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VIEWPOINTS

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of two articles dealing with Israel's popular political movements, Gush Emunim and Shalom Achshav (Peace Now).

PEACE NOW

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The privilege of disengagement is enjoyed by few in Israel today where moral, political, and existential problems are interwoven and inescapable. A Jew who determines to live in the Jewish state does so in order to live fully as a responsible actor in history, when the fate of the Jewish collective is dependent upon the actions of each of its citizens. It is precisely this sense of responsibility and actual responsibility which Zionism came to create for the Jews as a nationality, determining its history politically, economically, socially, and culturally.

Within this context, the committed Zionist cannot remain passive in the stormy debate occurring within Israel today, which involves basic political and moral decisions. Therefore, it should be stated from the outset that the following description of Peace Now is being written by an active member of Peace Now as such, and not as an external, objective sociological observer. However, it should also be noted that this involvement does not necessarily imply blindness nor distortion. This attempt is to present an historically accurate description and an analysis which is sympathetic.

BACKGROUND TO A POPULAR MOVEMENT

Peace Now is the largest and longest-lasting extra-parliamentary movement in the history of the State of Israel. It is clearly not a peripheral movement nor one whose members constitute a radical fringe. On the contrary, the peace movement has attracted supporters from center to left, from the religious and non-religious sectors, from the urban and rural populations, from among the young and the old, academi and industrialists. The emergence and ascendancy of Peace Now can onl

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be understood against the background of a political map in which little hope and no outlet was offered for thousands of Israelis. The political ideas or intuitions and the moral energy of these citizens were expressed in a few lines written by 350 reserve officers and soldiers in March 1978. Their letter was the accidental beginning of a movement whose size or duration was never imagined by those original signatories.

The letter speaks for itself and is indispensable for understanding the Peace Now movement:

March 7, 1978

Mr. Menahem Begin,
Prime Minister,
State of Israel

Mr. Prime Minister,

This letter is sent to you by citizens of Israel who also serve as reserve officers and soldiers.

It is with a heavy heart that we write these words to you. However, in these days when for the first time new vistas are opening up for the State of Israel, for a life of peace and cooperation in the region, we feel duty bound to call upon you to refrain from taking any steps that are liable to be a source of regret for generations to come, for our people and for our state.

We write to you out of the deepest concern. A government that will prefer the existence of Israel in borders of the greater Israel to its existence in peace in the context of good neighborly relations will arouse in us grave misgivings. A government that will prefer the establishment of settlements across the "green line" to the ending of the historic conflict and to the establishment of a system of normal relations will raise questions about the justice of our course. A government policy that will lead to the continued rule over one million Arabs is liable to damage the Jewish democratic character of the state, and would make it difficult for us to identify with the basic direction of the State of Israel.

We are fully aware of the security requirements of the State of Israel and the difficulties that lie on the path to peace. Nonetheless, we know that true security will be achieved only with the advent of peace. The strength of the Israel Defence Forces lies in the identification of its soldiers with the course of the State of Israel.

We call upon you to choose the path of peace, and through this choice, to strengthen our faith in the justice of our cause.

Response to this letter came in thousands of private messages sent to the reservists affirming its content. The response demonstrated that the letter had struck a deep chord. Within weeks two hundred thousand Israelis signed a petition in the language of the letter, and 100,000 attended a peace rally organized by Peace Now on the eve of the Camp David meetings. The purpose of the rally was to mobilize sentiment elicited by the officers' letter to urge Begin to compromise on the issue of territories in order to reach a peace agreement with Egypt.

In the half year between the officers' letter and the Camp David rally in Tel Aviv, Peace Now developed into a movement. It could have passed away quickly in a spirit of self-congratulation after the achievement of peace with Egypt. In fact, there was a lull in activity in the six months following the signing of the peace treaty and the announcement of the autonomy plan. The peace movement did not collapse, however, because the leadership realized that the true challenge lay ahead in reaching a comprehensive peace in the region. This implied settling the problem of the Palestinians and the West Bank. Since the signing of the treaty with Egypt, Peace Now has worked to influence public opinion and government policy in the

direction of its views on the Palestinian issue and the future of the West Bank. The goal is to open the way for negotiations with the Palestinians, which is seen as the only path towards breaking the cycle of hostility in the region.

PEACE NOW AND THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT

The peace movement has called upon the Israeli government to conduct negotiations with any Palestinian body which accepts the negotiation process as the only means to solve the problems of the region, and which renounces terror immediately and unequivocally. Israel is also asked to cease all settlement and legislative activity which is seen to impede the peace process. At the same time, Peace Now has called upon the Palestinians to recognize Israel's right to exist as a sovereign Jewish state within secure borders and to totally cease the use of terror. Only if these conditions are met can negotiations begin between the two sides. Once such negotiations do begin, they must be guided by security considerations only. Historical and religious claims, which obfuscate and block the lucid political thinking necessary if peace is to be achieved, must be denied.

The Peace Now movement is an Israeli organization composed of Israeli citizens. It exercises pressure, therefore, upon the government of Israel. Obviously, both Palestinians and Israelis must make compromises and both sides must be flexible. However, the citizens of Israel, constituting a loyal opposition, can be effective only vis-a-vis the Israeli government. For this reason Peace Now has dedicated itself to opposing Begin government policies which it considers as endangering further progress towards peace. The movement has attempted to activate public support against a variety of illegal and semi-legal acts of the government which are obstacles in the path of future negotiations and present relations with the Palestinians.

ON SETTLEMENTS AND AUTONOMY

The continuous settlement activity of Gush Emunim represents such an obstacle in the way of peace, as well as a violation of human rights. However, the target of Peace Now is not Gush Emunim per se but rather the government, which permits such violations to occur, which permits the rulings of the Israeli courts to be impugned, and which permits a radical extreme to threaten the very existence of Israeli democracy. The messianic politics of Gush Emunim are considered erroneous by religious Zionists within Peace Now from a religious point of view. The violations of human rights which Gush Emunim commits in the name of its politics are considered immoral from any point of view. However, it must be stressed that it is the government of Israel today, the government of Menachem Begin, which legitimizes the actions of Gush Emunim, that is the target of Peace Now opposition.

In the view of the peace movement, ~~the autonomy plan being discussed by Egypt and Israel today should be implemented, but only as an interim plan.~~ The real problems of the region are certainly not resolved by the autonomy plan. In order for these issues to be resolved, Israel must demonstrate a readiness to withdraw from Judea, Samaria, and Gaza to secure borders to be determined during

negotiations. This is another point which must be stressed. The peace movement has never outlined a map with its view of the final borders to be established between Israel and her neighbors. Peace Now believes that only qualified military experts can determine such borders, and only in the course of negotiations. It is clear to Peace Now members, many of whom serve in key positions in combat units, that withdrawal from the territories implies a risk. Also clear is that remaining involves a greater risk in terms of a future war, as well as corrupting the inner fibre of Israeli society.

Peace Now has called upon the Israeli government to state clearly that it has no sovereignty claims over the West Bank and Gaza. It has demanded that the government express a willingness to withdraw from these territories when the agreement over peace and secure borders is achieved. Members of Peace Now are convinced that the occupation of these territories, and the consequent rule over one and a half million Arabs, is corrupting Israel itself, diverting energy and funds from much more crucial internal tasks, and aggravating Israel's relations with the world.

THE TRUE ZIONISM

Underlying all Peace Now activities and statements is a positive Zionist vision which shines forth in the words and dedication of the young people, the future leaders of Israel, who devote themselves to this movement. The Zionist vision of Peace Now is constructed upon two fundamental principles: that Israel must be both a Jewish state and a strong, just, democratic state. In light of these two principles, holding the West Bank, entertaining the notion of annexing them and gaining a "greater Israel," subjugating another people with its own national aspirations for self-definition - - these are all considered violations of the Zionist and Jewish vision as shared by members of Peace Now, and which is continuous with mainstream classical Zionism. As Begin was in the minority during the pre-State period and for the first thirty years of the existence of the State, so his ideological position on the West Bank and the implications thereof are still minority positions within the Zionist spectrum.

ON DIASPORA RELATIONS

Part of the Zionist vision of Peace Now is establishing relations with Jews in the Diaspora on a new footing, one which counters the basis of the relationship of previous Israeli governments, but which is faithful to Zionist principles. The fundamental notion of Zionism was that Israel would be not only the state of those living there, but of all Jews. Citizens fight for their country, pay taxes, and vote. But citizens of another order, the Jews of the world who feel "we are one" and that all Jews are responsible for each other, must have a clear right of expression regarding affairs in Israel. The relationship cannot be symbolic flag waving and check writing, the denial of the right to express opinions, and the subsequent use of the silence of Diaspora Jews as a rubber stamp approval of the government policies.

Peace Now has reached out to Jews all over the world to join in the debate over the future of the West Bank and Gaza, which is a debate over the future of Israel herself, internally and externally.

Genuine Zionist concern means genuine Zionist conversation and disagreement, if necessary. Moreover, it is clear that Peace Now has not created conflict within the American Jewish, nor any Jewish, community. Both the discussion and the rift within Diaspora Jewry predated Peace Now. As the Begin government moved right, endangering the peace with Egypt, and seemed to be locked in an irrational process of establishing settlements which aggravated relations with radical and moderate Palestinians, succumbing to the pressure of Gush Emunim and their non-religious partners, American and European Jews expressed opposition mainly among themselves. Now, however, opposition has reached the media. Academics and cultural figures, Nobel Prize winners, and Jewish community leaders have signed petitions opposing the policies of the Begin government. Most recently, the Chairman of the Presidents' Conference, Mr. Theodore Mann, conceded that the Begin government had moved right, losing the consensus of the American Jewish community, and that 90% of the American Jews opposed the settlement policy of Begin's government. Peace Now has sought to channel the expression of such opposition. "Friends of Peace Now" has been established in the U.S. and is being founded in Europe. The "friends" are committed Zionists, who cannot be muzzled by fear tactics in the present situation. Opposition to the current government does not affect basic commitment to the State, and such opposition cannot be cut off by threats of destroying Jewish unity, which does not exist in these matters anyway and obviously.

SUMMARY

The members of Peace Now consider themselves to be sane Zionists who have proven their loyalty and responsibility in war and peace. Now they are dedicated to a long struggle over several matters, which boil down to one major issue: the future of the territories as a key to the future of Israel. They have issued a firm statement that the Jewish character of the State will not be determined by the amount of holy land upon which Jews live, especially if holding that land violates another's rights. While not denying the holiness of the land and our historic attachment to it, reality and morality dictate compromise and withdrawal for the sake of a real peace. Israel ought to take the initiative in opening the negotiations which will lead to such peace.

Concentration upon and conflict over the possession of the territories, a preoccupation of Israel since 1967, has increasingly weakened and impoverished the State and its citizens. It has diverted national attention and resources from the true goals for which Zionists constructed the state. It has produced a radical chauvinism and a religious fanaticism which threatens to override morality and democracy. It has drawn attention from internal social and economic issues, even from spiritual concerns, which are vital to the future of the democratic and Jewish state. It is for the return to a realistic Zionism that Peace Now calls, to a Zionism which will again be devoted to the construction of a just, excellent, and noble Jewish state. It is such a Zionist vision which motivates the people young and old who lead and support Peace Now, against tremendous odds, in their opposition to the present government and to any government which will not advance the peace process in ways suggested and outlined by the peace movement. It is only the inner strength of the ideas and positions themselves, and the moral character of their bearers which has

permitted a movement which is totally voluntary, which has no official support from any political party or organization in Israel or abroad, which depends totally on the hours donated by its members for all its activities, to have become a very significant force in Israel today.

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