

TWO ELECTIONS AND A SMALL WAR

The 2009 Political Lecture (and a p.s.)

I was going to America anyhow (to a family wedding, complete with tuxedo – a rare picture!) so Paula arranged for me to be invited to speak at a few places in New England and in Florida. I wrote the outline of what I wanted to say during the week in which the Torah portion **בו** ("Bo") was being read in synagogues throughout the world. That was useful because this portion begins in Chapter 10 of the book of Exodus. The good folks of Danbury CT, where I was, read Torah in a 3-year cycle, so they started at Ex. 10:21, right in the middle of the 9th plague, **DARKNESS**. That was terrific; pitch black Egyptian darkness—nobody could see anybody else, let alone understand—suited me as a metaphor for what has been happening to us, and the wider world, these past few months.

So we have 5 items on our agenda:

- 1) Dealing with the fighting in Gaza and the collateral damage (that is, international condemnation) coming from that.
- 2) New elections in Israel.
- 3) A new administration in the USA.
- 4) Fatah and Hamas in the Territories.
- 5) Mubarak of Egypt, and Turkey, and Iran

1) Dealing with the war in Gaza is the easiest part.

- a) Every agrees that Israel needed to act; 7 years of missiles is simply intolerable.
- b) Everybody agrees that any country on earth would have reacted much more strongly and a lot sooner if something like that had happened to it.
- c) Everybody agrees that Hamas had deliberately set its fighters and rockets in the middle of civilian populations. Peoples lives are not as important for them as scoring propaganda points.
- d) Everybody agrees that this human shield doctrine is illegal and immoral. They just don't expect the Arabs to have the same morals as the Jews, a universally held belief which is both a racist and anti-Semitic.
- e) Everybody agrees that the Israelis had amazing results for accuracy—despite a few screw-ups—and was not interested in destroying civilian populations.

f) Everybody agrees that the news footage coming out of Gaza was skewed because it was filmed entirely by local Arab cameramen. For the simple reason that they were the only ones allowed to be there! Their interest was clearly in making things look bad because horror pictures score points on CNN. And everybody agrees that they have no reputation for telling the truth.

All of the above is common knowledge and none of us is surprised to learn that public opinion in Europe and to a lesser extent in the USA—easily influenced by the horror footage (real or phony) coming out of Gaza—was solidly against Israel.

Europe was protesting mostly because that continent is now full to bursting of Arabs and other Muslims for whom being anti-Israel is a matter of religious faith. Also, having a demonstration is a way to let off steam at their humiliation at not getting anywhere with their own lives.

That is less true in the USA, but still there are enough Muslim youth to start a demonstration at any time of the day or night. And there is enough anti-Semitism in mainstream Europe and America and enough self-hating Jews to ensure that anti-Israel demonstrations will always have their fair share of angry white faces too. Those are the facts of life. Israel PR—good, bad or indifferent—is irrelevant, and there’s nothing to be done.

The United Nations is simply a bad joke. The General Assembly has held ten emergency sessions in its 60-year history. Six of them have been about Israel. And the most recent one, the 10th, has been reconvened 16 times since 1967. Which means that the UN keeps a permanent committee designed for the sole purpose of bashing Israel.

Further, the new Human Rights Council, now 2½ years old, has held five special sessions on Israel as compared to nine sessions about what goes on in the other 191 members of the organization. The results, hardly surprising, is that the council has condemned Israel more often than all of the other members of the UN COMBINED. And what have we learned from all this? That you are not going to get anything from the UN apart from aggravation.

THE INTERESTING PART OF ALL THIS REACTION IS THAT WE WERE GETTING HAMMERED FROM THE STREET AND FROM THE UN AND THE NGOS, BUT VERY LITTLE AND VERY MILDLY FROM GOVERNMENTS AND FOREIGN MINISTRIES. INTERESTING INDEED; THEY KNOW ABOUT HAMAS AND IRAN AS WELL AS WE DO AND DISLIKE THEM/FEAR THEM AS MUCH AS WE DO.

In summary for this first part of our agenda, we recall Ben Gurion’s famous dictum; “We care what the Jews do, not what the goyim say!”

Part 2) Israel had an election (again). As of this writing (Purim) we still haven’t got a government but it doesn’t seem to matter very much. The country runs as well or as badly as it always did on

what's left from the previous government. But the system is rotten and in my opinion represents a greater threat to the peace and survival of Israel than the Arabs and Iranians and the anti-Semites put together.

Because we are in the final days of our 32nd government in 60 years. And 34 parties have just now run in elections for the 33rd which Bibi has to put together this week or next.

That's what happens when you have a system of proportional representation in which parties choose lists, voters vote for parties, and parties divvy up the 120 seats after the election by a lot of fancy arithmetic. Nobody in the Knesset is responsible to the people because they didn't elect him/her. But rather only to the party that put him/her on the list. Nobody is accountable to the people nor in general to the good of the country. Only to the interests of the party.

In a fractious democracy like Israel, no party has ever got 61 seats and therefore a majority in the Knesset. Governments are in consequence always run by coalitions, always unstable, always weighted in favor the small party that's got 3-4 seats because it usually turns out to be the balance that decides whether the big party in power has 61 votes (in which case it has a government) or 58 votes (in which case it doesn't). So small parties become important beyond their numbers and the result is government by blackmail.

That system needs to be re-done. First; at least half of the 120 seats need to be direct representation by voting districts. Second; the cut-off point for the other half of the seats needs to rise from the present 2½% to 5% of the votes cast, as in Germany. And if you don't understand this don't worry; it's not worth explaining. Israel is badly governed now and won't get better until the political system gets cleaned up.

Part 3) The Americans had an election too. This was a remarkable thing because America elected a President about whom nobody knew anything. We have heard about President Obama being very smart, and a good listener, and charismatic, etc. And certainly seen how he inspires people to care. So we have seen the emotion and the hope but we have yet to see exactly what his agenda is (especially vis-a-vis Israel) and how he proposes to accomplish it.

What we *have* seen are political appointments.

--Rahm Emanuel, Chief of Staff, is a Jew.

--David Axelrod, Senior Advisor to the President, is a Jew

--Ronald Klein, " " " Vice-President, is a Jew

--Larry Summers, Economic Advisor to the President, is a Jew

--Paul Volker, " " " " is a Jew

--Peter Orzrag, Director of the Budget, is a Jew

By which one could conclude that President Obama is establishing not just a government, but a **MINYAN!!** Who knows what this Administration will do, about Israel or anything else. We can only wish it well. And hope,

sincerely, that our original impression—that America had elected an empty suit that talks—is proven wrong.

Part 4) Which brings us to the Palestinians. Surely the whole point of Items 1 and 2 on our agenda was to bring us to some kind of arrangement with the Palestinians. But who are they? They are divided into at least two irreconcilable camps: Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. The first is hopelessly corrupt and the other suicidally crazy.

The Camp David Agreements of 1993 put the Fatah in power (nobody ever elected any of them), but the endemic corruption of the Arafat and Abu Mazen regimes led Fatah to a humiliating loss to Hamas in the election of January, 2006. Of 132 seats up for election, Hamas got 74 seats against 45 for the Fatah.

Hamas then engineered a bloody coup in Gaza in June 2007 and has been an un-recognized international pariah ever since. Nobody—especially not us—will talk to them. Fatah also has the small problem that Abu Mazen's term of office ran out last January 10th and nobody on the West Bank feels like holding new elections because they know they'll lose. (They may be corrupt but they're not stupid!)

In any case, the prospect for a 2-state solution—so dearly beloved by every United States administration since 1967—seems less and less likely to happen. And Israel, meanwhile, is helpless to secure the release of its captured soldier, Gilad Shalit, now held by some terrorist cell in some cellar in Gaza (if he is still alive at all) for more than 1000 days. Which is heartbreaking for us personally and deadly politically. How can the foreign and security policy of a whole country depend on the fate of one soldier? Would any other country allow its feelings to determine its interests? Or is it just us, the Jewish state and its Jewish soldiers? Whatever, that situation is paralyzing the government in its dealing with Hamas.

Now dealing with Hamas would be difficult even without Gilad Shalit, because that organization remains absolutely unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of Israel. Difficult to see how one can negotiate with a party that denies that you have a right to exist.

So who can influence Hamas? That brings us to our 5th point:

Part 5) The Egyptians. They of all countries have the best chance of making a difference in Gaza. After all, Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip between 1948 and 1967 and has historical ties with the area. And Egypt, with 75 million people, the largest country in the Middle East, always claimed to be the dominant power in the Arab world. Surely Egypt, if it wanted to, would find ways to civilize Hamas in Gaza.

Maybe it would, and maybe it will, but meanwhile Egypt has a few really big problems.

a) Its president, Hosni Mubarak, is now 80 years old.

b) The country he runs is hopelessly bureaucratic and corrupt to the core. He can't do much even if he wants to unless his bureaucracy agrees.

c) He, like every other leader of the Arab world, is frightened to death of fundamentalist Islam (read Iran). Remember that Sadat got killed by religious fanatics, on religious (not political) grounds, and the largest opposition party in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood which has a natural sympathy with Hamas and with Iran. So Egypt, fearing its own population, is not likely to do Israel any favors or do anything which makes it look un-Islamic. e.g. cooperate with Israel.

d) The problems we have with Gaza involve the smuggling of rockets, missiles, weapons and explosives, plus food, women, petrol, Viagra, etc. etc. Egypt could stop all that if it really wanted to but it doesn't. Because the smuggling is being done by the bedouin of Sinai, who despise the Egyptians (the feeling is mutual) and over whom the Egyptian government has no control. Bedouin have no problem killing any Egyptian soldier or policeman who gets in their way. And they do.

e) The smuggling is done through dozens—maybe hundreds—of tunnels under the border fence between the Sinai and Gaza. Egypt can't stop that activity because Egypt is a poor country. Which means that wages for police and soldiers are pitifully small. And smuggling is a very good business; there's A LOT of money there. Money for the people who do it, who finance it, and who look the other way while it's happening. So the problem of the tunnels won't be solved any time soon because too many people are making too much money in allowing it to happen.

Turkey is the second great power of the area (71.5 million people). She was once our great friend and ally, our hope for normal relations with a secular Muslim nation in the Middle East, a partner in trade and military cooperation, etc. But Turkey now has an Islamist government that is taking it right into the fundamentalist camp. That situation is really bleak and getting worse; it is scarier than you think! We can expect no help from the Turks, at least as long as their present AKP government remains in power. Or is overthrown by the Army.

Not Egypt nor Turkey; the key is IRAN Hamas and Hezbollah—our immediate enemies—are proxies of Iran. That country, nearly as large as Egypt (with 72 million people) is now the leader of the fundamentalist, rejectionist movement in Islam. Everybody else, including Saudi Arabia, is afraid of Iran and of the fanatic Shi'ite drive for hegemony over the area. The country is wealthy, heavily armed, and talented but has got itself into a mess: a Shi'ite-cleric-controlled extremist frame of mind which is reaching out to conquer the world, which it really believes it can do. No two ways about it; Iran is the enemy.

BOTTOM LINE: the situation in the Middle East will only change when there is a fundamental change in Iran. That change might really happen; Iranian society is varied and interesting. It's just the government that is so awful. But governments change. That has to happen, and I believe it will happen sooner or later. But meanwhile there are, alas!, no encouraging signs.

In conclusion

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, we in Israel are still alive, and actually well and flourishing, despite what's going on in the rest of the world. The government and all vital services are working ok, etc. But as far as political prospects for the future, we are back where we started, in the middle of the 9th plague. There is darkness over the land and nobody knows what will happen. And on that cheerful note...

p.s.

Some last thoughts about the war in Gaza

The world has not given much attention to the extraordinary way in which the Israeli Army fought that action in Gaza. It's incredible that we lost only 13 soldiers in the whole campaign

Never mind that the war ended for no good reason¹, that it accomplished nothing, that whatever we gained won't last more than a couple of months. We know that Hamas, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, is re-arming at an alarming rate and now has more and better missiles than it had before. We know that the weapons are coming in through the tunnels of Sinai and the Air Force keeps bombing the tunnels but the bedouin rebuild them faster than we can destroy them. The only way to stop the tunneling is for the Egyptians to put in a fence at, say, 2 km inside the border—there are, after all, limits to how far you can tunnel!—but they won't do that for fear of being seen as too cozy with Israel. Indeed, the entire Arab world accuses Mubarak of being just that.

Fact is that the Army was brilliant (I have heard stories of new tactics for fighting in built-up areas) and we are really proud of them.

¹ The universally held opinion here is that the government ended the campaign because they didn't want a war to be going on during the inauguration of President Obama.

Excessive force?

And for those who have accused us of using excessive force. here is a list of casualties from other civil conflicts of the past 50 years:

1960-96	Civil war in Guatemala	200,000 killed
1971	Atrocities in Bangladesh	1,500,000
1971-79	Genocide in Uganda	400,000
1974-91	Genocide in Ethiopia	400,000
1975-79	Repression in Cambodia	2,000,000
1976-present	Civil war in Afghanistan	1,500,000
1986-89	Iraqi repression of the Kurds	150,000
1991-2000	Civil war in Yugoslavia	140,000
1961-present	Rebellion in Papua	100,000
1975-90	Repression in East Timor	200,000
1994	Genocide in Rwanda	800,000
1998-2003	2 nd Congolese civil war	4,000,000
2003-present	Sudanese repression in Darfur	300,000
2008	Israel action in Gaza (709 of whom were identified Hamas fighters)	1,100

Think anybody's convinced? Think again. ■