

A Painful Move:
Israel Trip – July 2005

I have spoken to you upon returning from previous visits to Israel these past several years about the resiliency and determination of the people of Israel and how significant their temerity has been in defeating terrorism and procuring a victory in the current war. None of that has changed. What is different, however, is that the hotels are packed, the tour buses with groups crisscrossing the country are once again ubiquitous, as the country was for the first time in five years filled with tourists.

Having just returned from Israel, less than a week ago, the most important issue facing the young state today is the question of disengagement. At various junctures, a speaker would make reference to, or a newspaper article would state in a matter of fact manner, that there are 42 or 38 or whatever number of days until Israel is scheduled to withdraw from Gaza on August 15th.

Hearing these references repeatedly, the passage in the book of Psalms advising us to, “number our days,” came to mind. I thought also about the period between Passover and Shavout when we count the days during a period known as *sefirat haomer* – “the counting of the omer.” Each night we proclaim how many more days there are until the arrival of the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah, much as the countdown before the scheduled launch of a spacecraft. The country is engaged in a countdown, not dissimilar from the counting of days during the period of *sefirat haomer*. But the mood is not one of joy or celebration, but rather of uncertainty and of anxious anticipation.

The impending date hangs ominously over the country, for so much is at stake. It is impossible to predict what will happen and how things will go. There are some who doubt it will occur and among them, there are those determined to try to prevent it from occurring.

One of the biggest questions is what will the removal of Jewish settlers and settlements from Gaza achieve, and if it is worth the sacrifice. Will withdrawing 9,000 Jewish residents from Gaza be viewed by the world as a major concession on the part of Israel for peace? Will Israel get credit for an act so unprecedented in the history of the world? Will no longer residing among 1.5 million Palestinian Arabs, and by thus removing what they perceive to be a thorn in their side, gain any good will in the Arab world? Will it lead to peace? And if not that, then perhaps, at least will it give Israel greater security or at least a respite from the regular attempts to take Israeli lives? Is it wise to pursue this policy unilaterally, or would it be better to extract from the Palestinians some mutual concessions? What guarantees are there that the Gaza Strip will not become “Hamastan,” that it will not become a terrorist stronghold and launching pad for Kassim rockets into Israeli cities such as Sderot and Ashkelon? What about the tunnels, some of which are big enough to drive tractors through? Will the Palestinians use them to continue to smuggle weapons of destruction? What impact will this have on Jewish areas of the West Bank? Will it set a precedent for vacating them, or will this withdrawal suffice and relieve pressure there?

Perhaps the most important of questions – Will Palestinians interpret Israel’s act as a sign that terrorism works and thereby further encourage more terrorism? And finally, the most perplexing of questions – Why? And why now?

If the United States has been divided over the last two election cycles into states which are blue or red, then the State of Israel today is divided between blue and orange. Colored streamers are attached to many cars, and children stand at traffic intersections distributing the banners. Orange signifies opposition to leaving Gaza and blue supports the government's position. In typical Jewish fashion, some automobiles have both. The division is deep. The animosity felt toward Sharon by opponents of the disengagement is visceral and intense. Many on the right feel betrayed by Prime Minister Sharon. Sharon vehemently opposed Mitzna's plan of uprooting settlers from Gaza. They heard him say in the most recent election campaign, "Netzarim (one of the settlements in Gaza) is as much a part of Israel as Tel Aviv." As a result, many feel, "We voted for Sharon, but got Mitzna instead."

Jews removing fellow Jews from their homes; Israelis being forced to involuntarily vacate homes the government had encouraged people to move to; uprooting communities where people have established a way of life, giving up an important source of the nation's agricultural output; turning over land and property to ungrateful enemies who do not acknowledge the sacrifice – all make the whole move painful. Compound that with two other critical elements – the question of whether or not the evacuation will be considered a reward for terror, and the biblical, religious, nationalistic and emotional ties to the land, and you begin to understand some of the difficulty fraught with the disengagement.

In fact, even the proponents of the move admit that it may not reduce terror or bring greater security.

But what it does do is radically shift the whole paradigm. Instead of saying, as has been the case until now, there is no partner for peace and we, therefore, are at a stalemate, Sharon has unilaterally declared that we are not going to wait or sit impotently. Instead of reacting or responding to the situation, Israel is defining its own borders and determining the rules of the game. Leaving Gaza removes a major impediment to Israel's standing in the world, while conveniently dismissing the problems accompanying ruling 1 – 1.5 million Palestinians.

No mutual steps are being sought because it is a pessimistic, yet realistic perspective of the situation. People are far more realistic today than before. Many recognize and admit that peace will not come in 20, 30, or even 40 years. This, I would say, is positive for it means the days of unrealistic expectations are over. The notion, that if we make some concessions and give the Arabs some land, they will be satisfied and start to like us and stop trying to kill us, is gone.

Yet, I also must tell you, ever since the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, I read articles and often heard Israelis express concerns about the long-term viability of the Jewish state. On numerous occasions, in recent past years, skepticism was voiced as to whether or not Israel would reach 110, or even 25. For the first time in years, I did not hear any such questioning or this kind of pessimism.

Israelis now realize that their Arab Muslim neighbors really don't like them and would be much happier if Israel did not exist. A Pew research poll just revealed that 99% of Lebanese and 100% of Jordanians have very negative opinions of Jews. 100%! Can you imagine any people ever fully agreeing about anything?! And these are two of the more moderate Arab nations! Just last week the PA Health Minister accused Israel of poisoning the wells of the places they are evacuating. But as Israel continues to move forward and build a modern, advanced, economically secure nation, the wistful and hateful longings of the Arabs become increasingly irrelevant and inconsequential.

And so, the countdown to August 15 continues.

As we approach the coming days, no one can foretell how things will go, or what the impact this cataclysmic event will be in the long term.

But I want to be sure people understand several basic, important considerations. I do not know whether or not this is the right thing to do. It may turn out to be absolutely brilliant, or it could be disastrous.

It just may be the best of several terrible options. A major reason for the disengagement is the serious concern that the Palestinians will stop demanding a two-state solution. In other words, they could say, as some already have, "Fine. Let there be just one state." The problem with this is that they will then overwhelm the Jewish population and the Jewish State of Israel as we know it will cease to exist. The other alternative is to do nothing and maintain the status quo stalemate. But under this scenario, Israel remains a pariah among the nations, as it is seen as an occupier and even worse, as a practitioner of apartheid. Not that our morality earns us any points in the court of world public opinion.

But what the Sharon scenario does do is to offer the Palestinians an historic chance to rule their own destiny in Gaza. No one should be under any illusions – the world will still hate us. The Arabs will still hate us, and they will still try to destroy us. But the hope is that by taking this risk, Israel will ultimately be stronger and in a better position to defend its borders, its citizens and the Jewish demographics to ensure the Jewish nature and character of the Jewish state.

We American Jews have an important role to play in all of this. Rather than allow the media or public to focus only on extreme fanatics devoted to the land, or on Jews fighting Jews, we should help people to realize the extent of the hardship Israelis are being called upon to make. We should help people understand the pain, the difficulty, and the depth and extent of the loss that Israel is undertaking in uprooting people from their homes and dismantling communities. It is doing all this despite our love of and attachment to *Eretz Yisrael*. What other nation has called on its citizens to make such a sacrifice?! As my nephew, an opponent of the disengagement lamented to me, it is like a person amputating an arm. It is not unreasonable then, in light of all this, to demand that the Palestinians should also show some good will and be equally forthcoming.

Let us let the world know that Israel seeks not territorial conquests or to suppress others, but as always, in the words of *HaTikvah*, *lihiyot ahm hofshi b'artzeynu*, to be a free people, to live in peace in our land, so we can continue to create a vibrant Jewish homeland for the Jewish people.

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