

Revival

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Almost 60

As Israel approaches its 60th birthday, a debate is raging internally on the nature of the celebrations. The government is planning a series of celebrations and activities for the benefit of the public at a hefty price tag and not a day passes without a commentator preaching in the media how the money could be better spent on medicine, education and the like. Each of us could probably say the same thing about our own individual birthdays – why should I throw party when I could pay off the mortgage a bit earlier?

The fact is, focusing on such milestones helps us as individuals and those around us to reflect on our lives and we often simultaneously feel satisfaction/disappointment, pride/humility, happiness/sadness and the like.

The same is true for Countries and States.

It is not a trivial event that the modern Jewish State was founded 60 years ago – and its creation and ongoing existence, is still, unfortunately, not something that is accepted by many in our own neighborhood. The achievements of Israel – have also not been trivial, but neither are the challenges.

In this edition of Revival we focus on old and new challenges. The struggle to achieve peace and security, which has been with us from the beginning – and the new challenges that we face as we look to protect our fragile earth and its climate.

In our next issue – we will dedicate Revival to Israel's 60th year and we will invite our friends from around the world to contribute to the reflection and celebration.

Wishing all our readers a happy Spring and our Jewish readers a wonderful Pesach.

Guy Spigelman, Editor

The battle against terror in Gaza

By Matan Vilnai MK

The struggle against terrorism, which has accompanied our existence in this land for over one hundred years, is particularly intensive these days. One can observe in Gaza all the characteristics of terror and the damage it inflicts on the populations - ours and the Gazans. We fight against it with determination, while at the same time doing all in our power to uphold our basic Jewish and human values: the sanctity of life and a moral code of behavior.

The Israel Labour Party, headed by Defense Minister Barak, bears the heavy burden of ensuring the security of all our citizens, particularly these days, of those who live in the south. We are trying to do so but it is no easy task. Indeed, we are confronted with an extremist organization, driven by a rigid ideology that does not face up to realities. The population in Gaza is poorer than ever, scattered and unorganized. This is the result of the Hamas regime, guided via remote control by the Ayatollas of Iran.

In 2005, in an independent, unprecedented step, the Government of Israel unilaterally pulled out of Gaza and dismantled all the Jewish settlements there. Even though this step was very painful for many Israelis, the Labour Party supported it, hoping that this would send a clear message to the Palestinians that this was the beginning of the end of occupation.

It is true that our party supports a negotiated political settlement, and would rather have left Gaza as a result of an agreement with the Palestinian Authority. Back then we believed that the disengagement was a 'second best' option given the situation of total stalemate where there was no political option.

Even though we retreated totally and completely, leaving the Gazans to run their own affairs, the Hamas took over the strip by force and has launched since then, indiscriminately, thousands of rockets on our cities, towns and kibbutzim. No school, no kindergarten or college is spared - and the rockets wreak destruction, suffering, damage, and turn innocent Israeli civilians into casualties.

No government elsewhere in the world would tolerate such daily attacks on its citizens without reacting. Neither does Israel. The International community has identified that after our disengagement from Gaza, there were no more territorial claims from Israel in that area, and therefore our reaction is met with a great deal of understanding.

A massive land attack on Gaza could have been an easy, obvious answer. Massive airstrikes likewise - this is what the Israeli population has been demanding. And yet this was not done, since we know that the day after we will have to face the consequences of our actions. We have opted for more moderate, measured steps.



Vilnai (Center) with Ken Bob (L) – Chair of Ameinu and Eric Yoffie (R), President of the Union of Reform Judaism on a recent visit to the United States

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Israel is conducting limited, focused operations that target the places from which rockets are launched, and aim to destroy the “labs” that produce explosives. Our objective is to prevent terrorists from infiltrating or carrying out their attacks and to cut the clandestine supplies of armaments to the strip. When these aims are achieved we will consider a cease fire.

In response to the terror, Israeli has initiated ongoing operations against terrorist leaders and does not hesitate in using military force against those who provoke us. Despite the fact that

Israel's fight is against the Palestinian terrorists and the Hamas organization who leads them and not against the Palestinian people.

the Palestinians directly aim their Kassam fire against innocent civilians, without prejudice, Israel makes certain to target terrorists and the source of mortar fire, aiming, wherever possible to avoid harming innocent civilians.

Furthermore, it is possible to say that the Palestinian population suffers due to the operations of terrorist leaders in Gaza. For example, Israel is trying to maintain the passage of essential goods like food and medicine into the Gaza Strip, but the Palestinians launch attacks over the border, forcing us to close the border crossing and stopping the supply of goods. Whenever there is period of quite, Israel transfers – for the benefit of the local Palestinian population essential goods – food, medicine, fuel and so forth. Additionally, Israel allows the entry of Palestinians who require medical treatment in to Israeli hospitals. This shows that Israel is waging a battle against the Hamas and other terror organizations, and not the Palestinian population.

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Despite this, a diplomatic settlement is in the national interest of the State of Israel. The Labor party has always believed and still believes that diplomatic negotiations will bring true security to the citizens of Israel and real peace with our neighbors. This combined with the maintenance of a strong deterrence via a strong army that will allow us to act carefully and with a cool head in order to protect the security of the state and its citizens.

We are making a supreme effort to assist Abu Mazen in reviving the Palestinian Authority and believe that the elected leader of the Palestinians wants peace – even his way was not paved with a bed of roses. Additionally it is possible to identify some progress with a numerous Arab states who do not approve of Hamas' behavior, and strengthen informally Israel's effort to bring quite to the area.

The Labor Party is an integral part of the Israeli government, and continues its traditional role – waging the constant battle against terror, while striving for negotiations with any Arab entity that wishes to engage with us. That's how it was in the days of Ben Gurion, through Rabin and till Barak. The Israeli Labor Party's vision will prevail, even if it is hard to see the light under the rainfall of the Kassam Rockets.

Matan Valnai MK, is the Deputy Defense Minister

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Annapolis – What next?

By Colette Avital MK

Hardly a week goes by, lately, without a Head of State, be he or she President, Chancellor or Prime Minister, visiting Israel. While it is true that these important guests come to declare their commitment to Israel's continued existence and security, on its 60th Anniversary they join a long list of Foreign and Defense Ministers who come here, trying each one to contribute to the ongoing negotiations between Israel and Abu Mazen's Palestinian Authority.



Indeed, more that in the past we live in strange times. On the one hand, negotiations launched at Annapolis, are proceeding seriously with our Palestinians Partners on the West Bank, while on the other hand violence is the order of the day in the South, the Gaza Strip.

This reflects the real, deepening rift within the Palestinian political body. It is the expression of two distinct tendencies existing in the Palestinian world: the more pragmatic part, represented by the Fath' and other independent elements who have recognized Israel and consider the two states solution as its ultimate goal – and another part of the Palestinian society, who in the past years has grown more radical, represents fundamentalist Islam, and rejects the existence of Israel on ideological-religious grounds.

Unfortunately, the Quartet's decision to preclude any contacts with the Hamas as long as it does not fulfill three basic conditions – (stop terrorism, recognize Israel, respect previous agreements) failed to bring about changes in its basic attitude; neither have economic sanctions softened the Hamas' resolve to do everything in its power to sabotage the ongoing negotiations.

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And so, the Israeli Government and the Israel Labour Party, being a part of it, faces real, complex dilemmas: how to proceed with negotiations in the face of public protest, as a result of the frequent daily shellings of its southern cities and towns; how to respond to this unprecedented wave of violence which takes a heavy toll from the citizens, how to effectively protect their security.

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Even though the public demands stronger action to eliminate these daily threats, Israel's Minister of Defense, The Chairman of our Party, has managed, so far, to impose a policy of restraint.

At the same time, one should not ignore the fact that lack of progress in the negotiations can negatively affect President Abu Mazen's position. For Israel, progress is dependent on an increased sense of security – and that in turn is tied to the Palestinian Authority's capacity to fight against terrorism. To do so, and to strengthen public support among the Palestinians, Abu Mazen must bring about improvement in the conditions of life of his people.

It is within those parameters that negotiations must move forward, dealing with fundamental core issues that have divided us for so many years – and to reach solutions that will demand sacrifices on both sides. Improving the atmosphere, creating better conditions on the ground, could give credibility to a process that is seen with equal skepticism by large parts of both public opinions.

Ultimately, this is the prerequisite to make difficult decisions acceptable to our public.

One thing has however become clear to both sides: Time is not an unlimited commodity – it is running out. An agreement which could be reached during this year, may become impossible later. Lack of solutions could trigger renewed violence, from which only the extremists would profit. Should we not reach a firm understanding on two states soon, that solution, too, may become for all of us, a thing of the past.

Colette Avital MK, is Deputy-Speaker of the Knesset and the International Secretary of the Israeli Labor Party

Strengthening Ties

On a recent visit to Australia, Isaac Herzog (Left) Minister for Welfare and Social Services met with the newly elected Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (Right) in Canberra and at a Jewish Community event in Melbourne.



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Israel's "Green" revolution

By MK Ophir Pines-Paz

Environmental awareness is not a new phenomenon in Israel, but in recent months it seems like it is finally getting the attention it deserves. Environmental issues are becoming central to the political, business, and media dialogue in Israel. People in Israel are finally waking up and starting to understand that protecting the environment is not only about protecting some endangered flower or animal species. It is about life and death decisions for tens of thousands of people in Israel every year. The destructive consequences of radiation, air and water pollution and land contamination are no longer doubted.

When Al Gore won the Nobel Prize for Peace a few months ago, it became apparent to us all that making peace with our planet is not less important than making peace with our neighbors. Unfortunately, the rise in awareness towards "green" issues in Israel, has not translated into any action by the government. It is no secret that environmental issues are on the bottom of the Israeli government's agenda. The Ministry for Environmental Protection remains weak, understaffed, under-budgeted, and too often un-influential on the reality on the ground.



Ophir Pines-Paz inside an electric-car at the Bali summit

But there is also good news: Israel has the potential to break new ground and become a world leader in several emerging fields of green technology. Israelis are well educated, and excellent with creating and consuming new technologies. Projects such as the rechargeable electric car or alternative energy production have an actual chance of becoming reality in a geographically small country with a small population such as Israel. Above all, the main driving force behind Israel's success is going to be necessity. Israel is in a constant struggle to provide its citizens with energy, fresh water, and uncontaminated soil. We simply have no choice other than becoming better at protecting our resources.

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Because the government is unwilling to face the environmental challenge, the task is left up to the Knesset. In almost every major party there are one or more members of Knesset which are leading the environmental reform. Israel is years behind other western countries in environmental legislation, and in the last year we have been starting to rapidly catch up. The Internal Affairs and Environment Committee in the Knesset, which I chair, is today initiating and passing more green legislation than ever before, both in terms of volume and quality. For example, in the last few months we have dealt with air pollution in the Haifa Bay, protecting the Sea of Galilee, rehabilitation of the Dead Sea, passing the clean air bill and the radiation regulations and many other issues.



Pines-Paz and the Israeli delegation to the Climate Change talks in Bali

A few months ago I represented Israel in the International Conference on Climate Change in Bali. The conference's objective was to build a roadmap that will succeed the Kyoto Protocol as part of the international effort against global warming. Israel, which is set between the desert and the sea, is already one of the countries suffering most from the effects of global warming, and it has to take its place with the world's most advanced nations and carry its burden as part of this global effort. So far Israel has not taken any significant steps in order to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases. I have initiated legislation, which is now backed by 70 members of Knesset from all of Israel's parties, which defines that by 2020, Israel will cut 25% of its greenhouse gas emission, and provides the legal mechanisms to obtain that goal. This is the first time such an attempt is made.

There is today a massive public demand for green political activity, which in the next election will be translated into Knesset seats. If the Labor party will not seize on this opportunity, other parties will. It is now our time to show initiative, creativity and leadership.

Ophir Pines-Paz MK is a former Minister of the Interior and currently serves as Chairman of the Internal Affairs and Environment Committee.

Young Labor Visit to Sderot

By Roi Assaf

On March 21, 2008 Israeli Young Labour (IYL) visited the town of Sderot. The town is under constant attack from Hamas and other extremists in the neighboring Gaza strip. The trip coincided with the Jewish festival of Purim.

IYL came to show support for the local population living in Sderot,

IYL members met with the Chair of the Sderot Businesses Committee, Daniel Dahan who owns a supermarket in the town center. Daniel gave us his insights about the economic aspects of the constant warning sirens and fear, not focusing on the immediate security situation - but rather the devastating effect it has on small and medium size businesses in town.

Due to the situation, local businesses are collapsing which in turn has a terrible effect on the local unemployment rate and the general atmosphere in Sderot.

He also spoke with us on the very personal aspects that the constant missiles attacks are have on his family life, especially the effect on his young children who are severely traumatized.

The members, under the leadership of the new elected chairperson of IYL Maayan Amodai held a lively discussion with Amir Peretz, the former Party Leader and Defense Minister. The discussion took place in a nice coffee shop that employs youth who have been unable to integrate in the regular school system.

The former party leader spoke about the situation in Sderot, where he has lived his whole life, and even served as Mayor from a very young age.

After the meeting with Peretz, the tour continued in the town, with activists engaging local citizens in discussions and helping local businesses by conducting their weekly shopping from shops in the area.



In the picture from left: Newly elected Chair of Young Labor Ma'ayan Amodai with former Labor Chair Amir Peretz MK and Doron Paz a young activist from the Kibbutz Movement

The visit ended with a trip to Barzilai hospital in the city of Ashqelon, where IYL members gave away a traditional Purim parcels to the children in the wards. The city of Ashqelon has also suffered missile strikes.

Most of the activists on the tour came from the center of Israel. The local activists that we met urged all of us to influence party policy and leaders to take more action to protect the local population.

The visit was very successful in achieving its goals of educating IYL activists and in demonstrating solidarity by IYL and the entire Labor Party with residents in the area.

Roi Assaf is the International Secretary of Israeli Young Labor