

OPINION/EDITORIAL

God Bless America

By Joseph Aaron, Chicago Jewish News

Chicago — I have never been prouder of the United States of America.

I have never been prouder of the state of Israel.

I have never been prouder to be a Jew.

I have never been prouder to be an American.

I was, of course, horrified and angered and saddened looking at the pictures of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, pictures of such incredible devastation, of

such incredible human suffering, of such incredible inhuman savagery.

But what I found myself feeling most was pride. Pride in this country and in the Jewish country, in the Jewish people and the American people.

For the terrorism in America, like the terrorism Israel has endured for more than 50 years, is the result of the fact that dark, evil forces in this world cannot abide what the United States and Israel stand for. And that they stand together.

Of those to whom much is given, much is expected, Jewish tradition teaches. And no two countries have been more blessed, are closer to God's ideal of what nations on earth should be than America and Israel.

But that didn't happen by accident. It happened because the American and the Jewish people made it happen. By what they believe in, by how they act, what they do and what they don't do.

Watching Palestinians in the West Bank dance and rejoice when they heard the news of the World Trade Center attacks, angered me, disgusted me, but mostly saddened me.

The Palestinians say they have gripes about the way Israel treats them. Say they have suffered, say they want their land back, say they want their own country.

Not unreasonable. But how they have chosen to accomplish the goals is a very different matter.

It was only about 50 years ago, please remember, that the Jewish people were attacked like no other people ever have been at anytime at anyplace anywhere on the face of the earth.

The Jewish people are the only people to have every single one of its men, women and children targeted for extermination.

Six million of them were. With several nations eagerly helping out, with all other nations turning away, not caring, doing nothing.

When it comes to gripes, we have more for better reasons than anyone else. When it comes to having your property and your possessions taken from you, we have lost more, suffered more than anyone else. When it comes to being persecuted at the hands of another, no one has gone through what we have gone through.

And yet, look at us, see what we have done.

Unlike the suicide bombers in Israel, unlike the animals who crashed into the World Trade Center, the Jewish people, despite all, has never lost sight of how civilized people are to act, how the Chosen People are to be.

Deprived of everything, including six million of our men, women and children, we went about the business of establishing a state for the Jewish people. By appealing to the United Nations, by winning world approval, by making our case to foreign ministries.

And when the partition plan was adopted, we eagerly agreed, were happy to accept the notion of two states, side by side, Jewish and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian, even with our holy Western Wall part of the Palestinian state.

But they said no and went to war trying to destroy us, while we said yes and went to work building our country. We took in Jews from around the world and welcomed them home. As former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak recently said, "we didn't call them refugees. We called them brothers and sisters."

For more than 50 years, lots of Palestinians have lived in horrific

conditions in refugee camps. Been purposely kept refugees by their own people, just to score political points.

The Arabs have tremendous resources, could have absorbed their refugees, gotten them on their feet, given them homes and jobs, improved their lot, improved their lives.

But they have not. By their peculiar way of doing, they have allowed their own people to live in misery. Israel, from its very beginning to this very day, has taken in every single Jew who needed a home.

And last year, when the prime minister of Israel and the president of the United States worked together to offer the Palestinians their own state, almost of all the West Bank and half of Jerusalem, they turned away, opted instead to continue to live in misery and to bring misery to Israelis, opted to blow up pregnant women and babies having lunch at a pizzeria, opted to train their own young people to blow themselves up.

Jews have always opted for choosing life, not destroying it, creating, not attacking, decreasing suffering, not increasing it.

To watch what happened on September 11 is to see a world view, a way of life that is so sick, so twisted, so coarsened, so evil.

To watch as Palestinians rejoiced at what was done is to see a people choosing to deal with their gripes and their suffering in a way that is nothing but destructive, not only to those they hate, but to themselves.

Jews, Americans do not, cannot act as those who attacked the World Trade Center. That is simply not who we are, what we are about, how we deal with things, how we see things.

That is what makes us so special, that is what makes us so threatening to those whose lives are so dark.

When Pope John Paul visited Syria earlier this year, most of the news coverage focused on the fact that Syrian president Assad made a speech full of anti-Semitism right in front of the pope.

But what I found most telling is when the pope visited the Syrian city of Kuneitra on the Golan Heights. What he found there was a bombed out shell, a city destroyed during the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars.

Almost thirty years after that last war, the city remains in rubble. Why? Because the Syrians say it is a monument to Israeli "crimes" and they intend to keep it that way until they get back all of the Golan.

We don't think like that. We being Jews, being Americans. Oklahoma City is being repaired, the USS Cole is being repaired, the World Trade Center will be rebuilt. The Sbarro pizzeria has been remodeled and is open for business. Every site of similar terrorism against Israel and Israelis, has been restored.

We act like *menschen*, we live like *menschen*. The Syrians would

rather let a city of theirs lie in ruin just so they can make some political point, damn the effect on peoples' lives.

There are people who wish to act in a way that builds, that heals, and those who surround themselves with rubble and wish to inflict the same on others.

Israel has fought four major wars with the Arabs, had thousands of its citizens killed in those wars and in thousands of terrorist attacks. And yet, when peace seemed a real possibility, the vast majority of Israelis enthusiastically jumped at the chance. We put aside all the hurt and pain and anger and blood and tears, showed we wanted to make life better not only for ourselves, but for others.

That is the Jewish way; that is the American way.

Jews could be mad at the world forever, could wish to see it suffer like it has made us suffer. But we aren't and we don't. We recognize that anger is as destructive to the one who aims it as it is to the one it is aimed at. And that inflicting suffering on others, ultimately most devastates the one doing the inflicting.

There are ways for people to behave, even when they have grievances, even when they want change. Jews, Israel, Americans, the United States understand that and live by that.

The people who planned and aided and executed the World Trade Center attacks, and the people who rejoiced over them, do not understand that, do not live by that.

The World Trade Center attacks made me feel pride in Israel, in the path it has chosen, in all it has accomplished, in its not letting go of its high ideals, even in the face of the kind of challenges Americans have now gotten a very vivid and personal sense of.

The World Trade Center attacks made me feel pride in being a Jew, for the values we hold dear and live by, for not acting like so many have acted toward us, for knowing that not every means justifies any goal.

The World Trade Center attacks made me feel pride in being an American, in this country, which will not allow what happened this week to change our core beliefs, will not cause us sink to the level of those who harm us, will, indeed, make us cling ever tighter to the freedom and justice we hold so dear and so uphold.

We will, I am confident, get those who did this, but we will get them in the right way, will do the right thing. We will not allow what they did to us to change how and what we are.

The United States and the State of Israel, Jews and Americans are the world's shining lights, with inspiring principles that, most inspiring of all, we are guided by and live by.

What a blessing it is to be part of both countries, to be part of both peoples. ✪

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Rabbi Woznica

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concepts such as the "Chosen People" and what Jews were "chosen" to do; why "You Shall Not Steal" includes not stealing time or reputations. He challenged us to try to not gossip for a 24-hour period. Also, when shopping in a store if you ask the sales person a question and do not buy the merchandise, you are technically

stealing the sales person's time.

His interpretation of the meaning of the Sabbath reminds us of our children's responsibilities to their parents and parental responsibilities toward children. He said that every Shabbat he places his hands of the heads of his children and he recites a prayer. He believes this to be a ritual that will always be remembered. He told us a story about his dear friend Joseph Telushkin. Rabbi Telushkin was traveling for a speaking engagement and was out

of town over a Shabbat weekend. On Friday evening, he called his family and asked to speak with his daughter. He said, daughter, did you hear my prayer? She said, no daddy, I had placed the phone on top of my head.

Rabbi Woznica will be returning to the 92nd Street Y to lead a three-evening series titled *God, Torah and Israel*, where he will appear with Governor Mario Cuomo, Malcolm Hoenlein, Dr. Alice Shalvi and Prof. Elie Wiesel in the spring of 2002. ✪