



## Sirens and solidarity when rockets fly from Gaza to Israel

In wartime, like now, there's a special solidarity between people. What lies behind this social cohesion?

By Nora Gold / Jewish World blogger | Jul. 24, 2014 | 7:29 PM



Israelis take shelter in a the stairwell of a building during a rocket alert siren, July 8, 2014.

Photo by Gil Cohen-Magen

Solidarity is a concept that, for many people, conjures up warm fuzzy feelings. For me, though, it has negative connotations, because it is so often exploited or used manipulatively by politicians. Jewish leaders - both in Israel and the Diaspora - regularly invoke the idea of solidarity as a way of silencing dissent, especially from the left. "Let's all stick together by no one criticizing what our leadership is doing" seems to be the general message. So I'm generally wary of the term.

Recently, though, courtesy of Operation Protective Edge, I've been reflecting on what solidarity really means. I was in Jerusalem for the first nine days of this war, and during this time there were three siren warnings of incoming rockets from which I had to seek shelter. Each time, the circumstance and the story was different. But through these three incidents I learned something new about the nature of solidarity.

Siren #1 - Tuesday, July 8, 2014, 9:52 PM, Baka, Jerusalem

My husband and I are in our apartment when we hear the siren, and hurry downstairs to our building's bomb shelter. Several neighbors are already there, including one with a transistor radio, so we huddle around him, trying to hear some news. Also present is the woman who rules our building with an iron hand, and with whom I've recently had a major disagreement. But now in this shelter (*sukkat shlomeinu?*) we both smile, then give each other a big hug.

Siren #2 - Thursday, July 10, 2014, 6:10 PM, German Colony, Jerusalem

This time I am at a restaurant with a friend from Jerusalem and a friend of hers visiting from the United States. We are deep in conversation and don't hear the siren go off. A waiter calmly approaches, tells us there's been a siren, and asks us to follow him into the kitchen, their safest space. There, we join about ten other people squeezed together into quite a small area. It feels cozy, and we have to wait there for several minutes in case the siren sounds again, so we start joking around. I comment on the cleanliness of the kitchen, and how this place has passed our snap inspection. Our waiter, a young man, says to all of us with a laugh, "Well, if you're already here, don't just stand around. Wash some dishes!" We all joke and chat and find comfort in each other.

Siren #3 - Saturday, July 12, 2014, 6:55 PM, German Colony, Jerusalem

Walking briskly along Emek Refaim Street to meet a friend, a siren sounds, and I realize I am surrounded only by closed shops because it is still Shabbat. The only people nearby are a man and woman who've started running. I asked them, "Do you know somewhere to go?" and they say "yes," so I follow them through an alley to a small apartment building. Inside, I join a group of people congregating in the ground floor stairwell. They all live there; I am the only outsider. They tell me there is no bomb shelter because this is an old building, but assure me this stairwell is very safe. It's a hot day and I've been walking quickly for 20 minutes before hearing the siren, so I am sweating. Three times, the same woman offers to get me a glass of cold water. I keep declining because I don't want her, on my account, to risk leaving the safety of the stairwell. But I am touched by her kindness.

What did I learn about solidarity from these three sirens? From the first one, I saw how everyday interpersonal conflicts, in a flash, could become almost insignificant. From the second, I learned about the power of humor in forming an immediate and comforting bond with strangers. From the third, I discovered strangers' capacity for surprising kindness, sensitivity to others, and hospitality.

According to Durkheim, solidarity is social cohesion based upon individuals' dependence on each other. If this is so, that explains why solidarity increases (since interdependence does) in times of crisis, stress, and danger. Even before this war began, when the three Israeli youths were abducted, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remarked on TV about the exceptional national solidarity that had resulted from this crisis, and said he hoped that when the crisis passed, the current solidarity would remain.

Fat chance. Because this kind of solidarity isn't normal. Maybe it isn't even healthy in the long run: the lack of boundaries between people, and the avoidance of any conflict.

That said, I was very moved by these three experiences. In all of them, there was something beautiful, even loving, in the air, as if we'd all drunk some magic potion together; a pleasant change from the usual fractiousness of everyday Israeli life.

Of course, though, I'd give up this special solidarity in a heartbeat in exchange for a return to normal life in Israel - with all its challenges.

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