

Eyeless in Gaza

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Anyone who expresses an opinion on Israeli politics is heading for disaster. But since when have I been afraid of getting into trouble?

The [current turmoil](#) over the forced withdrawal from Gaza illustrates the polarities of Zionism, Judaism and Israeli society. In Israel orange ribbons festoon cars and homes as the color of [those who object to withdrawal](#), the "Detachment" as it is called. Blue is the color of [those who argue that the Zionist dream](#) can only be sustained by reigning in the "settlers" and withdrawing behind defensible borders. Some are combining blue and white, the colors of the Israeli flag to argue that it is not Zionism at all that's the issue but the secular Israeli State.

As you'd expect, there are plenty of people who disagree with these descriptions and characterizations, both in principle and because they do not fit exactly into any category. Most Chareidi Jews don't care one way or another and stick to their usual color of black, and most young secular Israelis not in youth movements don't seem to give much of a damn about anything except sex, music and drugs. In Diaspora communities in Britain and America you hardly see a blue ribbon anywhere. In Hendon, mine was the only one on display and it evaded at least three attempts, to my knowledge, to rip it off! I can't even begin to fathom what Israeli Arabs think. They, too, seem to be as divided and sectarian as the others.

Israel is pretty much the same as any other country in a state of external and internal conflict, only more so!! Why, even the corruption of political life is no longer remarkable (not dissimilar to other so-called civilized countries). Most people seem to think there's little point in bringing any of the big guns to trial, either because they are protected by the wealthy cliques who really control Israeli money and power, or because everyone who might replace them is so corrupt, as well, that whole echelons of Israeli society would end up having to be removed.

The question, of course, is how does Israel survive, and not only cope but flourish, despite almost universal antagonism and internal dissent? I have always said that the best argument in favor of God's existence is the survival of the Jewish people. On occasion, though, I tend to feel that Israeli politics is proof that Darwin was wrong and we are regressing rather than progressing.

I strongly take the view of [Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai](#) at the time of the Romans, and most halachic authorities today, that life is far more precious than land. Jews and Judaism have survived exiles and land. The miracle of the [Third Jewish Commonwealth](#) is another God-given opportunity that we have the chance to lose. We have blown it before and we can blow it again.

Despite my passionate love and support for Israel, there seem to me to be

some basic axioms that stand above nationalist fervor. My love is neither blind nor irrational.

Two wrongs do not make a right so please spare me the arguments about all the other Arab/Muslim states being what they are. I do not want to be dragged down to the lowest common denominator. Neither is it any argument to say that the Palestinians are led by corrupt leaders and incapable of running their own affairs because by that criterion almost all of the United Nations would have to be discounted. We live in an imperfect world.

Both Judaism and Zionism were predicated on principles and values. One of these is the dignity of man (and also woman, it still, sadly, needs to be said). Occupying unwilling peoples is never good. I remember very well how in 1967 the Palestinians on the West Bank welcomed the Israelis because they were delighted to be rid of their Jordanian occupiers. Sadly, the [Khartoum Conference](#) of Arab States forbade any negotiations, and over time one occupier became another.

The issues are these. Israel has a right to exist as much as another country in the world. What are the defensible borders that will minimize risk and casualties? What policies are in the long-term interests of Israel? And what sort of society will Israel itself become?

Despite differences on details, everyone agrees that accommodation, in whatever form, is preferable to a state of war in a region awash with rockets, missiles and, potentially, nuclear warheads. As Winston Churchill said, [better jaw-jaw than war-war](#).

Prevention is the best cure. So protective measures like walls and fences, when executed fairly (and in many instances at present this not the case), are safer than occupying Arab cities. Incursions to avoid terror are preferable to permanently endangering lives by sitting in alien territory under conditions of constant danger requiring massive military deployment.

On these grounds, withdrawing from Gaza is a "no-brainer", as the Yanks say. Indeed, "Jews should not expel Jews," but neither, as [my brother Mickey](#) has said, should they expel Arabs or Filipinos or other guest workers without just cause.

As for the future, idealism is wonderful and necessary. But, like religious fervor, it needs containing. Logically, Israel needs defensible borders. And if it wants to remain a democratic state it has to give all its citizens a vote. Those it is not prepared to enfranchise, it must give autonomy to. Whether it is a two-state or a Federal State solution, is up for negotiation, but compromises have to be made.

If Palestinians are not prepared to stop hating and attacking, then total separation is the logical goal until time and usage repair the ravages of occupation, humiliation, death and hatred on both sides. If some Israelis are not prepared to invest in building social, economic and educational ties, then at least allow for parallel development behind securely monitored barriers. Barriers can always be dismantled. I must stress, though, that far

more is being done to bridge the gaps, by so many, than most Westerners supporters and critics of Israel, have any idea of.

It has always been an important component of Herzelian Zionism and Judaism to encourage coexistence. Sadly, politics has too often got in the way, because rabble-rousing is the easiest way of winning votes.

The late and great [Yaakov Herzog](#) often used to say that if ever there were to be peace, Israeli society would tear itself apart. Ironically, the Palestinian issue may turn out to be our salvation. In working together to heal others, we might cure ourselves.

It's interesting that as we [read in the Torah](#) about Pinchas the zealot, the upshot was that his zealotry was harnessed and then used for the maintenance of Israelite society in general. Fires when banked, can still warm. Ask any barbecue fan. They cook better when they're under control but damp squids are totally useless! So I don't completely "knock" the settler idealists. But I do think they need to face reality.

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