

What Hamas Means for Israel's Future

By Rabbi George Gittleman | Santa Rosa Press Democrat

I was in Israel during the recent Palestinian election. Despite the sensational press coverage in this country and elsewhere, Israeli society seemed surprisingly unaffected by the Hamas victory.

Sure, the elections were of great interest, and the results are of serious concern to everyone living in the region. There was also plenty of finger-pointing and Monday-morning quarterbacking about how a terrorist organization could be poised to take the helm of the Palestinian Authority. Nevertheless, Israelis seemed underwhelmed — as if the election results simply verified what they already knew: There is not a true partner for peace among the Palestinians at this time.

Granted, my observations are only the thoughts of an American rabbi. Although I travel regularly from Santa Rosa to Israel as a rabbinic fellow with the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I can't claim to be an expert in Israeli society or politics.

My thoughts, however, seem to be borne out by what's happening in Israeli politics today. Even by Israeli standards, the meteoric rise of Ariel Sharon's Kadima Party is unprecedented.

Imagine for a moment that Gen. Colin Powell (not a perfect analogy to Sharon) decided to launch a third political party as

a middle way to lead America through its current malaise.

Then, imagine that General Powell became gravely ill (God forbid) and was no longer able to lead the party. Meanwhile, despite the loss of Powell as the leader, the party was by all accounts destined to win the next presidential election, with the Democrats coming in a fairly close second and the Republicans a distant third.

This is exactly what is happening in Israel today. Kadima, even without Sharon, is garnering a majority of support of the Israeli people with Labor and Likud trailing behind.

Why did this happen? I think for many Israelis, Kadima which literally means "going forward," represents just that, a way to move forward even without a peace partner among the Palestinians.

How will they progress? They will follow the policy hammered out by Sharon, which includes continued construction of a security barrier to prevent Palestinian terrorist attacks and the unilateral withdrawal of Jewish settlements from Palestinian population centers in the West Bank.

These policies are driven by two main assumptions: First, the peace process is

dead, and, second, maintaining a Jewish democracy is more important to most Israelis than holding on to territory, even if evacuating Jews from that territory threatens the very fabric of Israeli society.

Is the ascendance of Kadima progress? The answer to this question is all about perspective. Certainly, many Israelis see Kadima as a chance for normal life, free from terror and the constant threat of violence. It is difficult to imagine that Palestinians see anything positive in this approach. The security barrier is a true hardship. The Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Gaza has resulted only in more chaos and violence for most Palestinians. What possible good can result for the Palestinians from the latest unprecedented shift in Israeli politics?

Even the Hebrew prophets had a hard time predicting the future in the Middle East. I, for one, will leave the predictions to greater, wiser people than myself. It does seem, however, that the Israeli message is this: Until the Palestinians are willing to become a true partner for a real and lasting peace, the Israelis are going to do the best they can to move forward without them. How far can they go? I guess we'll have to wait and see.