

Rattling the Cage: A taboo question for Israelis

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There's a question we Israelis won't ask ourselves about the Palestinians, especially not about Gaza. The question is taboo. Not only won't anyone ask it out loud, but very, very few people will dare ask it in the privacy of their own minds.

However, I think it's time we start asking it, privately and in public. If we don't, I think there's going to be Operation Cast Lead II, then Operation Cast Lead III, and each one is going to be worse than the last, and the consequences for Palestinians and Israelis are going to be unimaginable.

The question we have to ask ourselves is this: If anybody treated us like we're treating the people in Gaza, what would we do?

We don't want to go there, do we? And because we don't, we make it our business not to see, hear or think about how, indeed, we are treating the people in Gaza.

All these shocked dignitaries, all these reports, these details, these numbers - thousands of destroyed this and tens of thousands of destroyed that. Rubble, sewage, malnutrition, crying babies, humanitarian crises - who can keep up? Who cares? They did it to themselves. Where to for lunch?

IT'S NOT that we can't imagine life in Gaza. It's that we are determined not to try to imagine. If we did, we might not stop there. Next we might try to imagine what it would be like if our country were in the condition in which we left Gaza. And sooner or later we might try to imagine what we would do if we were living over here like they're living over there.

Or not even what we would do, just what we would think - about the people, about the country, that did that to us and that wouldn't even allow us to begin to recover after the war was over. That blockaded our borders and allowed in only enough supplies to keep us at subsistence level, to prevent starvation and mass epidemics.

What would we think, what would we do, if somebody, some country, did that to us?

A lot of people here, I'm sure, would reply angrily: So why won't the Gazans try making peace?

But is that how we would react? Is that what Israelis would do if a foreign army did to this country what the IDF did to that one a year ago? If another country sent F-16s, Apache helicopters, white phosphorous, drones, tanks and battalions into Israel, if any nation bombed and killed over here like we bombed and killed in Gaza, then rubbed our noses in it afterward, would we want to make peace with them?

Forget we; does anyone know a single Israeli who would?

I'M SURE a lot of people would argue: What about Sderot? Didn't the terrorists in Gaza bomb and kill in Sderot? Let's the turn the question around: What would the Gazans have done if another country did to them what they did to the people in Sderot?

Fair enough. Yes, they would have hit back, too. They're not pacifists, either, to say the least. In fact, their elected leaders are fanatical, murderous Jew-haters sworn to Israel's destruction. That's extremely important to remember, and we do. But what we don't want to remember, what we make 100 percent sure to forget, is that we do all sorts of hateful things to Gaza that they don't do to us, and that this is the way it's been since 1967.

Aside from choking the flow of goods to Gaza by land, we blockade their entire coast. We don't allow ships to sail into Gaza or out. Does anyone stop ships from coming and going at the ports of Eilat,

Ashdod or Haifa? What would Israel do if anyone tried? (Think of what Israel did two weeks after Egypt blockaded the port of Eilat in May 1967.)

We also blockade Gaza's airspace, preventing planes from flying in or out. Does anybody stop planes from flying in and out of Israel? Would we stand for it if someone did?

For 37 years, between 1967 and 2005, our soldiers and settlers were the overlords of the Gaza Strip. If foreign soldiers and settlers tried to come in and take over Israel, what would we do?

And regarding the years of rocket attacks on the people in Sderot, I've never been through such an ordeal, but I imagine it's hell. However, I've also never been through the ordeal that people in Gaza have gone through, and are still going through, yet I know - as everyone in the world knows, except Israelis - that life in Gaza is incomparably worse than life in Sderot ever was.

DURING THE 2008 US presidential campaign, Barack Obama visited Sderot, saying, "If missiles were falling where my two daughters sleep, I would do everything in order to stop that."

Absolutely right. I wonder, though, what sort of empathetic reaction he might have had if he'd also visited the Jabalya refugee camp that summer. I wonder how he'd react if he visited Jabalya now.

And how would we react? If we Israelis could go to Gaza and see in person what we've done to that place and its people, would we be capable of empathy? If we thought of our children living in a country that was just like postwar Gaza, would we allow ourselves to think what we might do?

We can't go to Gaza, but we have to start using our imagination. We have to dare to put ourselves in those people's place. And we have to stop doing to them what we would never allow anyone to do to us. Otherwise, we Israelis have no conscience, and little by little we become capable of anything..