

“Hearing Sirens”

From the Memorial Day Weekend Service, 5/26/13

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Most of you know me as our Faith Development Children’s Coordinator and as the mother of Terry and James. Some of you also know that I am married to a man who makes a habit of going to live with people in war zones. This has lead people to question his actions and my sanity. In November of 1998, tensions between the US and Iraq were high, and President Clinton was on the verge of ordering bombing raids. Thus, although my husband, Ken, had just returned from Iraq from a trip to deliver medical supplies to hospitals there, he announced, “If bombs are going to fall on Baghdad, I’m going to be there with the ordinary people when they fall,” made his travel arrangements and left. At the time our son Terry was 6 years old and in very fragile medical condition. My three step children were distraught (I had Ken’s daughter, Jenny crying and begging me to change his mind), the US government was threatening a 25 year Federal prison sentence and a million dollar fine for the medical supply trips, which went against the imposed sanctions on Iraq, and friends asked me, “You don’t really support this, do you? Don’t you know he could be killed? Don’t you resent him leaving you with Terry?” The answers are: I did and do support him, I did and do know the risks, and I could never resent his actions. Today, I will try to explain to you the why of that.

Just after my 5th birthday, my father accepted an invitation to be a professor at the University of Haifa, so my family moved from our rambling farmhouse in Maine to a kibbutz called Mishmar HaEmek in Northern Israel. On the kibbutz, children were divided by age, into houses where they went to school and lived. I was the youngest of 6 children in my family, the “baby,” the center of everyone’s attention. With the exception of half day pre-school three days a week, I had never been separated from my family. Suddenly I was just one of 20 children, assigned the same clothing as everyone else, all eating together, sleeping together, showering together. I could not speak their language. Although my siblings and I saw our parents each afternoon at their assigned apartment, I

missed my family terribly.

On my first day at my school, my new classmates surrounded me and excitedly asked me questions which the teachers translated for me, and then they translated my answers back to them. Except I didn't have the answers, because all of the questions coming from these 4 and 5 year olds were about the Vietnam War, and I had no clue what they were talking about. Did I think the US should have gotten involved? Did I know a lot of people who had been injured or killed? The only question I answered was "Did your father have to fight?" I might not have known what Vietnam was, but I knew my father did not believe in fighting. When I answered "no", they all nodded knowingly, but when the teacher translated, I discovered they were not agreeing that Daddy's don't fight, they were saying, "He must have been too old to be drafted." This conversation was so confusing for me, that it is the earliest conversation in my life that I can remember having.

A year later, I was speaking Hebrew fluently and considered these other children my closest friends, my brothers and sisters. I was standing with them on the lawn of my school looking across the path to the lawn of the school for the four year olds. A boy was running in circles, away from his teachers and mother as they chased him. The whole time he was screaming, "You're lying! My father's not dead. Abba will come home a hero. You're all liars!" The Yom Kippur War had broken out. Israel was attacked by Egypt, Syria, Iran and Jordan on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, when most of its military was given the day off for prayers. The first casualty reports had come in.

Along with reported deaths, came the reports of those missing, and among them was the father of one of my classmates. Every free moment with my friends was spent in discussion. However this group of 5 and 6 year olds wasn't giggling over a fart joke, professing which Beanie Baby was our favorite, or debating whether Handy Manny was better than Bob the Builder. No, we were talking about the father missing. Did we think he was dead? Was he injured and lying somewhere dying? Was he captured? Did we think he was being tortured, and if so, what

was being done to him?

Life on the kibbutz changed dramatically. I was no longer allowed to visit my older siblings in the junior high and high school buildings. These were considered prime bombing targets. Killing teenagers meant killing the next group of soldiers. The younger children were not supposed to go anywhere near the upper grades, but I missed my siblings, and used to sneak near their school buildings in hopes of getting a glimpse of them. Guards heavily armed with machine guns stood outside and according to my brother, inside as well. How war affects children differs greatly. In my family, we all responded differently. My brother Izzy was 13 when the war broke out. He remembers it as one of the happiest periods of time in his life. All the young men had been called into service, and Izzy had been assigned to work in our kibbutz's plastics factory. Suddenly, everyone was treating him like a man, and he relished it. My sister Shoovie on the other hand turned 18 and was drafted into the Israeli army, so that we had to leave her behind when we returned to the United States the following year.

The official Yom Kippur War only lasted three weeks, until a cease fire agreement was signed. However, air-raids and bombings went on for well over a year without any predictability, seemingly out of the blue. And my fear would surface just as randomly out of the blue. One sunny day, my best friend Rinat and I were out for a walk along the Kibbutz paths. We had gone down to see the farm animals, stopped to climb trees in the orchards and were now strolling through the woods near the edge of the kibbutz. Then we realized that we did not know where the nearest bomb shelter was. What would we do if the sirens sounded? We began to look, but could not find an entrance. We became more frantic in our search, and then we started to run. We ran, and ran, screaming and hyperventilating, but not stopping until we reached our school house and threw ourselves onto the lawn, clinging to the earth and sobbing.

Odd, that I should have been so desperate for a bomb shelter when on my first night in one I didn't want to be there at all. We spent the first twenty days of the war sleeping in our school's bomb shelter, with our teachers and apart from our

families. And we had to return to the shelters each time the air-raid sirens sounded. There are many different types of bomb shelters in the Middle East. Some are huge, with supplies to last hundreds of people for many days, and some are tiny with only room for a couple dozen people. The shelters on the kibbutz were like the later. Each school had an entrance to a shelter. We would go down a long set of stairs into the earth until we reached a heavy fire-proof door that opened into a cement room. There was another heavy fire-proof door at the other end of the room, but it was never opened. On the other side was an identical room with its own door and staircase, so that if one entrance was bombed, people had a second means of escape. The room had three wide shelves on each side, and mattresses on the shelves. I was assigned to a top shelf. When it was time to go to sleep, I was the only one of my classmates who began to cry. I told the teacher it was because it was too high, and I was afraid of falling off in my sleep. "Oh, Avigayil, you won't fall" she assured me, and pointed out that the top bunks were the best because we could talk face to face, while the children on the bottom only got to see her legs and the children in the middle bunks had to look out on her waist. This might have been a comfort except that I was the child who believed I could fly using swimming strokes and who made a habit of climbing trees and jumping off the playhouse roof. I had no fear of heights. I just wanted my mother. I begged my teacher to let me leave so that I could go find my mother and make sure she was safe. The teacher smiled and told me my mother was on the other side of the door, for she was a teacher of the three year olds, and that is where their shelter entrance ended up. I begged to be allowed to go to her, but the rules were strict. That door was not to be opened. Somehow the knowledge that my mother was so close, but untouchable was even worse. I turned away from my teacher, curled into the fetal position and pressed my body into the hard, rough cement wall.

When my husband was on his first visit to Iraq, He visited the Amiriyah air-raid shelter. On February 13, 1991 the US Air Force destroyed it with two laser guided "smart" bombs. Over 400 civilians died. All women, children and elderly men. It has been turned into a shrine for the dead, with photographs, flowers, candles and mementos left by grieving family members. Ken was given a tour by

Umm Greyda who lives in the shelter ruins. She sent her family there for safety before leaving for her night shift at work the night of the bombing. All eight of her children were killed. The first smart bomb blasted through several feet of reinforced cement to make a hole in the shelter roof. The second bomb followed through the hole. Everyone on the first floor of the shelter died in the blast, but the children were on the lower floor. They died when the huge water storage tanks exploded and boiling water flooded the lower level and rose. Ken came home with photographs of palm prints in the ceiling from children who had stood on the bunks and tried to push their way out of the cement ceiling as the boiling water rose, cooking them alive. He also had a photograph of an image formed from skin melted into the cement wall, a few feet from the ceiling. The image of a child curled into a fetal position lying on a bunk, pressed into the wall.

I looked at that photo, held it in my hands and thought: That's me.

Does my husband go to dangerous places? Yes. Do I support him? Yes. Do I resent the strains it puts on me and my children? Never. Why? Because I still hear sirens. I still hear sirens. Only now instead of calling me to run and hide, those sirens tell me to open the door. I love my children more than anything in this world, but I know that they are not more worthy of care, more worthy of safety, more worthy of life than any other child anywhere in the world. If we want a peaceful future for our children, we have to stop teaching them that the solution can be found in war.