party that they have been planning. While I am gone, they decide to set up outside. They arrange the table beautifully with a tablecloth and candles. I walk through the gate of our yard to cries of “happy birthday!” As if on cue, the siren wails. I tell the girls that they planned quite a fanfare to alert everyone of my birthday as we retreat to the mamad. In our safe room we sing birthday songs and Rut does a little birthday dance that she learned a gan. We play with the balloons they have brought up with them. There is a second siren during dinner and a third that is more distant,

but the girls are nervous so we climb the stairs for the third time in an hour. Later, my friend from down the block will call and say “you had a real ‘blast’ for your birthday.” We will laugh, but not wholeheartedly.

We go back to our party table and the girls bring out a gorgeous birthday cake that they have obviously worked on for a long time with their Abba. I look around. I have a beautiful family, a meaningful job, and I’m living my dream life in the Land that I love. I feel very blessed on this birthday, as always. I close my eyes and as I blow out the candles, I wish for peace.

Wednesday

The siren wakes us up at 5:20 a.m. I am grateful that the girls are sleeping in the mamad and I hope that they will sleep through the noise. No such luck. One runs to make sure that we heard the siren. When eventually I go back to my room, I am trailed by my twins who are too anxious to sleep. I let them sleep with me and the warmth and comfort lulls them back to dreamland.

I tell my friend how terrible I feel for the seminary and yeshiva recruiters who are in the US right now trying to convince people to come to Israel for a year. If they can’t recruit enough students, their schools will close, people will lose their jobs, teachers won’t be able to feed their families. I wish aloud that people would understand that they should still come to Israel. “Well, you know how irrational American parents can be” she says offhandedly. I look at her quizzically, “They think we’re the ones who are irrational!”

Miryam’s school is still cancelled as it is in the kibbutz next door, just a few kilometers closer to Gaza. The younger four girls are at school again. The siren blares twice during the morning while they are there. I think of 700 elementary school children rushing for the mamad in 64 seconds. Two days ago, schools in Ashkelon were hit. Thankfully, school had been cancelled. “Shamayim K’chulim” I yell to Daniel and Miryam as we run for our mamad at home and think of our four little ones, ages 3, 7, 7, and 9, having to enter mamadim far away from us.