

American Jewry's "blind solidarity" with Israel renders a disservice to all parties to the Mideast conflict

# The Present Chance for Mideast Peace

Nahum Goldmann

Since the proclamation of the State of Israel thirty-one years ago, the Middle East has been in permanent crisis, more or less violent, with one war following another. It is no exaggeration to say, however, that no crisis in the past was as menacing as the present one. Some of my Israeli friends know more about the details of the situation from the Israeli point of view than I—inflation going beyond 100 per cent, the growing abyss between a small, rich minority that is getting richer and the vast majority getting poorer, the growing polarization of the inner political scene and, internationally, the total isolation of Israel, supported only by the USA, primarily for internal political reasons, especially in view of the approaching presidential election.

On the other hand, and this is the paradox, in my view there has never been any other moment that offered such chances for a real, total peace. I am optimistic not only, or even chiefly, because of the Camp David agreement (which, despite its significance, will end in failure if it remains isolated), but because I begin to believe that the Arabs are undergoing a change of mind. The majority of the Arab states seem to have realized that they cannot in any foreseeable future destroy Israel, and, instead of wasting any more of their enormous resources on a hopeless attempt to liquidate Israel, they would be ready, under certain conditions, to accept Israel and establish normal relations. This is also true for the greater part of the Palestinians and PLO. There are many clear indications that the PLO would be ready to recognize Israel and live together with it in some yet-to-be-determined form (which would mean a change in their charter), on condition, of course, that the Palestinian right of self-determination be universally recognized, with Israel no exception. I must also state here that the time has come for the PLO to cease using terror as one of its methods. Not only is terrorism in itself immoral; I rejected it as such when, in the past, it was used by some

Jews in Israel. It is also, from a political point of view, totally unjustified, since, having gained recognition by a large part of the world, the Palestinians can only be harmed by the use of terrorism.

Should the conditions for an overall Middle East settlement be fulfilled, the acceptance of Israel by the Arab states would follow. If, however, no solution is found despite a policy of flexibility and moderation on both sides, the chance for peace may be lost for a long time. The tragedy of such a development, from a Jewish point of view, is that time works against Israel and in favor of the Arabs; one must not overlook the fact that the world could imagine the Mideast without Israel but not without Arabs.

The details of a settlement can only be worked out by negotiations, bargaining, and political maneuvering. I shall limit myself here to commenting on three main actors, whose attitudes will determine the outcome of such negotiations: (1) Israel; (2) the Arabs, especially the Palestinians; (3) the USA and American Jewry.

I have always maintained that the decisive quality of a people, which determines its destiny, is not external but internal. The gravest danger to Israel's survival today is neither the Arabs nor the PLO, and not the hostile states all around the world, but the erosion of Israel's moral strength and the disappearance of a minimal national consensus in all important spheres. Zionism was a great success story in its first fifty years, culminating in the creation of the State of Israel, and so were the first ten or twenty years of the existence of Israel. On moral, intellectual, and psychological fronts it was strong and justly admired by the majority of the peoples of the world. Day by day, however, Israel is losing its moral qualification and is becoming only a small, aggressive state, overestimating its potential. It fails to pay attention to its image and has little regard for the opinion of the non-Jewish world, thus losing the respect and admiration of the larger part of world public opinion, which, in turn has an effect on the Jewish Diaspora.

Jews lived for two thousands years in complete isolation, persecuted and despised by the majority of non-Jews. They could afford to over-

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come this situation because they lived on the fringe of history, in their own "portative fatherland" (to quote Heinrich Heine), in their *shtetls* and *mellahs*, sure in their faith in their own God and in their messianic destiny. The greatness of the Jewish people was, to a large degree, the result of this attitude, which has hardly a parallel in world history. Jews were always troublemakers, and their persecution and mistreatment was the consequence of the negative reaction of the non-Jewish world to Jewish nonconformism. But as long as the troublemakers were Abraham, who preached monotheism, and Moses, who gave mankind the Ten Commandments, or the Prophets or Spinoza or, in modern times, Einstein or Freud, the non-Jews would often get angry but could not help admiring and respecting them. When the troublemakers are Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, it is not difficult to understand that the non-Jewish world only gets angry, without any element of admiration or respect. Israel today is trying to have the best of two worlds: It wants to be a state like all other states, with an army, power, political maneuvers, expansion, etc., but nevertheless to continue to live in the psychology of the Jews in the Diaspora.

To formulate it in another way: Jews survived the Diaspora because they remained firm and rigid in their strategy, in their loyalty to their faith, and in the conviction that they were the chosen people and would bring salvation to all humanity by their Messiah. When it came to tactics, escaping dangers, surviving tragedies, remaining alive in times of persecution, they were flexible and yielding, running away, hiding, using all kinds of stratagems to save themselves. What Israel does today is just the opposite. The government of Begin and the majority it still commands get more rigid, more aggressive, and less able to reach a settlement as far as borders, new colonies, and occupation of territories are concerned. When it comes to ideals, Zionism, socialism, new forms of social life, there are few idealists left.

One of the paradoxes of Israel today is that the only real idealists are the religious and nationalistic extremists of Gush Emunim. But it should be said in this context that some of the great tragedies in history were caused, not by criminals, but by fanatics who followed wrong ideals. As a matter of fact, the claim by certain religious zealots that they have to conquer the Greater Israel because it was promised them by God is really a "*hillul hashem*," a profanation: Nowhere in the Bible were the Jews commanded to conquer Eretz Israel by war or bombs. From this point of view the anti-Zionist Orthodox Jews—the Naturei Karta or the followers of the Satmarer Rebbe—are right when they declare that, from their point of view, the State of Israel is not the one brought about by the Messiah, according to divine promise. Without going so far, some of the important religious leaders of world Jewry and Israel have stated that, according to Jewish tradition, the safeguarding of human lives is more important than territory of the holy land.

Developments in the Arab world tend in the opposite direction. Although a minority of the PLO is just as fanatic as the "hawks" in Israel, the majority are more flexible today than ten or twenty years ago, and the

courageous and visionary gesture of Sadat was a first indication of this new state of mind. The Camp David agreement, though not yet officially accepted by the other Arab states, may yet be followed by other similar agreements.

**T**he key to the solution of this tragic deadlock lies in the USA. Israel has reached a point of exclusive reliance on American support, which in itself contradicts the original Zionist ideal of achieving independence for the Jewish people. Israel is more dependent today on the USA than were the Jews on the rulers under whom they lived in centuries of Diaspora life. Financially, economically, or militarily, Israel could not survive even for a short while without American support. The budgetary burden this represents is being viewed negatively in the States, and so too is the political isolation in which the USA finds itself, because the Arab countries, the Third World, and practically all the European states oppose American policies in the Middle East. Under these circumstances, Israel's belief that "what is good for Israel is good for America" is naive and absurd.

I am firmly convinced that peace could have been achieved long ago if the USA had taken a stronger and more determined position vis-à-vis both the Arabs and Israel. Naturally, the other powers of the world will have to play a role, and neither the Communist bloc nor chiefly the USSR can be completely eliminated from the peace process. Israel's lack of confidence in guarantees by other powers is psychologically understandable after the tragedy of the Holocaust. In the present circumstances, however, the alternative to ongoing wars, with Israel's proportionate strength weakening from year to year, can only be international guarantees for Israel's survival, accompanied by international troops on the Arab-Israeli borders for a certain time, until a psychological climate of peace and mutual goodwill develops. The initiative for such guarantees must come from the USA, and this is another reason why its position is decisive.

In the shaping of American policies, American Jewry is an important element. I may be allowed to be personal on this point. I made my first Zionist speech at the age of fourteen, which means that I have seventy years of Zionist activity behind me. I lived more than twenty years in America, helped establish the American Jewish Conference, the first united representative body of American Jewry during the Second World War (together with Weizmann, Wise, Silver, Lipsky, and Monsky), and took the initiative to create the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in 1956, of which I was president for the first eight years. During several decades I was president of the World Jewish Congress and for twelve years of the World Zionist Organization. All this gives me credentials to state certain things that some among the American Jewish leadership may resent. Having retired from active political work and holding no ambition in any sphere of Jewish public life, I can afford to be frank, without worrying about criticism.

American Jewry is a unique phenomenon, with mag-

nificent qualities and great weaknesses. While its forefathers were poor, miserable, and persecuted in Europe, it reached a position of considerable wealth and political influence within two or three generations and, in the last decades, great cultural achievements. But, the greatest danger looms for a people that, after centuries of persecution and lack of power, comes to a position of strength, wealth, and power within one short generation. I have often said that the problem of world Jewry in our times is how to be good Jews in good times; how to do it in bad times we learned in two thousand years of tragedy and suffering.

Another element that explains the psychological attitude of American Jewry is the impact of the Holocaust and the feeling of responsibility and guilt for having reacted insufficiently to the fate of European Jewry under Hitler. American Jews were warned of the impending tragedy but refused to take Hitler seriously. For instance, when the World Jewish Congress proclaimed the boycott against Nazi Germany, the Jewish establishment in the USA, with few exceptions, refused to cooperate. During the entire period American Jews reacted in only a minimal way, and the realization of this failing is one of the bases for their present total solidarity with Israel. The unlimited support for whatever Israel does has become a policy of blind solidarity since the coming to power of the Likud, despite the fact that many American Jews do not approve of Israel's present policies and realize—consciously or unconsciously—that they present a danger to Israel's survival.

**I**t may appear paradoxical if I state that this blind support of the Begin government may be more menacing for Israel than any danger of Arab attack. American Jewry is more generous than any other group in American life and is doing great things, financially and socially, in favor of Israel. But by misusing its political influence, by exaggerating the aggressiveness of the Jewish lobby in Washington, by giving the Begin regime the impression that the Jews are strong enough to force the American administration and Congress to follow every Israeli desire, they lead Israel on a ruinous path which, if continued, may lead to dire consequences.

I have never believed in the principle "my country, right or wrong." American Jewry and Jews all over the world not have only the right, but the moral duty, to advise Israel and to warn it, instead of pledging automatic support for any action, however wrong or even immoral it may seem. If the USA has, on many occasions—with regard to Gunnar Jarring's mission, for example, or the Rogers plan—refrained from exploiting opportunities to bring about a full settlement in the Middle East, it was to a very large degree because of electoral considerations, fear of the pro-Israel lobby and of the Jewish vote. The operation of lobbies is a normal element of every democracy, and I personally helped establish the pro-Israel lobby when I lived in the USA twenty years ago. But the Jews have always been a people of superlatives, inclined to think in extremes. The support of America, under the pressure of American Jewry, has been precious for Israel, but it is now slowly

becoming something of a negative factor. Not only does it distort the expectations and political calculations of Israel; but the time may not be far off when American public opinion will be sick and tired of the demands of Israel and the aggressiveness of American Jewry. To give one example: Israel's request for financial support from the USA this year equals the total amounts given to all other countries by the United States. It is obvious that the Congress will not accept such a provocative demand. One should also remember the defeat suffered by the Israeli lobby on the question of arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Israelis, Jews, and non-Jewish friends of Israel have decried as immoral and unacceptable the fact that the Arab oil-producing countries link both the quantities supplied and the prices to America's unlimited support of Israel. I consider this condemnation unrealistic and hypocritical. Politics is based on interests. It is hypocritical to become indignant when politicians in America or Arab leaders try to use the powerful oil argument in the search for a solution to the conflict.

**D**espite all this, I end on an optimistic note, not in order to comfort my readers or to conclude "*bachi tov*," with the best, but because I believe in it. For the first time in the thirty-one years of Israel's existence I am hopeful that there may be peace in the near future, and I base this hope, as I said to begin with, on developments in the USA, the Arab world, and in Israel and world Jewry.

Not only America but the entire world has had enough of the Middle East conflict, which has been continuing for thirty years. The presidential elections in the United States may yet delay a quick solution and postpone the attempt to achieve an all-embracing settlement until after 1980. But the situation in the Middle East may not allow the president to wait, and I still hope that a decision will be taken soon.

As to the Arabs, there is a growing flexibility, indicated by Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the subsequent negotiations, as well as by the resolutions of the Baghdad conference of the more extreme Arab states, about their readiness, under certain conditions, to recognize the existence of Israel and live in peace with it.

With regard to Israel and world Jewry, the sooner they understand that they have to be flexible and give a positive reply to the Palestinian problem, the better will be the solution for Israel. A majority in Israel seems to realize that the alternative offered by Menachem Begin went bankrupt faster than expected, and a completely different political line has to be followed in order to achieve peace. This is of utmost importance for world Jewry, which, in a certain way, is menaced by the continuation of the Middle East conflict. The creation of the State of Israel did not in itself solve the Jewish problem, as Herzl naively thought it would; for the time being it has only aggravated it. Only a change of Israel's policies, opening the road to mutual concessions and total peace, will allow the start of a new chapter in Jewish history: that of the full realization of the Zionist ideal. [WV]