

Seeking God's Presence

Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff

Four days following the Oct 23, 1983, suicide truck bomb attack in Beirut that took 241 American lives, then-Vice President George Bush led the White House team that visited the site. Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff, then a chaplain attached to the staff of Commander, Sixth Fleet, had arrived in Beirut on Oct 21, to lead a memorial service for a slain Jewish Marine, killed by sniper fire – and so was at the scene of the attack. At the request of the White House team, he wrote the following report on the attack and rescue effort that followed. This report was read by President Ronald Reagan as his keynote address to the April 1984 Baptist Fundamentalist '84 convention, chaired by the Rev. Jerry Falwell. A video tape of the presentation is available on-line at www.resnicoff.net.

One of the first to reach the building after the blast, I—along with Lieutenant Commander George ("Pooch") Pucciarelli, the Catholic chaplain attached to the Marine unit—faced a scene almost too terrible to describe. Bodies, and pieces of bodies, were everywhere. Screams of those injured or trapped were barely audible at first, as our minds struggled to grapple with the reality before us: a massive, four-story building reduced to a pile of rubble; dust, mixing with smoke and fire, obscuring the view of the little that was left.

Because we had thought that the sound of the explosion was linked to a single rocket or shell, most of the Marines had run toward the foxholes and bunkers, while we—the chaplains—had gone to the scene of the noise, "just in case" someone had been wounded. Now, as news spread quickly throughout the camp—news of the magnitude of the tragedy; news of the need for others to run to the aid of those comrades who might still be alive—Marines came from all directions.

There was a sense of God's presence that day in the small miracles of life which we encountered in each body that, despite all odds, still had a breath within. But there was more of His presence, more to keep our faith alive, in the heroism—and in the *humanity*—of the men who responded to the cries for help.

We saw Marines risk their own lives again and again, as they went into the smoke and the fire to try to pull someone out, or as they worked to uncover friends, all the while knowing that further collapse of huge pieces of concrete, precariously perched like dominoes, could easily crush the rescuers.

There was humanity at its best that day, and a reminder not to give up the hope and dreams of what the world *could be*, in the tears that could still be shed by these men, regardless of how cynical they had pretended to be before; regardless of how much they might have seen before.

Certain images will stay with me, always. I remember a Marine who found a wad of money amidst the rubble. He held it at arm's length as if it were dirty and cried out for a match or lighter, so that it could be burned. No one that day wanted to profit from the suffering of the catastrophe. Later, the Chaplains would put the word out that the money should be collected and given to us, for we were sure that a fund for widows and orphans would ultimately be established. But, at that moment, I was hypnotized with the rest of the men and watched as the money was burned.

Working with the wounded—sometimes comforting, and simply letting them know help was on the way; sometimes trying to pull and carry those whose injuries appeared less dangerous in an immediate sense than the approaching fire or the smothering smoke—my kippa [skullcap] was lost. The last I remember it, I had used it to mop someone's brow. Father Pucciarelli, the Catholic Chaplain, cut a circle out of his cap, a piece of camouflage cloth that would become my temporary head covering. Somehow, we wanted those Marines to know not just that we were Chaplains, but that he was Christian and that I was Jewish. Somehow, we both wanted to shout the message in a land where people were killing each other, at least partially based on the differences in religion among them, that we—we Americans—still believed that we could be proud of our particular religions and yet work side by side when the time came to help others, to comfort, and to ease pain.

Father Pucciarelli and I worked that day as brothers. The words from the prophet Malachi kept recurring to me, words he had uttered some twenty-five hundred years ago as he had looked around at fighting and cruelty and pain: "Have we not all one Father?," he asked. "Has not one God created us all?" It was painfully obvious, tragically obvious, that our world still could not show that we had learned to answer "yes." Still, I thought, perhaps some of us can keep the question alive. Some of us could cry out—as the Marines did that day—that we believe the answer is yes.

Before the bombing, Pooch and I had been in a building perhaps a hundred yards away. There had been one other Chaplain, Lieutenant Danny Wheeler, a Protestant minister, who had spent the night in the building that was attacked. Pooch and I were so sure that he was dead that we had promised each other that, when the day came to return to the States, we would visit his wife together. Suddenly, Pooch noticed Danny's stole—what we used to call his Protestant "tallit" [prayer shawl]. Because it was far from the area Danny was supposed to have been in, there was cautious hope that perhaps he had been thrown clear, that perhaps he had survived.

Later, Danny would tell the story of his terror. He was under the rubble, alive, not knowing what had happened, and not knowing how badly he was hurt. Then he heard the voices of the Marines searching near his stole, and his cry for help was answered with digging which lasted four hours before he was dragged out alive.

Danny told me later that I treated him like a newborn baby when he came out: that I counted fingers and toes, trying to see that he was whole. I didn't realize that I was so obvious, but the truth was that we could not believe that he was in one piece.

As I hugged him as they brought over a stretcher, he spoke, and I can still hear his first words. Racked with pain, still unsure of his own condition, he asked how his clerk was. Like so many of the men we would save that day, he asked first about others. These men, the survivors, still had no idea of the extent of the damage. They still thought that perhaps they had been in the one area of the building hit by rocket or mortar. We would wait until later to sit with these men and tell them the truth, to share with them the magnitude of the tragedy.

After the living were taken out, there was much more work to be done. With the wounded, with those who had survived, there was the strange job of trying to ease a gnawing feeling of guilt that would slowly surface: guilt that they had somehow let down their comrades by not dying with them. So, our job was to tell them how every life saved was important to us: how their survival was important to our faith, and our hope. They had to give thanks—with us—that they still had the gift, and the responsibility of lives that would go on.

With others, the Marines who stayed behind to continue the job of digging—a terrible, horrifying job of collecting human parts for identification and for eventual burial—there was the job of comforting them as they mourned. Thankfully, the self-defense mechanisms within us took over from time to time, and we were able to work without reacting to each and every horror we would encounter. But, suddenly, something would trigger our emotions; something would touch our humanity in a way impossible to avoid.

For some, it would be the finding of a friend's body, someone filled with life only days before. For others, it would be a scrap of paper or a simple belonging—a birthday card, or a picture of someone's children—which would remind them that this was no abstract "body count" of two hundred and forty military casualties. This was a tragedy of people, where each was unique, and each had a story. Each had a past, and each had been cheated of a future. As the Mishnah puts it, each was a world. We were not digging up "two hundred and forty." We were digging up one, plus one, plus one....

I have a personal memory of two "things" that brought to my mind images of life, images that haunt me still. One was a packet of three envelopes, tied together with a rubber band. On top, under the band, was a note that read, "To be mailed in case of death."

The other was a Red Cross message, delivered the next morning. The American Red Cross is the agency used by Navy families to communicate medical news from home. This message was a birth announcement: a baby had been born, and we were to deliver the good news. Only now there was no father we could congratulate, no father to whom the news could be conveyed.

That message stayed on the chaplain's desk for days. Somehow, we couldn't throw it away. So it stayed on the desk. And, without mentioning it, we all seemed to avoid that desk....

I stayed in Beirut for four more days before finally returning to Italy and to my family. During those days, as the work went on, a Marine here or there would send a silent signal that he wanted me—that is, a chaplain—near. Sometimes it was to talk. Sometimes it was so that he could shrug his shoulders or lift his eyes in despair. Sometimes it was just to feel that I was near—for, despite the struggles I might be feeling on a personal level, I was a *chaplain*, and therefore a symbol that there was room for hope, and for dreams, even at the worst of times.

In Jewish tradition, of course, when we visit the home of a mourner during *shiva*, the first week following the death of a loved one, visitors follow a simple rule. If a mourner initiates the conversation, the visitor responds. Otherwise, you sit in silence, communicating concern through your very presence, even without words. Somehow, I applied the rules of *shiva* during those days of digging. When a Marine or a sailor said something, I responded; otherwise, I stood by.

During all of my visits to Beirut, I, along with the other chaplains, spent much of the time simply speaking with the men. Informal discussions, whether going on while crouched in a foxhole or strolling toward the tent set up for chow, were just as important as anything formal we might set up. I remember the first time I jumped in a foxhole, the first time the shells actually fell within the U.S. area. Looking around at the others in there with me, I made the remark that we probably had set up the only "interfaith foxholes" in Beirut! The Druze, Muslims, Christians, all had theirs. The Jewish forces in the Israeli Army had theirs. But we were together. I made the comment then that perhaps if the world had more interfaith foxholes, there might be less of a need for foxholes altogether.

To understand the role of the chaplain—Jewish, catholic, or Protestant—is to understand that we try to remind others, and perhaps ourselves as well, to cling to our humanity, even in the worst of times. We bring with us the wisdom of men and women whose faith has kept alive their dreams in ages past. We bring with us the image of what the world *could be*, of what we ourselves *might be*, drawn from the visions of prophets and the promises of our holy books. We bring with us the truth that faith not only reminds us of the Holy in Heaven, but also of the holiness we can create here on earth. It brings not only a message of what it is divine, but also of what it means to be truly human.

It is too easy to give in to despair in a world sometimes seemingly filled with cruelty and brutality. But we must remember not just the depths to which humans might sink, but also the heights to which they may aspire.

That October day in Beirut saw men reach heroic heights, indeed: heights of physical endurance and courage, to be sure; but heights of sacrifice, compassion, kindness, and simple human decency as well. And—even if the admission might bring a blush to the cheeks of a few of the Marines—heights of love.

Long ago, the rabbis offered one interpretation of the Biblical verse that tells us that we are created "in the image of God." It does not refer to physical likeness, they explained, but to spiritual potential. We have within us the power to reflect as God's creatures the highest values of our Creator. As God is forgiving and merciful, so can we be. As He is caring and kind, so must we strive to be. As He is filled with love, so must we be.

Because of the actions I witnessed during the hell in Beirut, I glimpsed at least a fleeting image of heaven. For, in the hearts and hands of men who chose to act as brothers, I glimpsed God's hand as well. I did not stand alone to face a world forsaken by God; I felt I was part of one created with infinite care, and wonderful—awesome—potential.

We live in a world where it is not hard to find cause for despair. The chaplain has the challenge to bring to those who often see terror at it worst some reason for hope.

We need to keep faith and to keep searching, even during the worst of times. Only then may we find strength enough to keep believing that the best of times still might be.