

Blood and rubble: Civilian deaths in Lebanon

by [Warren Goldstein](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

It is a measure of my anguish and my desperation as a Jew and an American that I write now in this magazine. While death stalks the skies of Haifa, while bombs and missiles rain down on Beirut and what is left of southern Lebanese cities, my country gives Israel a green light—and expedited weapons shipments—to create a “new Middle East” out of blood and rubble. Condoleezza Rice has the nerve to use the term “birth pangs” to characterize the destruction of Lebanon and the killing of civilians.

The country that considers itself a Jewish homeland has effectively declared Lebanon a free-fire zone in the fantasy that if its planes drop enough bombs on apartment buildings (Hezbollah “strongholds”) and empty enough southern Lebanese cities, it will destroy Hezbollah as a political and fighting force.

Does no one remember Vietnam? Bombing civilians whose only offense is to live in a country that cannot control its own fate is not only a war crime. It guarantees that new generations will be nourished on thoughts of vengeance. I suspect that the Israeli air strike that hit civilians in Qana is now burned into Lebanese consciousness.

Where are Jews and Judaism in this debacle? Here my anguish verges on shame. Look at the Web site of Reform Judaism and you will see a propaganda effort on behalf of the Israeli bombs. “What can I and my congregation do now to help the people of Israel?” asks a headline. It suggests, “Post a ‘We Stand with Israel’ lawn sign and proudly fly an Israeli flag at your congregation.”

By these efforts Judaism has been reduced to political cheerleading, a role disturbingly analogous to that of the American religious right. Just as right-wing evangelical Christians narrow the Gospels to the latest Republican issue—Terry Schiavo, “activist” judges, taxing dividends—too many American Jews put their religion on the shelf to take up the language of strategy and tactics and realpolitik.

Jews who know better fear to speak up, because the Israel propaganda machine works most effectively through Jewish organizations. Any hint that the lives of Lebanese children matter as much as the lives of Jewish children is treated as a case of naiveté, “self-hatred” or treason.

At a family gathering of 35 Jews—along with a few non-Jewish spouses or significant others—we all decided not to raise the subject of the war because we were afraid the resulting arguments would ruin the party. I sensed, however, that many of us were critical of the U.S. and Israel and that there was much unease about what is being perpetrated in our name. But those who felt this way were afraid to speak up, afraid to offend the one Israeli in our midst. So unused are we liberal Jews to saying what we really think about Israel and about the U.S. government’s blanket support for Israeli military policy that we don’t even speak up in our own family, much less to our political representatives.

Let me be clear: no nation ought to have to live alongside terrorist political entities committed to its destruction. I shed no tears for Hezbollah militants, whose murderous, ill-thought-out raid invited the Israeli response and who proudly demonstrate disrespect for all civilian lives. Nor do I shed tears for Hamas, the latest example of Palestinians’ propensity for self-destructive choices. Some Israeli military response is thoroughly understandable and justifiable. That is why we need an immediate cease-fire and an international police force to patrol southern Lebanon, disarm Hezbollah and keep Israel within its own borders.

But Israel’s far greater military power, and its consequent ability to inflict far greater harm—Lebanese civilians are dying at roughly ten times the rate of Israelis—brings greater responsibility. No religious or political tradition worthy of the name justifies bombing children in the hopes of taking out a rocket launcher. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, does not distinguish between Israeli and Lebanese children. Doing everything possible to avoid killing civilians (using antipersonnel bombs fails the test) is not only the right thing to do—it is the only acceptable way to engage in military action.

Israelis’ unity in favor of the current offensive should not silence those of us who want the killing to stop now. Most Americans supported the hopeless, pointless war in Vietnam until its final years, but the war’s critics were right from the beginning. I hope that Jews and Christians alike will cast off the pall over debate and speak their minds, breaking through their fear of being labeled “self-hating” or “anti-Semitic.”

Israel needs friends who support its security and tell the truth, not sycophants putting out lawn signs. I wish that Jewish congregations would direct as much energy as they have lately expended on the crisis in Darfur to the task of realizing real peace in the Middle East.

And those of us Jews who find ourselves on a religious and political limb need the courage of Christian brothers and sisters, who outnumber us by far, to use their religious and political influence to speak truth, to challenge the callous invocation of realpolitik to justify the killing of civilians, and to remind us that the God we both worship insists on justice tempered by mercy and drenched in love, not blood.