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Religious leaders react to Israel-Hamas war

By JEFF LIPTON

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For Rabbi Noah Gradofsky, spiritual leader of Temple Israel of Long Beach, Israel's massive offensive against the terror group Hamas in the Gaza Strip isn't only necessary, it's essential for the Jewish state's survival.

"What else can you do when a civilian population has thousands of missiles fired at it?" said Gradofsky. During the past eight years, he said, Sderot, an Israeli town about a mile away from Gaza, has been targeted with about 5,000 missiles. That averages out to about two or three missiles a day, and Israeli citizens have a 10-to-15-second warning system to take cover before the bombs hit their mark, he said.

"It's beyond a terrible situation," Gradofsky said. He said his cousins live in Ashkelon, with a population of roughly 125,000, about seven miles from Gaza. He said he recently spoke to his cousins who said that nine or 10 missiles are hitting the town daily.

He added that his cousins owned a jewelry shop in a mall that was hit by a Hamas-fired missile last May, which injured several people. One of his cousins is being taught math by a teacher in a bomb shelter.

These are the conditions under which the Israelis have been living during the past several years, making the massive military offensive critical during the past three weeks.

Israel began its military action in the Gaza Strip on Dec. 27 in an effort to stop Hamas rocket fire into Israel, after it said Hamas ended a six-month cease-fire on Dec. 19.

The offensive has resulted in the deaths of roughly 800 Palestinians, many of them civilian women and children, and 13 Israelis as of Saturday morning. But Ghazi Khankan, a Long Beach resident and a spokesman for the local chapter of the American Muslim Alliance, said Israel is the one who violated the cease-fire in November when Israelis killed six Palestinian leaders, claiming that they were terrorists.

"They are the ones who broke the present cease-fire," said Khankan, who is also a consultant on Islamic affairs. "And the military blockade of the area is a

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clear declaration of war.

"These are very sad times," he said. "We are seeing so many innocent people being massacred. I don't think it's necessary at all."

Khankan said the accusations that Hamas was using Palestinian civilians as shields against the Israeli assault "doesn't make sense. It is the most crowded, inhabited spot in the world," he said.

He said that the root cause of the problem — European Jews taking the Palestinian homeland by force after World War II — must be resolved before any peace can be reached in the region. "What about the people who were living there?" he said. "They have been made refugees all over the world. That must be resolved first — satisfy the Palestinians who lost their homes and property — to come to a peaceful conclusion.

"The Israeli government wants to destroy Hamas and physically destroy its people, but the root cause of the problem will remain."

Khankan likened Israel's control of the area to apartheid in South Africa, where basic human rights were violated.

He said he could see fighting stopping only when all the U.N. Security Council resolutions are implemented.

Gradofsky said he had been planning his annual trip to Israel next month to visit his cousins and will not be deterred by the ongoing violence.

"I don't want to be deterred from going to my homeland and from seeing my relatives," said Gradofsky, who recently helped lead a prayer service for Israel at his synagogue.

Rabbi Daniel Mehlman, spiritual leader of Lido Beach Synagogue for 30 years, recently returned with his wife Mimi from a trip to Israel, where their grandson was bar mitzvahed.

They took a car ride in Sderot, where they could hear Hamas missiles exploding in the near distance. "The [missiles] came over us," Rabbi Mehlman said. "We could feel the impact. When that happened, it was sheer terror.

"Israel wants to have peace," he added. "It doesn't want these rockets aimed at playgrounds and grade schools. It's really doing what has to be done to protect itself." In May, Mehlman said he will be leading a solidarity mission to Israel. "We want to show our strength and our strong feelings for the state of Israel," he said.

He added that despite the violence that has wracked the region, Israelis continue to go about their business and their daily lives, holding ceremonies such as weddings and bar mitzvahs.

Rabbi Eli Goodman of the Bach Jewish Center in Long Beach said he recently received an invitation to a wedding, which will take place at the end of winter, for a first cousin who lives in Israel, and the rabbi is planning to attend it.

"I'm not hesitant at all to go there," he said. "This is our homeland. We have to support it in good times and in bad times. "If you look objectively, you can see quite clear that it's a matter of self-defense for a sovereign nation like Israel," said Rabbi Goodman. "I have family throughout Israel and even though I live in New York, I feel compelled to go back in solidarity with my family and friends over there, even though the bombings continue."

Comments about this story? Jlipton@liherald.com or (516) 569-4000 ext. 213.

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