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ISRAEL IN THE WAKE OF THE BEIRUT MASSACRE:

Ten Days in Search of Answers

David Clayman

In the aftermath of the tragedy of the massacre in Beirut, Israeli society underwent a radical soul-searching. The trauma raised fundamental questions about the basic underpinnings of Zionist and Jewish belief and ideology. Much has already been written and will yet be written about the effect of this event on the psyche and soul of the Jewish people and of the people of Israel. Israelis have been left in a state of doubt, questioning, self-examination, and self-accusation. For some, defensive rationalization and aggressive displacement serve as a means of projecting this guilt. What is clear is that few, if any, have remained unmoved and unchanged by these events.

It is much too soon to even conjecture as to how all this will influence Jewish attitudes or Israeli political ideas and policies. However, there are certain short-term effects which should be noted.

The trauma set off by the news of the massacre on Rosh Hashana did not induce moral or even political paralysis. Rather, we were witness to a striking demonstration of the vitality of Israeli democratic institutions and processes. There was an unprecedented groundswell of public, private, and political forces demanding a full and impartial inquiry into the entire affair. The hesitation of the Prime Minister in announcing a state commission of inquiry unleashed a storm of protest and pressure.

Even Begin did not attempt in any way to cover-up or "stonewall." His hesitation and delay were due to two considerations. Firstly, he misperceived the demand for a state commission of inquiry as a political ploy by the Opposition rather than a deep-felt cathartic need of the people. Secondly, his deeply engraved sense of personal loyalty to his friends and supporters required him to protect and consult with his Chief of Staff, Minister of Defense, and Cabinet ministers before taking any dramatic public steps. His initial formulation of an investigation chaired by the President of the Supreme Court was an attempt at compromise to bridge between the public need and demand, on the one hand, and his personal loyalties and political strategems, on the other.

There was an unprecedented coalescence of forces and pressures during the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur which succeeded in changing the initial position adopted by Begin and his government:

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First, the President of the State of Israel, Yitzhak Navon, acting in every respect as president, courageously called for a full and impartial investigation. This came on Monday evening, September 20, the day after Rosh Hashana. This national call to conscience filled the void of Begin's silence which was to continue until Wednesday of that week when he spoke in the Knesset. This was the first mistake made by Begin in that he failed to speak out immediately and forthrightly on the need for self-examination and investigation. His aides indeed urged him to appear on television and to speak to the nation, but he refused their counsel.

Second, the free press of Israel fulfilled its role as the fourth estate in revealing facts, uncovering inconsistencies, and demanding governmental action. Third, the response of American Jewry as well as other friends of Israel abroad created additional pressure upon Begin and his government.

Fourth, key groups and sectors within Israeli society lent their prestige, influence, and voices to the demand for action by the government. Israel's Bar Association under the leadership of Amnon Goldenberg, a one-time Likud candidate for the post of Minister of Justice in the Begin government, publicly joined in the call for a state commission of inquiry as opposed to Begin's proposed investigation committee. Similarly, leading academicians, writers, artists, and other public personalities, many of whom hitherto unidentified politically, joined in the call for decisive and immediate action.

Fifth, the massive public demonstration on Saturday evening, September 25, included tens of thousands of the silent majority inherent in any democratic electorate. The hundreds of thousands of participants included many not identified with Peace Now or the Alignment. Perhaps the most eloquent and moving speech was that of Avraham Burg, the son of Dr. Yosef Burg. As a reserve officer and an Orthodox Jew, his words were particularly evocative. As a leader and founder of the newly organized protest group, "Soldiers Against Silence," his voice was heard by many who might otherwise have viewed the demonstration as a partisan political affair.

All of these forces should be perceived as concentric rings of power choking a self-perceived embattled and besieged central government. Begin's preconceived notions of "them" and "us," *goyim* and Jews, traitors and the faithful, allowed him to respond with his "blood libel" charge and "*goyim* hanging Jews" statement, rather than the call for self-examination and judicial review. Only as the rings drew closer and he could no longer label them as anti-Semites, self-hating Jews, or political foes, was he moved to change his position.

If the image of concentric rings be understood, then the inner ring, and hence the most powerful force acting upon Begin during that fateful week, was that of the political leaders within the government coalition itself. The broad base of support for Begin amidst the Israeli electorate has been long identified as the Sephardic and religious communities. As such, the pressure which came from these two sectors proved conclusive in forcing Begin to reverse his stand on the investigation. Daniel Elazar has discussed their role in some detail in Challenging Begin from Within: The Response of the Religious Parties and the Sephardim to the Beirut Massacre (Jerusalem Letter #52, October 7, 1982).

The coalition partners Tami and the National Religious Party (NRP) were undoubtedly the crucial and decisive forces which came into play. The defection of such Liberal leaders as Yitzhak Berman and Dror Zeigerman were injurious to Begin but not unexpected. Unfortunately, the majority of Liberal M.K.'s were unable to overcome their political inertia and vested interests in order to play a more decisive role in the unfolding drama of events.

The Sephardic Tami leadership proved itself to be considerably different from the stereotype pro-Begin street supporters the media have long depicted. Ministers Uzan and Rubin pressed Begin early on for a full state commission of inquiry. Similarly, Minister Mordechai Ben-Porat of Dayan's Telem party and a leading Sephardic personality, wrote a forceful personal letter to Begin immediately after Rosh Hashana calling for the clarification of serious questions and doubts. He wrote:

1. "Did the security services, intelligence or Army, suspect or have any information that the Phalangists might commit such an act? If they did, why did they not issue a warning?"
2. "What did Zahal do once they knew of the massacre? How much time passed until they intervened and evicted the murderers?"

"Only the appointment of a state commission of inquiry can lessen the pressures both from without and within and, more importantly, give rest to the troubled consciences of all of us."

While the Ben-Porat letter was on its way to the Prime Minister, an urgent meeting of the NRP leadership was being held. Messrs. Burg, Hammer, and Ben-Meir reached a consensus that there must be a full investigation. Burg called the P.M. and requested an urgent meeting. This meeting took place on Monday evening, September 20, and the NRP leaders pressed upon Begin the urgency and need for a full inquiry into the massacre.

The dominant personality in this triumvirate seems to have been the Minister of Education, Zevulun Hammer. His threat to resign from the Government was the inner ring of pressure which in the end decided the issue, and Begin reversed himself and agreed to the appointment of a state commission of inquiry.

The full story of Hammer's personal protest and effective role in the drama is not known, but all indications are that his actions were decisive and critical. In so doing, he has generated a major shift in the political geography of Israeli politics. The NRP had been the godfather of Gush Emunim and the religious support of Begin's national-religious policy for a Greater Israel in Samaria, Judea, and Gaza. His Sept. 29 appearance on Israeli television gave dramatic evidence of his personal re-assessment of Israel's situation. He movingly spoke of his past commitment to the Land of Israel but out of the tragedy of war had learned that the wholeness and completeness of the people of Israel was of even greater importance. Hammer's Gush Emunim supporters are already up in arms against this possible shift in policy and ideology. For example, within days he was disinvented as the main speaker at a ceremony to be held at a new settlement on the West Bank.

Hammer's personal odyssey during this war is not unique to him alone. Other leaders and members of the National Religious Party have begun to rethink their positions. The *hesder yeshiva* soldiers (those who divide their time between Talmudic studies and military service) suffered disproportionate losses in this war. Nine soldiers from Rabbi (M.K.) Haim Druckman's yeshiva Or Etzion fell in battle. Yeshiva heads have asked for the integration of these hitherto segregated units to avoid such tragically disproportionate losses in the future.

The linkage of religious conviction and nationalistic fervor has been sorely tested and weakened by these events. The NRP as the faithful right hand of this Government has lifted, if not yet withered. While the NRP continues to be the balance of power for any government coalition in Israel, it is no longer safely in the Begin camp.

The story of the NRP's crucial role in this affair has not fully emerged. It is only being hinted at in the press and in conversations. The cynicism of much of the Israeli public as to the opportunism of Israel's main religious political party has given way to a modicum of respect for its steadfast stand for Jewish values in this painful episode in Israel's history. The National Religious Party has discovered its soul and perhaps a new political role.

What is clear is that the sensitive pressure points on the Begin body politic are not in the more distant circles of pressure from abroad in the form of letters, newspaper ads, or emissaries. Nor are they to be found in public demonstrations or opposition party motions in the Knesset. Rather, they are within the tight circle of coalition political partners which sustains this present government.

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