

## **Rosh Hashanah Morning Day 1 5775: Iron Dome**

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When young David was asked by his father to say the evening prayer before going to bed, he realized he didn't have his head covered...so he asked his little brother Henry to rest a hand on his head until his prayers were over.

Henry grew impatient after a few minutes and removed his hand. Their father said, "This is important, Henry, put your hand back on David's head!"

To which Henry exclaimed, "Why, am I my brother's kippah?"

The Kippah: the Jewish head covering. Where does it come from? According to that oh most authoritative source of Jewish law, the 2000-year-old man, the Kippah came about because 2000 years ago there was a rabbi with a little male bald spot that he wanted to cover up. He cut out a little piece of fabric, and, well, the rest is history. Not a bad idea, but not true. First of all, as you can see from me, it doesn't work. And second of all, it's not true.

So what is it all about? It is not found in the Bible. It isn't mentioned in the Talmud. It is, like so many things we do, just "a tradition," but it is more than that, too, because many people would not walk into Temple without one on their head.

Other than making us feel more Jewish, does it do anything else? Does it, for example, protect us from harm? I'm not sure about that, but I do know of one such Kippah that does. That "Kippah" protected all of Israel this summer. It destroyed thousands of the rockets that Hamas fired at Israel. That "Kippah" is the Kippat Barzel, the "Iron Kippah," or as it is normally translated into English, the "Iron Dome." The Kippat Barzel, or Iron Dome, is an amazing example of both Israeli ingenuity, technical prowess, and military sophistication. Most of you saw it in action if you watched the news reports during Israel's 50-day war with Hamas. A few of us sitting in this sanctuary were in Israel this summer and saw it in person.

I am not sure that I can adequately describe how amazing it is. The Iron Dome has a radar system which “sees” a rocket launch from the Gaza Strip, identifies its trajectory, decides whether or not it needs to fire, then locks on, fires, intercepts, and blows up its target. It does all of this in just seconds! Or, to put it differently, it is designed to destroy incoming rockets which take 15 seconds from launch to impact.

Because of the Iron Dome, Israel was able to save the lives of thousands of its citizens (Jewish, Christian and Moslem), prevent thousands of dollars in property damage, and keep the country going while calling up its reserves and, ultimately, dealing a serious military blow to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Iron Dome’s success rate was incredible. The system destroyed 87%, or nearly nine out of ten, rockets that were fired at Israel before they hit anything important, while ignoring those that were heading towards uninhabited areas.

All of this got me thinking: we need an Iron Dome system. Just think about how great it would be if each one of us had our own, personal iron dome.

- When people make stupid comments, the system would shoot them right out of the air, before they insulted us.
- Too many things on the to do list: The Iron Dome would target them and, just like that, our “to do” lists would be shortened. Like the real Iron Dome, ours would also prioritize its targets, knocking out only what needs to be destroyed and leaving on the things are important.
- There could be a special version: a “*parent* Iron Dome system” which we could deploy to protect our children. Bad grades ... knocked right out of the sky. Bullies... gone.
- And think about how great it would be if, the first time the kids ask for the car keys, we had an Iron Dome system on the car! Fender benders... a thing of the past.

O.K., I am just fantasizing, but the truth is there are times when each of us feels the need to bolster our “defense” system. While we might not be able to protect ourselves or our children from everything, if we could strengthen our inner resources and bolster our communal institutions, we might be able to defend ourselves from the threats surrounding us.

And there are real threats out there. Not only is Israel under attack, but Jews and Judaism are in danger everywhere. We feel it right here on Long Island. We read about it in the news. We hear about how, in American college campuses, and in debates among liberals, there is a growing anti-Israel movement. And we hear their arguments and we see that they border on, and often cross over into, Anti-Semitism.

There is a marked increase in antisemitism throughout Europe. In France, this summer, anti-Israel rallies quickly turned into physical assaults on Paris’s Jewish community. Many French Jews are leaving France for the safety of Israel.

And right here in our country we are well aware of these threats: I keep hearing anecdotes about problems everywhere I go. A comment in the hallway of the Temple: “Rabbi, did you hear about the supermarket chain in Europe where they removed all the Kosher products from their shelves?” Someone pulls me aside at *shiva* “Rabbi, did you hear about the security guard in England who refused to allow Jewish kids into a store? He turned them away saying: “no Jews allowed.” At last week’s Temple Board Meeting, a number of people raised the issue: what are we going to do about the rising level of anti-Semitism in the world? What is our response going to be? There is a palpable undercurrent of worry in our community.

Here in America there is a growing movement called BDS which stands for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. It is gaining strength on College campuses and liberal Christian Churches throughout the United States. The Presbyterian Church of America voted this year to divest from Israel after a debate tinged with antisemitism.

Last week, I saw a disturbing YouTube video where the President of the Student Senate at Ohio University, wearing a pink boycott Israel shirt,

poured a bucket of red water over her head, calling it the “Blood Bucket” challenge. She was “protesting” what she called “the genocide” taking place in Gaza and the Israeli “occupation” of Palestine.

Why should we care? Let people boycott whoever they want... It’s a free country, after all. But sadly, it is not that simple. It is very problematic. First of all, the BDS movement ignores the complexity of the situation and instead places all the blame on the State of Israel. Secondly, the boycott movement is a blatant attempt to equate Israel and Zionism, and, by extension, Jews and Judaism, with racism and the apartheid regime that existed in South Africa.

Calling Israel’s actions to defend itself against Hamas in Gaza “genocide” is ridiculous. If Israel wanted to, *it could have* caused genocide in Gaza. However, the reverse is true: Israel acted with remarkable restraint in Gaza. Israel went out of its way to warn civilians of pending attacks and often decided not to strike when civilians were present. Calling Israel’s actions “genocide” is a subtle, but very real and dangerous, attempt, to portray Jews not as the victims of genocide and racism, but as its number one perpetrator, while, at the same time, ignoring the fact that it is Hamas who has declared its objectives explicitly in its charter: to destroy Israel, kill Jews, and engage in acts of terror targeting civilians.

Yet the BDS movement is growing, and not just on American college campuses: In liberal Christian Churches throughout our country! At our community’s 9/11 service, two Christian clergy asked me for “my take” on the Gaza conflict, because, as one of them said, her denomination, the United Church of Christ, would be taking up a BDS resolution at their next convention and she wanted to know what it was all about.

And this summer, I received a few calls from nervous parents from our Temple whose kids were heading off to college campuses, like Ohio University, with BDS agitators, large Moslem populations, and active anti-Israel groups. We set up a program to talk about the challenges faced by Jewish kids heading off to college. We examined the history of the conflict and gave the kids some useful information. On your seats is a handout with some of the information we shared with those kids.

It's not just here, in the US, that has us worried: Every American has watched, with horror, the growth of ISIS and the brutal murders they committed. ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or as it is sometimes called, ISIL, has declared itself to be the new Moslem Caliphate, the new Islamic kingdom. It is a threat to the security of the United States, to the entire Western world, and to many Arab States, as well. Radical Islam is a threat to the world. It is interesting to note that Egypt, Saudi Arabia and much of the Arab world remained strangely silent during Israel's fight with Hamas this summer. It is interesting to note that a number of Arab States, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates joined with the United States in attacking ISIS targets yesterday.

I don't want to sound overly alarmist, but I am feeling, and hearing, that sense of alarm in our community more and more. Which brings me back to the Iron Dome. We need an Iron Dome system here in America. Something that can help defend us from incoming threats. Jewishly, here in America, we need an Iron Dome system and we are going to have to build it ourselves, Israel cannot do it for us.

That metaphoric Iron Dome system will need a launching pad that is strong and stable... and that means having strong Jewish community institutions: like the synagogue, the JCC, and the UJA Federation. Sadly, we are seeing more and more individuals turning away from these traditional Jewish institutions and going for a "do it yourself" kind of Judaism. But if we don't support these institutions, who will? We want strong synagogues in our area, and we have already seen one local synagogue close. It is up to us to make sure that doesn't happen.

Secondly, we need a good targeting system: and that means innovative and effective schools and programs that create a sophisticated understanding of Judaism among adults, and a solid Jewish education for our children. Knowledge of Jewish teachings, knowledge about Israel and Jewish history, and good shared Jewish experiences, will help us target and defend ourselves.

Third, we will need rockets capable of hitting any threat: metaphorically these are the mitzvot, both ritual and ethical, that we fire off into the world in order to mold it and shape it.

And, finally, it has to work together... Our metaphoric Iron Dome will work best if all Jews — Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox, Jewish Federation, JCC, and even just cultural Jews — unite and work with each other to strengthen the Jewish people.

Many of these components are already in place... but we have to get them working better! Take Temple Chaverim: Our synagogue is amazing, our Religious School is fantastic, our Youth Engagement program is terrific, and our Bar and Bat Mitzvah program is one of the best on Long Island... but do we have an 87% success rate? If not, then how do we get it there?

Our new Temple President, Karen Bressner, is asking for more volunteers. If your family would do just one thing more than you normally do, that would be 500 more “things” that are getting done, hundreds of more volunteers to bolster our Iron Dome defense system. Now if every adult in our community did just one more thing, that would be almost 1000 more things! Add in the kids... and, you do the math!

In his great book of Jewish Law, Moses Maimonides has an entire section dealing with martyrdom. Maimonides lived in medieval times when the Jewish community was under attack by both Christians and Moslems. In the Christian areas, called Ashkenaz, Crusaders demanded that Jews convert or die. The dominant response in Ashkenaz was martyrdom. Books were written about the martyrs of Ashkenazi Jewry. And an entire section of High Holy Day prayers on Yom Kippur is devoted to remembering them.

In the Moslem areas, called Sepharad, Maimonides subtly and significantly, pushed the Jewish tradition in a different direction. It isn't that Maimonides didn't know about, or venerate, Jewish martyrs. In Moslem Spain, where Maimonides was born a group of extremist Moslems called the Almohads who demanded that all non-Moslems convert or die.

We don't know exactly what happened to Maimonides before he left Spain, did he and his family convert or not? Scholars have debated this question for years. But we do know for certain that Maimonides' moved: First to Morocco, then Israel, and finally, to Egypt. So, it is perhaps not surprising that when Maimonides treated the question of Jewish martyrdom

in his code of Jewish law called the Mishneh Torah, he first went through all the examples of when a person should NOT become a martyr. And only then, the few examples when a person had no choice.

Martyrdom, both in Christianity and Judaism, is not a component of faith today. Jews can thank Maimonides for that... But, ironically, the enemy that Israel and the world faces today is one who is all too willing to commit martyrdom compel others to follow their ways. We saw that in Gaza, where civilians were used as human shields. We saw it in Afghanistan where suicide bombers frequently attacked Western Forces. In ISIS held territory we have seen a return to medieval like forced conversions and in Africa, the forced conversion and sale of non-Moslem women as sex slaves. And we have seen their gleeful willingness to brutally murder Westerners and even Moslems who don't agree with them. The enemy we are facing is fanatical and very committed. If we are going to win this war it is going to be because we show just as much commitment as they do.

We can do something: *We can commit ourselves to live for our faith just as much as they are willing to die for theirs.* We read a Torah portion today that dealt with martyrdom. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, for the cause. In the end, God says to Abraham: "you misunderstood Me," I don't want him to be a martyr. I want him to live!

From Maimonides' treatment of martyrdom we learn that the ultimate sacrifice a Jew can make is not dying for God, but living for God.<sup>1</sup>

On this day, we read the Unetaneh Tokef prayer: It says: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur, it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die."

May God give us the strength, this year, and for many years to come, to make the ultimate Jewish sacrifice, living for God, living Jewishly; being the best human beings that we can be.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Avi Weiss, NYBR Sermon Seminar 5775.

It is my fervent prayer this year that you and I, our families, our brothers and sisters in Israel and throughout the world, will be inscribed for goodness, safety, and life, in the Sefer haChayim, the Book of Life.  
L'Shanah Tovah.