

# Children of Gaza, Run to the Angels

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Ironically, it was in Palestine, 20 years ago, that I concluded that there is no God. For how could a God, who claims to love all and treat all with impartiality, allow such horrors like those in Palestine to happen?

This unbelief grew stronger with each curfew, with each strike that mourned the death of yet one more martyr, with a decapitation induced by gunfire in the main square on a sunny Ramallah afternoon so many years ago. But it was cemented the day I had to tell one of my fifth grade students that his brother had just been taken away by the Israeli army. His expression, his body going limp, the shuddering of his shoulders as he wept with his classmates...that's what finally did it.

Nearly 20 years have passed since that day, and I have now married into a Gazan family. I am a wife and mother, the sister and aunt of so many kids living the horror of what Gaza has become. As we watch the footage of Israel's onslaught, I hear myself, whispering as I see one more martyred child, "Run to the angels....run." After so many years, this living nightmare is fostering a burning desire to believe once again in the afterlife.

Caged, starved, sniped, suffocated. They are slaughtered like sheep, but the leaders of the free world just cannot seem to find a moment to comment. Golfing, vacationing, Obama, Bush, even the EU, they just aren't important enough. My mutterings have become a like a canter. I call out to these stricken and shattered little bodies, who frankly never experienced life to lose it. The only consolation to offer is the respite found in death.

A crowd gathers, shrouded in gas, smoke and dust. In the front stand eight young fathers, each holding a white swaddled bundle of what used to be a son, a daughter. For a few moments there is no screaming, no chanting or crying, but a moment of quiet and stillness that presses one to wonder just whom has been granted the greater mercy, the toddler who caught the snipers bullet, or the young father, who will have to find some way to live beyond this moment?

A young boy sits on the sidewalk beside his mother. She is propped up against the wall of a collapsed building and her life is bleeding out all over the sidewalk. It is spattered on his face and smeared on his shirt. She uses the last of her strength to lift her arm and clutch his cheek in her palm and then she is gone. He rests his head in his hands and cries. He is all alone.

The camera zooms in on the scene of a freshly detonated building, a civilian home. A little girls brown curly hair covered in dust and eyes wide open is all that can be found of her. Her mother wails and pulls her hair while her father frantically searches among the rubble for

the rest of his daughter, where could she be? I whisper again, “you will be made whole again in Paradise. Run to the angels”.

What amazing faith. What strong devotion that a father loses his mother, father, wife and eight children, that this man before anything can assert, “God is Great, Thank God for Everything”. He holds his child, now still and ashen, he smothers him with kisses and then gently pulls back the sheet to expose two bullet holes in his chest. He then tenderly places the child beside his brother and again, pulls the sheet back of his youngest son to reveal a single snipers bullet to the chest. He can barely compose himself and he moans to the sympathizing camera man, “God is Great, Thank God for Everything”.

An old and wrinkled Imam so lovingly cradles a little girl’s lifeless body, as if mishandling her now could inflict more pain, he mumbles a benediction and gently lies her beside her sisters and her brothers in the mass grave. I try to comfort her, saying, “Finally, a place of safety. Rest beside your sister. Your brother. Put your fears to rest and meet your beloved Prophet and the many of your little friends who have fallen before you.”

Hospitals, schools, mosques, civilian homes, UN shelters, all worthy targets. Doctors, medicines, food and water, truckloads of relief from all corners of the world line up for miles at the Egyptian border but they are refused entry. Security is high, food is scarce, water is completely gone.

Faith seems to spring forth in the strangest of moments. For me, it seems to be coming full circle out of desperation and in agony, for the sake of the snow-white souls of the many bloodied and dismembered innocents of Gaza.

UN workers coordinate with Israelis to get civilians to safety inside a UN school. Hundreds are tucked inside the mutually agreed safe haven. Soon after, the school comes under Israeli fire. Bruised and battered refugees stare Satan in the face, clad in his fatigues. Hundreds wounded, scores dead, many lost and unaccounted for.

Governments negotiate a cease-fire. Rumors buzz of conspiracies. The US President-elect is forever silent. Parents search beneath the collapsed walls for what remains of their children. Shattered concrete, random arms and legs, broken glass, tossed together in a bloody hodge-podge. But, in my mind, I see them whole, their little bodies swiftly being swept up into Paradise and I call out to them, “Run!”

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