

## ARYEH RUBIN

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Greetings,

I just returned from a one-week visit to Israel. I arrived in Tel Aviv from London the morning after suicide bombers killed 28 and wounded scores more in Jerusalem and Haifa. I returned to New York the day before the bus was bombed and sprayed with gunfire that killed 10 and wounded dozens outside of Emmanuel.

The mood in Israel when I visited during Passover was somber, but the people were looking for a way out. At the time, many, despite the bombings and killings, saw it as a grotesque form of muscle flexing, but felt that the Palestinians would halt the violence and come back to the table. They figured that the Palestinians wanted to achieve statehood by means of a revolution and not via a deal with the Israelis.

The mood last week, however, was depressed, with many expecting war. And when the war ends, then what? Everyone knows someone who was killed or wounded, and most people know someone who should have been at the site, but missed it because of some good luck a la Twin Tower stories.

The sense of futility is omnipresent. Unemployment is rising. The economy is sliding. Hotels have closed. At the Tel Aviv Hilton they claimed a 30% occupancy: it seemed a lot less, like a ghost town. In Jerusalem, the Dan Panorama (formerly the Moriah) had, on the first night of Chanukah, an occupancy of 17%. The hotel eateries were closed. Restaurants are, for the most part, empty. And when patrons are dining, the boisterous banter of people dining out is absent.

The Kotel was empty with only a dozen people, and no tourists evident. The Cardo in the Jewish quarter was TOTALLY empty. The Arab Souk, as well, had no customers. Countless people told me that they stick to their own neighborhoods, and ventured out only when absolutely necessary. Of course, there are many who wish to defy the suicide bombers, and parade themselves in the pedestrian malls of Ben Yehuda Street, but many people have withdrawn into their own cocoon. One mother told me that each time one of her children goes into the street she feels as if she is playing Russian roulette.

At a bar mitzvah in Jerusalem, another mother thanked her guests for their bravery in coming to the event in Jerusalem despite the dangers. More than a few people have told me that they have stopped reading the papers and listening to the news. Faith in the Palestinians has been shattered;

yet all realize that it is with those 86% of Palestinians who are in favor of resorting to violence with the Israelis that a deal must be cut.

Yet, despite the pessimism, and some would say hopelessness of the situation, no one that I talked to has admitted to contemplating leaving. “Israel is our destiny, and what happens, happens,” was the refrain that I heard countless times.

I have no answers. I have a lot of questions.

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I have received a lot of comments, both on the letter to the Israel Policy Forum and on my op-ed piece in the Jewish Week. It was somewhat amusing that readers, both on the right and the left, read the letter as a reinforcement of their views, when we, in fact did not share the same political outlook.

In both the letter and the op-ed piece, I did take the left to task for not condemning the Palestinian Authority, and for pursuing a “peace” process that the Israelis no longer believe in. But I was clear in stating that the territories need to be unloaded and that some sort of deal is crucial; not exactly a “right wing” position. Yet, many thanked me for switching camps, and congratulated me for correcting the errors of my ways. One of the basic differences between my views and those expressed later in this letter by Fred Ehrman, J.J. Gross, Rabbi Dadon and others is that, I would, in a flash, support any Israeli government that worked out a deal with the Palestinians, providing that the people on the firing line, - the Israeli populace – are behind it. These gentlemen, on the other hand, opposed Oslo under the Rabin and Barak governments, are against any sort of compromise and would rather battle it out. If I had a choice; war now or war 20 years from now, I’ll take 20 years from now, any day.

A middle of the road position is where the majority in Israel comes out. A middle position does not need breed passion, and without passion, the message falls on deaf ears. After decades of establishing settlements, the right has failed to convince the Israeli masses of the viability of a ‘Greater Israel’, while at the same time the actions of Arafat and the PA has doomed the dreams of the left. A deal must, and will be done. The big question is with whom.

I, myself, continue to maintain that the long term prospects of doing battle with 500 million Arabs, and more than a billion Moslems, is a Bar Kochba-like strategy [He took on the Romans some 2,000 years ago, and we went into the Diaspora.]

As we all know, Israel has never put much emphasis on public relations, but with the public emergence of the Moslem anti-Semitism it seems to me that a massive public relations campaign [or propaganda, if you will] should be undertaken together with the Western powers to alter the opinions of those who hate us. The American government knows full well how inciting rhetoric can arouse populations. Naïve. Perhaps. A solution, no. But, it’s a beginning. As Dr. Efraim

Zuroff has often stated, it took the Holocaust for the Christians to make their peace with us. What will it take for the Arabs to make their peace? If we want to avoid a perpetual battle, we have to at least attempt to alter their perceptions and deflate the hate. Campaigns should be started with those that represent the biggest threats. First Palestine, then Egypt. We should insist that the United States government insist that Egypt refrain from its anti-Israel and anti-American rhetoric. All foreign aid should be dependent on outside monitoring agencies testifying to the cessation of government-sanctioned destructive rhetoric.

While I am not very optimistic, I am paying close attention to and welcome the rationality of Sari Nussibeh. Is he being tolerated by Arafat because he serves his purposes as a voice of sanity and logic, or is he just a PR tool?

Best regards,

***Aryeh Rubin***

Miami