

Rabbi's Reflections Looking Back: A Seminal Event,
and a Chaplain's Experience

6:22 AM Sunday, October 23, 1983. We should remember. Mostly we forget. A truck bomb explodes. 241 USA military dead in Lebanon. President Reagan said we'd never back down from terrorists. We left in four months. Defense Secretary Weinberger, who opposed being there, said he learned that we shouldn't commit insufficient military forces to an illdefined mission with no clear national interest or exit strategy. Donald Rumsfeld, President Reagan's Special Envoy to the Middle East (Nov. 1983–May 1984), said it convinced him that the best defense against terrorism is a good offense, "take the war to them, to go after them where they are, where they live, where they plan, where they hide, go after their finances, go after the people who harbor and assist them." Osama bin Laden told ABC News in a 1998 interview, the U.S. response to the Beirut bombing showed "the decline of American power and the weakness of the American soldier, who is ready to wage cold wars but unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut in 1983, when the Marines fled." Beirut led to the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond. It should have been a wake-up call that a new threat, requiring a new response, would replace the Soviet Union: militant, fundamentalist Islam.

Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff was there because he wouldn't fly back to his base on Shabbat after leading a memorial service on Friday for Alan Soifert, a Marine shot by a sniper. Four days after the bombing, Vice President George Bush led a team to the site and asked Rabbi Resnicoff to send a report of the attack and rescue effort to the White House. President Reagan read it at Rev. Jerry Falwell's Baptist Fundamentalism '84 convention. Full text and video are at

<http://www.resnicoff.net/FalwellConvention.html>.

"One of the first to reach the building after the blast, I—along with Lieutenant Commander George ("Pooch") Pucciarelli, the Catholic chaplain...faced a scene almost too terrible to describe. Bodies, and pieces of bodies, were everywhere. Screams of those injured or trapped were barely audible at first, as our minds struggled to grapple with the reality before us: a massive, four-story building reduced to a pile of rubble....

"There was a sense of God's presence that day in the small miracles of life which we encountered in each body that, despite all odds, still had a breath within. But there was more of His presence, more to keep our faith alive, in the heroism—and in the humanity—of the men who responded to the cries for help....

"Certain images will stay with me, always....a Marine...found a wad of money amidst the rubble. He held it at arm's length as if it were dirty and cried out for a match or lighter, so that it could be burned. No one...wanted to profit from...the catastrophe....

“Working with the wounded—sometimes comforting, and simply letting them know help was on the way; sometimes trying to pull and carry those whose injuries appeared less dangerous...than the approaching fire or the smothering smoke—my kippa [skullcap] was lost....I had used it to mop someone's brow. Father Pucciarelli...cut a circle out of his cap, a piece of camouflage cloth that would become my temporary head covering. ...we wanted those Marines to know not just that we were Chaplains, but that he was Christian and that I was Jewish....we both wanted to shout the message in a land where people were killing each other...partially based on the differences in religion...that we—we Americans—still believed that we could be proud of our particular religions and yet work side by side when the time came to help others, to comfort, and to ease pain.

“Father Pucciarelli and I worked that day as brothers. The words from the prophet Malachi kept recurring to me, words he had uttered...as he had looked...at fighting and cruelty and pain: "Have we not all one Father?""Has not one God created us all?" It was painfully..., tragically obvious, that our world still could not show that we had learned to answer "yes." Still...perhaps some of us can keep the question alive. Some of us could cry out—as the Marines did that day—that we believe the answer is yes.

“Before the bombing, Pooch and I had been in a building...a hundred yards away. There had been one other Chaplain, Lieutenant Danny Wheeler, a Protestant minister, who had spent the night in the building that was attacked....I hugged him as they brought over a stretcher...his first words....unsure of his own condition, he asked how his clerk was. Like so many...we would save that day, he asked first about others....

“After the living were taken out, there was much more work to be done. With the wounded, with those who had survived, there was...trying to ease a gnawing feeling of guilt that would slowly surface: guilt that they had somehow let down their comrades by not dying....So, our job was to tell them how every life saved was important to us: how their survival was important to our faith, and our hope. They had to give thanks—with us—that they still had the gift, and the responsibility of lives that would go on....

“This was a tragedy of people...each...unique...each had a story. Each had a past, and each had been cheated of a future. As the Mishnah puts it, each was a world. We were not digging up "two hundred and forty." We were digging up one, plus one, plus one....

“I remember the first time I jumped in a foxhole...within the U.S. area. Looking around at the others..., I made the remark that we...had set up the only "interfaith

foxholes" in Beirut! The Druze, Muslims, Christians, all had theirs. The...Israeli Army had theirs. But we were together. I made the comment then that perhaps if the world had more interfaith foxholes, there might be less of a need for foxholes altogether....

"During those days..., a Marine...would send a silent signal that he wanted me—...a chaplain—near. Sometimes...to talk. Sometimes...so that he could shrug his shoulders or lift his eyes in despair. Sometimes...just to feel that I was near—for, despite the struggles I might be feeling on a personal level, I was a chaplain, and therefore a symbol that there was room for hope, and for dreams, even at the worst of times.

"In Jewish tradition,...when we visit...a mourner during shiva, the first week following the death of a loved one, visitors follow a...rule. If a mourner initiates the conversation, the visitor responds. Otherwise,...sit in silence, communicating concern through your very presence...without words....I applied the rules of shiva during those days of digging. When a Marine or a sailor said something, I responded; otherwise, I stood by....

"...the rabbis offered one interpretation of the Biblical verse that...we are created "in the image of God." It does not refer to physical likeness...but to spiritual potential. We have within us the power to reflect...the highest values of our Creator. As God is forgiving and merciful, so can we be. As He is caring and kind, so must we strive to be. As He is filled with love, so must we be. "Because of the actions I witnessed during the hell in Beirut, I glimpsed...a fleeting image of heaven. For, in the hearts and hands of men who chose to act as brothers, I glimpsed God's hand as well. I did not stand alone to face a world forsaken by God; I felt I was part of one created with infinite care, and wonderful—awesome—potential.

"We live in a world where it is not hard to find cause for despair. The chaplain has the challenge to bring to those who often see terror at its worst some reason for hope.

"We need to keep faith and to keep searching, even during the worst of times. Only then may we find strength...to keep believing that the best of times still might be."

----- Rabbi Michael Rascoe