

Where Are We?

By Rabbi Wesley R. Gardenswartz

A Shabbat Sermon Delivered on April 6, 2002 at Temple Emanuel, Newton

Let me tell you about a young man named Eran Picard. He was an 18 year old Israeli from Jerusalem. You've never met a sweeter, smarter young man, full of life, full of promise. My nephew, Yehuda Goodman, who formally enrolls in the Israeli army tomorrow, and his best friend Eran were touring Boston last August. And Shira and I were hosting them. Eran's parents are French. He spoke French in his home. He obviously spoke the Hebrew of a native. And his English was perfect. He had an 18-year old's fascination with American sports, especially the NBA, which he and Yehuda would watch in Jerusalem at 3:00 a.m. One day I took Eran and Yehuda out for lunch at a kosher deli in town. I asked Eran, now that he had recently graduated high school, what he would do. He explained that he was going to do a preparatory year before the army in a remote place called Atzmona. Why Atzmona, I asked. He said, eyes twinkling with the innocence of youth, it's the learning. It's a great yeshiva. In the middle of the night, on March 1st, a Palestinian terrorist cut through barbed wire and shot unarmed teen-age yeshiva students, killing 5, including Eran.

We hear about the numbers. In the last 18 months of Arab terror, 3,598 Jews have been injured- and many of those injuries are life-alteringly severe. 414 Jews have been murdered. Behind every number is a life, like Eran Picard. And behind every life lost or wounded is a family crushed, a universe extinguished.

How many of us wake up in the morning and dread unwrapping the blue plastic bag that contains the Times or the Globe, bracing ourselves for news and editorials that leave us with a pit in our stomachs?

The maiming and murder of Jewish innocents studying in a yeshiva, sitting around a seder table, dancing at a Bat Mitzvah, drinking at a café, and the war to which this terrorism has led, are unspeakably tragic. And also bewildering.

We can understand--we may or may not agree--but we can understand why the United Nations, the Vatican, the European Union, the peace activists, all call on Israel to get out of the West Bank. But what defies comprehension is why, when condemning Israel for its reprisals, do none of these at the same time condemn the Palestinians for their terrorism? The Israeli army has unearthed documents proving what we've known all along: that Yassir Arafat personally signed his name to invoices authorizing payments to senior terrorists. Why is it that the only world leader to call the Palestinians and their leadership to task is President Bush?

We see Israelis and Palestinians mourning their dead. We see pictures of pitched battle, of the fire and fury of war. And we feel not only sad and bewildered, but also powerless. But we are not.

In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve begin to live in a scary new world. The garden of Eden is over. The innocence is shattered. Now that they've eaten from the forbidden fruit, their eyes are

opened up not only to their own nakedness, but to the pain and travail, to the moral ambiguity and complexity, of the human condition. What do they do? They try to run away. They hide.

There is no hiding from God, of course. God finds them, and asks: *ayeka?*

Where are you? This question puzzled our commentators. Why did God ask it? God knew where they were. God was talking to them!

The medieval commentator Sforno explains the question:

You are not seen in the garden like you used to be. You are now hiding and not doing what you used to do.

We are living in a post-Eden Israel. The exuberance of 1967 is long since ancient history. Even the robust economy and era of relative optimism and peace from 1993 to 1995 likewise feels like ages ago.

The innocence is shattered. And not only because so many innocent Jews are dead and wounded. It is also true that the Palestinians have suffered. There is more than enough suffering to go around. And with all this suffering, there is moral ambiguity. Reasonable people, in and outside of Israel, can have very different understandings of the origins of all this despair. Personally, I believe that to a large extent Palestinian suffering is self-inflicted because they have made a choice to resort to terrorism. Others would locate the locus of responsibility elsewhere.

Perhaps because of this sadness, and this grayness, we are not as loud and supportive as we used to be. Last week I was driving around listening to the Connection on National Public Radio. The show was about American Jewish attitudes to the current crises. It was hard to take. I knew that the Arab world, the Europeans, the United Nations, the Vatican, the peace activists, looked the other way at Arab terrorism while blaming Israel for responding to it. What I did not appreciate till hearing this broadcast was how negative American Jews are on Israel. These callers said: it's gray and complicated, I don't like what Israel is doing, I am hiding. And as we are hiding, God is calling out to us, *ayeka*, where are you?

But God asks us this question not only to get us out of our hiding places. The commentator Sa'adya Gaon adds that God wanted Adam and Eve to come out from hiding and do something positive. Engage. Be present. It's a gray world. Make a difference in it.

Now American Jews can disagree on the merits. I could not disagree more passionately with the American Jews who called in with their negative comments. I believe that Israel occupies the high moral ground. But that disagreement doesn't really matter right now.

What matters is that all American Jews, whatever our views, lift our voices for Israel in this dark hour.

For, it is not only God who is asking us, where are you? It is also a woman named Sharon. Sharon was born in America and made aliyah 19 years ago and now lives in Jerusalem with her

husband and four children. She wrote a letter to the American Jewish community in which she first describes how picking up a pizza for dinner at the local pizzeria frays her nerves, how when she goes in to pick up the pizza there is no one but the cashier in the store. And then she writes:

A war is being fought in our front yards. The battle grounds are coffee shops. And what do I feel? What do I wonder most? It isn't about when will this end or whether it will end. It's more about where world Jewry is.

As a Jew who grew up community active, I remember flooding the streets of the garment center industry in Manhattan with picket signs, *Let My People Go* and *Free Soviet Jewry*. Bus loads of teens and adults pouring out with determined looks of pride on our faces. The refuseniks say that it was the knowledge of the masses behind them that kept them going.

I ask, Where are you? Where are the Diaspora Jewish leaders and if they are there and active, why don't we, the guys on the Jerusalem street corner, know about it? The isolation is almost as hard to understand as the situation itself.

How can we make a difference if you are silent? How can you make a difference without letting people know that you care?

The Arab world recognizes the Jews' silence and thrives on it. Am Yisrael's silence is the Jewish people's biggest tragedy and our greatest enemy right now. The Arab world, no-the world in general-is looking to all of you for leadership. The silence is deafening to those of us here. In this letter to you, I sound no political voice, I reflect no religious opinion. I merely ask all of you as Jews to look for your public voice and help us fight this terror. And she concludes...It effects all of us, our children, our grandchildren and our future.

Each of us must look into our hearts and answer Sharon's question. There are four practical things we can do.

First, we can show our emotional support. Sharon asks, where are you? We answer, we are at a rally in support of Israel tomorrow at noon at Faneuil Hall. But it's not just a one-time thing.

Israel also needs our religious support. And so we need to come back right here next Thursday night, at 7:30. Rabbi Warmflash has called upon all of us to attend a special service to pray for Israel. Praying, reciting tehillim, is a classic Jewish response to events of trauma. We pray for the strength to wage a war that incessant terrorist attacks have foisted upon us. And we pray for peace. We pray that one day, soon, Isaiah's vision will be fulfilled, lo yisa goy el goy cherev, lo yilmedu od milchama, nations will beat their swords into ploughshares, they will not lift up sword, neither shall they know war any more.

Third, we can show our political support. Our President has been strong on Israel. Again, his is the only voice of any world leader to condemn Arafat for his terrorism and to demand that he change his ways. But the White House is no doubt receiving letters and emails hostile to Israel. Write or email the President that you know and care about his support. In the tables outside is a sheet listing a website telling us where we can direct our support.

Finally, we can show our economic support. The pizzerias are empty. It's take-out only, as Sharon points out. The hotels are empty. The malls are empty. The stores that cater to tourism

are gone. Unemployment in Israel is nearing ten-percent. Unemployed parents mean that one out of four Israeli children are living below the poverty line. We need to give Israel money. Lots of it. Write a check to CJP's Israel in Crisis Fund. That money goes, dollar for dollar, straight to Israel. Every Jew in this community should give as much as they can.

We who live here cannot solve the problems over there. But neither should we remain hidden. We can, and we must, offer our brothers and sisters in Zion our emotional support. Our religious support. Our political support. Our economic support.

Ayeka, where are you? Sharon is asking. Lots of Israelis are asking. God is asking. It is high time that each of us stands up and answers, *hineni*, I am here. Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Gardenswartz is Associate Rabbi of [Temple Emanuel](#) in Newton. He is also a member of the Board of Advisors of [ShalomBoston.com](#).