

Rallying Cry

By Yishai Fleisher
for KUMAH

On Saturday night, the first of December, my friends and I were about to perform Havdallah, the ritual ceremony that separates the Shabbat from the rest of the week. Suddenly, my friend Jake burst in and told us to turn on the TV. A suicide bomber had detonated himself in downtown Jerusalem - close to Ben Yehuda Street - a familiar spot for many of us. We listened to him with a mix of shock, sadness and desperation.

Then, only after we made Havdallah, did we turn on the TV to see the frightening scenes of Jews running for their lives and the gruesome images of dead Jews and pools of blood defiling the streets of Jerusalem. Early the next morning, on my way to teach sixth grade Hebrew, I learned that there was another bombing in Haifa, my birthplace. All in all, 25 Jews dead in 12 hours.

The next day my friends and I went to the anti-terrorism rally at the United Nations, which was organized by a multi-denominational group of rabbis and lay people. At the rally we saw a few thousand people and a steady trickle of latecomers listening to speakers bemoan the current situation and the latest attacks in Israel. Elana Flatow, a sister of Alyssa Flatow, a 20-year-old girl who I went to school with, who was murdered in Israel by a Palestinian suicide bomber, spoke emotionally about the pain of losing her sister. Rabbi Avi Weiss, political activist and president of the Coalition for Jewish Concerns spoke about Israel's right to self-defense. Using strong language, Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice-president of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations said: "There is one guilty party, and it must be held to account." Every speaker called on the American government to take a tougher stance on terrorist groups, and reaffirmed the strong relationship between Israel and America.

For our part, my friends and I represented our grassroots organization called Kumah, which is Hebrew for 'arise.' We came to the rally bearing boxes of materials to hand out, including flyers which read, "Israel does not need your sympathy, it needs YOU," pamphlets entitled "Neo-Zionism and the Event," and buttons which read "Arise- Americans Return To Zion." This was our effort to promote the reinvigoration of American Jewish Aliya to Israel, and to suggest that Israel needs more than just the money and the political support of American Jewry; rather, Israel desperately needs real human capital, people like you and me, to revitalize its malaise stricken society.

Yet although the rally was a much-needed outlet for some tough words, it failed to stir the soul of American Jewry. Even after the two deadly attacks in Israel, the great masses of Jewish people that live in the tri-state area did not show up. The few thousand people who came were the same committed Zionists, usually with knitted kippas on their heads, who always stock such events. The rest of the Jews, the Haredim of Brooklyn and the Conservative and Reform of New Jersey did not come out to protest the rampant murder of Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

Even the people at the rally itself remained relatively passive during the proceedings. During one of the speeches, a few youths climbed the exo-skeleton of a nearby gazebo and began shouting 'Am Yisroel Chai!' in an attempt to ignite the passions of the crowd. Instead, they were promptly "shhhhed" in favor of another speaker's condemnation of this or that. Apparently, their heartfelt cries threatened to disturb the slumbering Jewish masses. I saw no tears shed at the rally, no moment of silence for the slain, no fast day decreed by the rabbis. The shofar blast, which heralded the end of the rally, was weak and brittle and was no battle cry to glorious destiny.

The rally's weak attendance mirrors our general apathy with regard to the year and a half of violence that has plagued Israel. The remarkably un-radical intellectual climate of America Jewish society is a result of our assimilation to American consumerist values and the fundamental detachment between our fate and that of our Israeli brethren. No clarion call has been issued; no clear message galvanizes us into action. Our enemies, on the other hand, seem to have great resolve, and are willing to sacrifice their lives in order to take ours. While we speak of peace they make plans for the Final Solution. They are killing our children, maiming innocent people every day. Pathetic rallies will not frighten those who are willing to die for our destruction.

This is not the first time our enemies have debased our Holy Land and sullied the Temple Mount, this is not the first time we have been attacked because of who we are, and therefore the message of Chanukah is especially pertinent to us today. The Maccabees stand for fierceness and courage in the face of great adversity while the lights of Chanukah represent victory over evil and the destruction of the forces of darkness. Chanukah reminds us that there are times to fight - and this is clearly one of them. Today, we Jews must arise, unite under one banner, invoke the name of God, and bravely call out our enemies for a day of reckoning. Only if we awaken will we merit seeing the miracle of "those days in our time."