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ISRAEL-DIASPORA RELATIONS AND THE PEACE PROCESS

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How to Capitalize on Our Short-Term Gains

In the short term, the Israel-Palestinian agreement has done a great deal for Israel and that is not to be dismissed nor diminished. One of the reasons that Rabin and Peres are willing to take the risks that they are willing to take is because they hope that these short-term improvements will start a momentum that will roll towards a better case scenario finish. If they are right, we will all be very much blessed by it and one can not only hope that they are right, but must do whatever one can to make them right.

The Declining Breach in Relations

Needless to say, alongside of its fateful impact on Israel, the peace process is also having an immediate as well as longer-term effects on Israel-diaspora relations, reversing the major trend of the last decade. At the present moment the breach between Israel and the diaspora is probably in the process of being reduced. A part of that breach

was, of course, media-caused. We all know that the broadcast media today are more important as a source of information for North American Jews and others, even more than the *New York Times*, once the major occupant of that role. (The Jewish press ranks somewhere lower on the list.) The inaccurate and even slanted media reporting, which has not improved that much but is still better because of the realities that have changed, was certainly helping to drive a greater wedge between Israel and the diaspora.

In this, the media play to underlying Jewish insecurities as well as to more manifest Jewish humanitarianism. The fundamental insecurities of diaspora Jews seem to be as strong today in a latent way as they used to be in a manifest or open way, even among American Jews. American Jews should rightly pat themselves on the back for having "made it" at all levels of American society. However, as soon as the Arabs declare an oil boycott or there is criticism of Israeli actions in Lebanon

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or a picture in the newspaper of Israeli soldiers apparently acting against Palestinian children, American Jews get as tense as Jews elsewhere in the diaspora. They get so worried that it leads one to believe that deep down they are not as secure as they have convinced themselves that they are, though in the process of convincing themselves they have also convinced a lot of Israelis that come in contact with them. So it is important to remember always that in dealing with the diaspora, this residue of insecurity remains and is stronger than it is usually given credit for.

The other element that contributed to the breach between Israel and diaspora Jewry was the fact that the talking classes in the United States became so sympathetic to the PLO. Many of the leaders of the talking classes are Jews and the kinds of interviews that were featured increasingly in the media included many Jews who were critical of Israel. Even within the Jewish establishment, some two-thirds of the American Jewish leadership apparently shared many of those views. They were certainly opposed to the (mistakenly called) "Greater Israel" movement. It has been a great loss for Israel to let ourselves get tagged with this label, which is simply a mistranslation of the accepted Hebrew phrase. "Complete Land of Israel" is the accurate Hebrew translation. Had it been used, the reaction would have been much different. "Greater Israel" sounds expansionist and this movement was not. They were not asking for Jordan or for southern Syria. The effort to realize Israel's claim to Judea, Samaria, and Gaza and a part of the Golan came about because those territories ended up being occupied out of necessity in 1967, in a war for Israel's survival. Yet the terminology adopted in discussing these issues was essentially that of those hostile to us.

The Leadership and the Jewish Public Differ Over Territorial Compromise

The majority of the American Jewish leadership has been in favor of territorial compromise all along, by about two to one. However, the Jewish public in the United States has not been, even if they now have moved more in that direction. So there was a real gap between the American Jewish leadership and the average American Jew, but the leadership, of course, are the ones who articulated the position for the community.

When one compares the position of the average Jew, it must be remembered that while these people are members of the constituency and the community, most of them are not even aware that there is a constituency

to be a member of, much less understand that they are being counted as members. That is one of the reasons why the Israel-diaspora breach grew, especially when Israel was under a government pointing in one direction and American Jewry was under a leadership pointing in another.

A Major Shift in Direction

Suddenly all this has changed, not only because of the return to power of the Labor party, but because of the agreement made in Oslo and signed in Washington. Suddenly Israel was doing what seemed to be all the right things and diaspora Jewry jumped on the bandwagon. Yet this was more than a political reaction of being supportive of the policy of any Israeli government. Rather, there was a great outpouring of relief and hope and all sorts of other positive feelings toward the idea, all of which have done a great deal to repair the breach.

The day-to-day business of Jewish life remains as it was and those tensions within it that cause friction are continuing to cause friction while those that promote unity are continuing to do so. That has not changed much. But for the moment, and as long as the process continues as it is continuing, the global framework has now brought Israel and diaspora, particularly American, Jewry potentially and actually much closer together. Diaspora Jews do not have the feeling that they have to gear themselves up to support policies that they do not believe in. If anything, there are more calls for brakes on what appears to be the current policy of the Rabin/Peres leadership, to go slower. But in general there is a feeling that diaspora Jewry is moving down the same path with Israel and that makes it possible to adjust to many other things. It is not only a question of Rabin shaking hands with Arafat. It is a kind of pointer to a general atmosphere which has made a major step toward healing what has been a growing breach between Israel and the diaspora.

The Aspect of Giving Hope

Another important aspect of the peace process impacting on Israel-diaspora relations is that it gives hope. Contemporary Jews, and especially American Jews who have acquired the generally optimistic and hopeful attitude of Americans, were feeling desperate because the situation in Israel looked as if there was no hope. While they could say and even argue on behalf of the view that some problems have no solutions, as Americans they did not feel good about that. Now they have hope.

One immediate result was the removal of the Simcha Dinitz issue, which involves the alleged financial improprieties of the Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, from the headlines in the Jewish communities. Had we been stuck in the impasse of the end of the Shamir years, with the peace negotiations apparently going nowhere and obvious growing differences of opinion between diaspora Jewish leaders who wanted to go in one direction and an Israeli government that seemed to be unwilling to move at all, the Dinitz issue might have become a lightning rod and there would have been many more people upset about it in the diaspora than there were. But the week that the issue was supposed to have come to a head, there were other headlines from Oslo that made the Dinitz issue look much less significant. True, Dinitz was not invited to the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, but hardly anyone noticed. Now it is almost a non-issue in the diaspora. So the possibilities of building on this sense of giving hope to the Jews are not insignificant.

Reaching Out to the Arabs

The third result of the agreement is the diaspora and particularly the American Jewish leadership reaching out to the Arabs. It at least starts with a positive notion. Yet the Jews throw away their good cards all the time. For example, in July — before Oslo — there was a meeting of UJA leaders with Egyptian businessmen in Taba, to talk about American Jewish investments in Egypt. The meeting itself was a good idea, but the diaspora Jewish leaders should have used it as a card. The least the American Jews could have done was to use their clout to say that if the Egyptians wanted investments, they would meet with them in Israel but would not go to Taba in Egypt.

Since the agreement, everyone has seemed to be going beyond themselves to reach out to the Arabs. It seemed clear that the Jews would rehabilitate the PLO leader. At least Israel got an agreement in the process of the rehabilitation.

Rabin was clearly the only person in the world who could have brought Arafat to the White House. Clinton could not have done it himself, nor could anyone else. Rabin gave away one of the biggest prizes to Arafat for a payment. It can be argued whether it was a proper payment, whether it was necessary to pay so much right away, but Rabin played that card and he played it early on. Perhaps Rabin should have let Peres sign the agreement with a representative of the PLO that Arafat sent and should have saved his own handshake for

another occasion when he needed something else.

Timing in these matters is almost everything. This writer said in 1970 that sooner or later we were going to have to negotiate with the PLO. Golda Meir was not being helpful then when she refused to pay any attention to the Palestinians. Perhaps the timing was not right in 1970, but it was going to come sooner or later. One has to make peace with one's enemies and not with one's friends.

Now the diaspora Jewish leadership seems to be actively seeking Arabs to whom they can reach out in friendship. Those Arabs who are sophisticated will use this. Those who are not will be surprised and not know what to make of it. For example, we already see diaspora communities instructing their community representatives in Israel to be working on activities involving Arabs, together with the work they are doing today for the good of Jewish families in the Project Renewal communities or in some other capacity.

At one level, this is a laudable effort, a reflection of the basic good will of the Jewish people, their strong humanitarian instincts, and their desire for rapprochement with the other people in the Land of Israel. On the other hand, if not properly managed, it could signal a false message to the Arabs, namely, that the Jews are weak and need to placate their neighbors. This would indeed be the wrong message, but it would not be the first time that one people misread the intentions of another. Every effort must be made to avoid such an effect including a measure of prudence in reaching out to our neighbors. We should by all means seek to foster good relationships now that the opportunity has presented itself, but we should do so with due prudence, understanding that the matter is more complex than simply stretching out our hands.

There are those pragmatists in the Arab camp who would like to respond to these initiatives, who think that peace will be good for the Arabs as well as for the Jews, and who want to move ahead in that direction. This strategy will be successful only to the extent that we can work with them in such a way that they do not see us as having no concern about our own interests.

Arab Unity and Jewish Divisions

The Palestinians and the other Arabs have their viewpoints and are pursuing them in ways that are generally legitimate, except for those who have continued to engage in terrorist acts. The Arab side is trying to get as much as they can and that is not illegitimate in international bargaining. On the other hand, criticism could be directed toward the Israeli government

for failing to do the same thing. In that respect there is very little difference between the present Israeli leadership and the diaspora Jewish leadership.

The two major reasons why Israel was not successful in the aspirations that it more or less fixed for itself after the 1967 war are the failure of world Jewry to respond to the opportunities presented and the public divisions within our own ranks. These are the reasons that Israel has to make real concessions. As I have previously pointed out, three times in the twentieth century the Jews have failed to take advantage of opportunities not presented to us since the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, who returned from Babylonia 2500 years ago. Had even 20 percent of world Jewry, between 2 1/2 and 3 million Jews, settled in Israel from the diaspora after 1967, the whole position in the land would be a different one. 1967 was our third opportunity in the last fifty years. The first came after 1917 when the British issued the Balfour Declaration, most of the world endorsed it, and Eretz Israel was newly occupied by the British. For some three years there were no restrictions on immigration to the country and Jews could have come flooding in and established our presence once and for all. Then after 1948 when the State of Israel was established, the gates were wide open. Many Jews did indeed come, almost all but the tiniest handful as refugees, while the Jews from elsewhere stayed in the diaspora. Thus we missed all three chances.

Although the Arabs, too, are divided, they have been able to work together in a manner sufficient for their purposes. Often they kill each other in order to be able to have one voice and we should not forget that part of it. We should know that among them are the kind who will do that and we should respond accordingly. But it has been our own very cleaved society that has opened the door for all of the erosion of positions that has gone on in the last decade and realism demands dealing with that and living with it. The Arabs are divided too, but because they have a more focused immediate goal, they are more unified than we are.

The Danger of Overoptimism

The first danger to Israel is overoptimism. Israel is already coming down from its high. The tremendous euphoria that surrounded the moment of the agreement is certainly in retreat. Things are not going easily and we are getting a little more cautious.

This poses a real problem for our leadership, however, for different reasons. First of all, Rabin and Peres have staked their "all" on the success of this

agreement. There are many times in politics where the personal needs and ambitions of leaders enable those self-same leaders to talk themselves into courses of action which, if they were analyzing those courses of action objectively in the case of somebody else, they would reject thoroughly. We see this even more with Rabin than with Peres right now because Rabin had to take what was, for him, a much bigger step. Peres' strength always has been his long-range vision; he is always looking forward to something really good at the end of the road. Every so often that vision may carry him away, but it is part of the normal course of his thinking to move down that path.

Rabin is just the opposite, he normally is solid, stolid, and cautious. The few occasions when he has departed from that path he has departed wholeheartedly and he has really paid for it too. Now he has departed from it in a huge way and he seems almost desperate to make it succeed. That may be one of the reasons why he appears to have become so cavalier with the truth. Politics sometimes requires judicious juggling of truth, but a politician cannot be caught in more than a few judicious untruths before he loses the trust of the media and then the media go after him on everything. And that becomes devastating because the media can beat anybody they want. When the media put out a story, if they have to correct it the next day or the next hour, the falsehood is already out. The word has gotten around, the smoke is there, and people are convinced that where there is smoke there must be fire.

Rabin has been so caught on numerous occasions since the summer. The turning point seems to have come while he was in China when his office formally announced to the press people accompanying him that he would stop in Uzbekistan on the way home when all along he was planning to make a surprise stop in Indonesia. The media responded not only by making the Uzbekistan announcement but by presenting features on Uzbekistan's leaders, the character of the country, and the like. Then when the plane took off they found themselves flying southward. The media people were furious and the Israel government television crew actually filmed them on the plane yelling at Rabin "How could you lie to us in this way? Why did you lie to us?" When this was presented to the Israeli public that evening, it showed the depth of the lack of confidence between the prime minister and the media. As other political leaders have found out, once the media get on someone's case, life becomes even more difficult and since then, even the media which are generally sympathetic to the peace process have not

given Rabin favorable press.

Obviously people in public life are the most vulnerable. If they ever get the media on their case, they are in great difficulty, unless of course the public is so uninterested because something else has occupied their attention that it does not make any difference. But that is rarely the case with heads of state. So Rabin is running real risks now that he has been caught on this wave of untruths.

American Jews and diaspora Jews in general also suffer from overoptimism. Most diaspora Jews are not very politically sophisticated. They may be very politically involved, but many still have not caught on to the politics of Israel. In a situation like the current one, if the Arabs that they embrace, embrace them back, many are not going to understand that this response is often used as a tactic. Rather, they are going to understand it as a sincere embrace which means they are going to be motivated to do it even more. The reaching out is a positive thing, but the overoptimism will lead to unhappiness.

Rushing Too Fast

A second danger is rushing too fast, which is related to the overoptimism. Some would like to think that there are not certain problems that really do exist because there has been surface friendliness.

To take just one example, it is not Rabin's business to defend the PLO for not condemning the killing of Israelis. He may want to be understanding in private, but as prime minister of Israel he should be telling Arafat and the PLO to condemn the killings and he should try to reassure his constituents. That is his job, and by not doing his job he hurts us. Perhaps he should not break off the talks or hold the PLO to impossible standards in practice, but certain things have to be on the public record. When the British government condemns the IRA for putting a bomb in Belfast, it does not expect the IRA to come crawling to the Queen to beg forgiveness, but the government wants to put Great Britain on record as taking a certain anti-terrorist position. When somebody does not do that, the other side gets the wrong signals. That kind of overoptimism and rushing too fast can be harmful to us.

Let us also remember that there remains a basic imbalance in these negotiations. Israel has to realize that the world is going to hold the Jews to everything that we say that we are going to do, yet the world will not hold the Arabs to anything they say they are going to do.

Seeing the Other Side's Position to a Fault

The final problem is due to a Jewish practice from time immemorial that is rooted in our sense of virtue, but comes out as something less than virtuous in terms of our interests. One of our virtues as Jews is trying to see the other person's position, but when we do it to the point where principle overrides practicality, we end up making a vice of our virtue in terms of our own self-preservation.

We are now going to hear the same position in the name of principle. This was one of the reasons for all the divisions in Israeli society, because we honestly felt sorry for the fact that the whole Zionist exercise is based upon a certain measure of injustice. Every new development in the world perforce is based on a certain measure of injustice, but it is true that the Palestinians did not persecute the Jews. They may not always have been nice to the Jews; when they had the upper hand they may have put the Jews in an inferior position, but the persecution of the Jews elsewhere came back to rest on them because Eretz Israel always has been the Jewish homeland, never abandoned or forgotten, and the Zionist enterprise perforce displaced, in most cases unintentionally, at least some part of the Palestinian Arab population from certain parts of the land in order to enable Jews to return to it. This is now coming back to haunt us in a sense.

Actually, we have no more or less legitimate right to Tel Aviv than we have to Shechem. There may be good reasons why we do not want to expand and include Shechem, why we think that the Palestinians should have their share of Eretz Israel and that the land should be divided. But one cannot make the case that because Shechem was acquired after 1967 it is less legitimate for us to be there than Jaffa which was acquired in 1948 or the sand dunes north of Jaffa where Tel Aviv stands today which were acquired in 1909.

This is the reality of the world. The United States and Canada (or, for that matter, Australia and New Zealand) are based on a far greater injustice to their aboriginal peoples (and the Palestinians are not even that in Eretz Israel). This does not mean that anyone seriously proposes turning the U.S. back to those aboriginal peoples, only that the latter be better compensated in some way. There is a balance to be considered in all these things. Is not the world so much better because a great, free and democratic nation was founded in North America? There is a measure of injustice in every major human endeavor that has taken place and we do not like to face it. We like our justice to be absolute. We like things to be perfectly good and

we like our enemies to be perfectly bad, but that is not the way of the world.

There was a time when the Jews in Israel seemed to be rising above this tendency of making vices of their virtues and were applying a certain toughmindedness in knowing where to draw the line. They knew what to prosecute and what to criticize and they built an army which has a morality that is more than to be expected from most armies and that was all for the good.

Yet after a while the position of some Israelis became more like that of many Jews in the diaspora. The issues became clouded and toughmindedness began to fade, among certain quarters at any rate, even if they still think of themselves as being toughminded. As we proceed with the peace process to achieve what we hope

will be a good ending, we must restore some of that toughmindedness so that we can approach our tasks in a way that will make for real and lasting progress. In this, as in so many other things, Israel will need to rely on diaspora support to ease it over the difficulties that are certain to multiply as we move along the path toward peace.

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Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. This is the fourth in a series of commentaries on the peace process as it presently stands.