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# With the Marines in Beirut

**By Arnold E. Resnicoff**

DECEMBER, 1982—HANUKAH

"There are no heroes here," said the Catholic Chaplain who led me through the rubble in what was once the civil aeronautical building, Beirut International Airport.

That was the most even-handed statement about the foreign forces that I had heard. Most others—Americans and Lebanese—praised one side or the other, and blamed one side or the other.

Around us, Beirut's civilians tried to clean up the city. Workers were clearing concrete and stone, sweeping areas clean. Later, visiting marines, I would see rebuilding of a different kind: Lebanese soldiers training, putting together an army.

Religion and politics are inseparable here, and we are only beginning to realize what that means. Lebanon's President must be Christian. This official must be Moslem, and that one, Christian. The make-up of an office must match, at least in theory, the religious make-up of the country, as reflected in an out-of-date census. It's called "confessional balance" but it has a strange ring to American ears: as if we would legislate that our President be white, our Vice-President, black, and our Secretary of State, oriental. We learn to be cautious of this amalgamation of loyalties: offering humanitarian aid to a Christian orphanage can be construed as taking an anti-Moslem stand.

Our American position of neutrality here means we try to treat all equally: no fraternization, and no conversation. Such a stand is a practical necessity, it is explained to me: if we don't talk to one side, we don't get shot at by the other. Or so we hope.

The American feeling about our presence seems positive. We disagree about the actions of others—actions which led to our involvement. But we hear no claim back home that we ourselves are here for anything other than a "moral" reason. We look around at destruction and death, and we think our being here does make a difference: skirmishes continue, but the real battles have stopped, at least for now. The rest is up to the diplomats and the politicians.

The debate concerning the morality of military action in Lebanon goes on in Israel. There, many face the same question we faced in Vietnam: how much destruction and bloodshed can be countenanced for the sake of a necessary, or even a "righteous," goal? In simpler

*Lieutenant Commander Resnicoff* is part of a three-man Jewish-Catholic-Protestant Chaplain Team on the staff of Vice Admiral Edward Martin, Commander Sixth Fleet. His assignment takes him to all Sixth Fleet ships, and to the marines of the multinational force, in Lebanon.

terms: how much bad can be justified in the name of good?

*In Lebanon, there is terror, and uncertainty. Even* were all foreign forces to withdraw, there remains grave doubt that peace could reign in the face of internal, and deadly armed, religious and political factions.

Hanukah recalls an ancient Jewish-Syrian conflict. Now, images begin to mix: old and new wars; old and new enemies.

*"There are no heroes here," said my friend, the* Priest. And yet, as I lit the Hanukah candles in Beirut, I couldn't help thinking that perhaps, for now, it was heroism enough just to keep hoping rather than giving in to despair.

APRIL, 1983—PASSOVER

*One marine remarked that this was his second expo*sure to war, and he saw a difference in the reactions of the peoples involved. In Vietnam, people survived by moving on, and adapting to homelessness. Here, he said, they seemed to be fighting the inevitability of abandoning what was theirs: here the urge was to rebuild, not just to survive.

Another marine told me: "We Americans are not used to an ongoing battle: even in Vietnam, we were sent over for one-year assignments." There was, he had learned, a moral danger in war as a fact of life: children came to be seen not as victims but simply as future enemies. Since the war would go on, it made sense to kill children before they would grow to the age where they could strap on weapons, and augment enemy forces: it made sense to kill women, before they would have babies who would one day carry on the war. Another reason, I reflected, to force ourselves to act as if we believed the war would end: acting otherwise made us part of the problem, not the solution.

One change since my last visit was the deteriorating relations between our forces and the IDF (Israeli Defense Force). Everyone had an opinion about why this was happening.

Part of the problem was that we were discovering something the Israelis have long known: their army is not "professional." Largely a civilian reserve, they fight when there is no choice, but they lack military discipline. Up to this point, our men knew the Israelis only by way of reputation, or perhaps through contact with the officers who come to the States for special schooling. Now we were dealing with individuals called up for special duty, many of whom dealt with their own frustrations by egging us on.

Israel was discovering something new, as well: U.S. marines were a peace-keeping force unlike UN troops stationed along Israeli lines. Whereas the UN forces functioned largely in an observer capacity, reporting on violations, our peacekeeping force was prepared to block passage. On both sides, then, there was some *honest confusion.*

But more troubling were suspicions that politics were aggravating on-site tensions. Was the U.S. manipulating news of isolated incidents to make Israel look bad, so that its citizens would push for withdrawal? Was Israel trying to discredit the U.S. presence, in order to "justify" its continuing involvement—much like the British had stirred up Jewish-Arab tensions during the time of the Palestine Mandate, to "prove" their troops were needed to maintain order?

Many Americans had another fear: that there was an Israeli attempt to maneuver the U.S. into a position of American-IDF alliance within Lebanon, a dangerous image for us from both a political and practical standpoint: practically, because anti-Israel terrorists might then aim their sights at us; politically, because an alliance now gives the impression of U.S. backing for the Beirut attack from the first, and lessens American credibility in terms of ongoing negotiations for peace.

To avoid the impression of complicity, almost no U.S.-Israel contact was allowed at the battlefield level—a decision which perhaps contributed unavoidably to the downward spiral of the relationship. Israelis began to feel that our forces were more concerned with "image" than with what was for Israel a real war. At the human level, each side felt that "friends" should act differently, and a feeling of betrayal increased tensions still further. Ironically, hindsight raised the question of the wisdom of stationing our troops along the Israeli line: troops may ultimately see those whom they face as the enemy.

IN ISRAEL, public opinion remains divided about the Lebanese conflict. Our troops are amazed, and impressed, at the fact that only the Israelis continue to confront moral issues, in politics and in war. When Prime Minister Begin refused to consider an inquiry into the Sabra and Shatila massacres, 400,000 Israelis demonstrated. And, when the inquiry report was published, a new concept of law was introduced: responsibility for what we might have stood against, because we should have known better. There are times, said the commission, when it is appealing to avoid reality by turning a blind eye, or refusing to acknowledge with our minds what we already know in our hearts. But, with authority, or with power, comes responsibility: we cannot fool ourselves and then claim ignorance—or innocence.

In Lebanon, some officers have ironically adopted an Israeli slogan: "Never again." "Never again," say the Israelis, will Jews be slaughtered without a fight. "Never again," goes the new Lebanese cry, will outsiders tear apart their land without the Lebanese uniting



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to protect their country.

I led the *Seder* for the Americans here in Lebanon, and we spoke of dreams that chains can be severed, and the world can be changed. But we spoke as well of the linkage between Passover, the time of the Exodus, and Shavuot, the time of the giving of the Torah. It is not enough to learn to stand against what is wrong, the Rabbis taught: it is necessary to face the future based on what is right.

From this teaching we must learn that "Never again" may be a necessary beginning, but it cannot be an end. In the long run, the call must change to "never before." We must believe—and act upon the belief—that the time must come to put down the arms, and work together to build the kind of world we have never seen.

As I learned from my marine friend, the philosopher: if we fall into the trap of believing that war is inevitable, and fighting will go on, then we may already have lost.

## SEPTEMBER 1983—ROSH HASHANAH

Nine months have passed since my first visit, and much has changed. Yet, despite the deaths, there is still a feeling that we are not part of the war around us, even though it may touch and hurt us from time to time.

The tent set up at one outpost as a "club" reflected the developments through changes in its name. Originally dubbed, "The Can't Fight Back Saloon," it had become, "The Will Fight Back Saloon," and, finally, "The Did Fight Back Saloon."

Morale was higher, because, as the name changes showed, we had at least made the statement that, although we were not here to fight, we could only be pushed so far until we would defend ourselves.

And this was the feeling, after all was said and done: we were still outside of the war, not in it. We were peacekeepers. In fact, said one gunny sergeant, we're not doing badly, even considering the casualties. There would have been just as many deaths because of car accidents back home. . . .

We were not dug in, as in a war zone. Instead, we had taken precautions that would keep us distinct from the many factions at war. Our weapons were usually unloaded. We were part of a multi-national force, showing by example that representatives of groups with differences could work together for a common good.

Would our presence make a difference? At first, the answer seemed to be yes, for others were hesitating to take action which might involve us, and so we were buying some time. Now the question was whether or not the novelty of our position had worn away. With outside forces working against success at the diplomatic level, how much more time could we count on?

Discussions about our situation continued. Was this a religious war, or was religion just being used as an excuse, as people fought for other reasons? Part of the problem lay in defining a "religious war." For us, as Americans, a religious war means a battle for religious freedom, and that was not the case here, where churches, mosques, and even synagogues, remained open. Here the war was for religious power: the economic and political clout of the religious group—a concept foreign to us Americans, who tend to think more in terms of individual rights and personal success.

As I prepared for Rosh Hashanah, the fighting continued. I visited the outposts and distributed prayerbooks. I reminded the men of evening services, speaking over the military station to the portable radios the men seemed to keep with them everywhere. But renewed shelling forced us underground before services could begin.

For the first time in my life, I prayed alone on Rosh Hashanah, taking cover in one of the bunkers. And I wondered if there would be anything new in the "New Year" which was now beginning.

Here in Lebanon, the question remains as to whether loyalty to the country has taken root. There is loyalty to family, real and sometimes extended. There is loyalty to tribe and to religion. But the truth is that many loyalties sometimes equate with many divisions. An old play, Galsworthy's *Loyalties*, posed the question: can a loyalty exist without automatically becoming a prejudice? Here, where so many divisions exist, it is unclear whether there is, in the hearts of enough of its people, a "collective" Lebanon worth sacrificing for.

Some 2,500 years ago, the prophet Malachi looked around at the fighting and hatred of his time, and asked a simple, powerful, question: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?"

In Beirut, these High Holy Days, he would have asked the same question. I know I did.

## MARCH, 1984—PURIM

For the first time, my holiday visit took place entirely on board ship. But I have had many times ashore—hard times—since the last time I found an opportunity to put thoughts on paper.

On October 21st, I arrived in Beirut to lead a memorial service for a Jewish marine, killed by sniper fire. The Protestant and Catholic chaplains joined me for a psalm during that service. We wanted to say something about our presence; we wanted to say that here, in a country where peoples of different religions were killing each other, we believed we could stand together. Had there been a Moslem chaplain in the Navy then, as there soon will be, I would have welcomed his presence in that service.

Because the next flight was on Shabbat, I postponed my planned departure until Sunday. It was that morn-



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ing. October 23, when the truck crashed through the gate, and two hundred forty-one Americans were killed.

For the first time, those of us in Beirut understood the "terror" in the word "terrorism." We were under attack by an enemy who would not honor any rules.

There was an immediate reaction, a feeling that we should expand our perimeters, to ensure that the next attack would be more distant from our center. If you can't stop a terrorist who is willing to die, then you must make him die farther away. In the future, I think all of us would think differently of Israel's talk about the need for "buffer zones."

The marines were heroic that day, risking life and limb to save their comrades. Amidst the rubble, we found the plywood board which we had made for our "Peace-keeping Chapel." The Chaplain Corps seal had been hand-painted, with the words "Peace-keeping" above it, and "Chapel" beneath. Now, "Peace-keeping" was legible, but the bottom of the plaque was destroyed, with only a few burned and splintered pieces of wood remaining. The ideal of peace, above: the reality of war, below.

I made one more visit to the marines ashore, after that terrible day, and again it was for a memorial service. Eight marines in the new group had been killed. But this service was chillingly different. In slightly different ways, the same kind of prayer had been recited at all previous services: prayers that *this service* be the last service; that *this death* be the last death. Now I was slightly numb as I listened to the marine officer deliver the eulogy for these men: "May we honor our friends by being smarter during the next attack; stronger; better prepared." Our idealism was wearing thin. As one marine put it, simply and to the point, "We ain't virgins no more."

Our final decision to pull back, to redeploy to the ships, was inevitable, given the deteriorating situation within Lebanon. There was some hesitation, because no one wanted to send out a message that terrorism works. But the response to the changing situation had to take one of two forms: withdrawal from our positions on land, or a massive build-up, and perhaps a military intervention to shore up the Lebanese Armed Forces.

As we pulled back, there was some talk of failure, *but these marines did not fail*. They served with strength, and with courage, never succombing to the hatred around them, never giving in to the urge to avenge their fallen comrades. It was the international effort to negotiate peace which failed, despite the time the peace-keeping forces had "bought" for the diplomats.

Mark Twain once wrote that a cat which sits on a hot stove will never do so again—but, it will most likely never sit on a cold stove either. I hope we will not overreact to our experience in Lebanon, lumping all stoves together, and losing courage to try again to help when the cause seems just—even if helping means taking risks.

The Jewish teaching is "Where there is no man, strive to be a man." Or, as William Cohen, a Jewish poet, has translated it: "Where there is no humanity, you be humanity."

In Beirut, we Americans strove to be human, despite the inhumanity which sometimes seemed to surround us. For a time our presence seemed to make a difference—seemed to give breathing space, for hatreds to cool, and working space, for diplomats and politicians to confer.

It is inspiring how many of our men who have suffered here still speak in terms of an effort which was worthwhile, and a goal which was—and I hesitate to use the word when it is chic to be cynical—noble.

During Purim, as I sat with the marines on the ships so close to Lebanon, we read the Book of Esther, the story of personal vendetta, religious hatred, and political intrigue. Somehow Jews kept faith. Perhaps this was the real miracle of the Purim story.