



ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel
A service of the Bet El Twinning Committee of
Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation*

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Hamas's favored outcome was not victory, but a strong showing that would leave Hamas with the best of both worlds: It would remain in opposition (or would be invited to join a coalition as a junior partner) but would impose severe limitations on the Fatah-led government on how to manage its relations with Israel. Hamas could thus claim to reject Oslo, decline to recognize the Palestinian Authority and its commitments under the Oslo

Events...

Sunday, January 29, 10am-12:30pm

Nefesh B'Nefesh Pre-Aliyah Seminar at the Lipa Green Building 4600 Bathurst St. Meet with our professional staff and get practical information and advice on: Employment in Israel; Children, Family and Aliyah; NBN Services and Benefits; Rights ("Zechuyot") as a New Oleh; Pre & Post-Aliyah Guidance and Strategies. For more information, call 1-866-4-ALIYAH.

Quote of the Week...

"The treatment of the expellees is a national disgrace, and everyone is silent... Israel's mad rush for peace has the opposite effect." [Many of the thousands of people expelled from Gush Katif and northern Shomron are still in hotels] "even now, a half-year after the expulsion, without the most basic conditions. Most of them are not yet in permanent housing, or even in reasonable temporary housing. There is no work, the children are in despair, and there have been some suicide attempts. Many families, and maybe even most, have not seen a red cent in compensation money, and those who have received are spending it on daily food.

"We're not talking about enemies or lawbreakers, but rather productive people who built a glorious settlement enterprise, and whose lives have now been destroyed - and yet everyone just ignores it. The entire media and everyone else; no one hears a word about it, no one relates to it, everyone ignores it. I, for one, will not be silent, and I am not silent.

"I don't know how the treatment [of the expellees] affects our national resilience and I'm not talking about the expulsion itself - but just about the treatment of those who were expelled. It's not clear whether this is being done purposely to show a message that Zionism is not worth it and [people] might as well stop engaging in it as quickly as possible - or just out of criminal negligence. And I don't know which is worse.

"The wretched Oslo Agreement includes a clause in which the Palestinian Authority agrees to stop the unbridled incitement in their schools against Israel and the Jews... This clause has never been carried out, and the incitement gets worse and worse each year... It's much worse than various terrorist attacks or Kassam rockets, because these children who learn in school that the State of Israel must be wiped off the map will soon be grown adults.

"The Arabs always said they have time, and that they can wait 10, 20 or 50 years until we disappear. But our problem is that we don't have time; we're rushing. We want 'peace now,' and so we go and destroy beautiful blossoming productive communities. We destroy the lives of tens of thousands of people on the altar of 'we have to do something.' The very act of running crazedly after the longed-for peace is precisely that which distances it from us." - Nobel Prize Winner Prof. Aumann, Saturday night at the Herzliya Conference. (IsraelNationalNews.com Jan 22)

Commentary...

Hamas Without Veils: No more hiding behind the PA.

By Emanuele Ottolenghi

Contrary to initial responses, Hamas's projected victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections is a positive development. Not, as its apologists claim, because the proximity of power will favor a process of cooptation into parliamentary politics, and therefore strengthen the pragmatic wing of Hamas. There is no pragmatic wing in Hamas, and all differences within the movement — the armed wing and the political wing, Palestine Hamas and Hamas in Syria — are arguably tactical differences. No, the reason is, as Vladimir Ilich Lenin would put it, "worse is better."

accords and the roadmap, and continue to use its rising political clout and its military strength to sabotage any effort to revive the moribund peace process.

What victory does to Hamas is to put the movement into an impossible position. As preliminary reports emerge, Hamas has already asked Fatah to form a coalition and got a negative response. Prime Minister Abu Ala has resigned with his cabinet, and president Abu Mazen will now appoint Hamas to form the next government. From the shadows of ambiguity, where Hamas could afford — thanks to the moral and intellectual hypocrisy of those in the Western world who dismissed its incendiary rhetoric as tactics — to have the cake and eat it too. Now, no more. Had they won 30-35 percent of the seats, they could have stayed out of power but put enormous limits on the Palestinian Authority's room to maneuver. By winning, they have to govern, which means they have to tell the world, very soon, a number of things.

They will have to show their true face now: No more masks, no more veils, no more double-speak. If the cooptation theory — favored by the International Crisis Group and by the former British MI-6 turned talking head, Alistair Crooke — were true, this is the time for Hamas to show what hides behind its veil.

As the government of the Palestinian Authority, now they will have to say whether they accept the roadmap.

They will have to take control over security and decide whether they use it to uphold the roadmap or to wage war.

There will be no excuses or ambiguities when Hamas fires rockets on Israel and launches suicide attacks against civilian targets. Until Tuesday, the PA could hide behind the excuse that they were not directly responsible and they could not rein in the "militants." Now the "militants" are the militia of the ruling party. They are one and the same with the Palestinian Authority. If they bomb Israel from Gaza — not under occupation anymore, and is therefore, technically, part of the Palestinian state the PLO proclaimed in Algiers in 1988, but never bothered to take responsibility for — that is an act of war, which can be responded to in kind, under the full cover of the internationally recognized right of self-defense. No more excuses that the Palestinians live under occupation, that the PA is too weak to disarm Hamas, that violence is not the policy of the PA. Hamas and the PA will be the same: What Hamas does is what the PA will stand for.

Continuing to pursue a violent path will automatically switch off all international aid. Perhaps Hamas intends to offset the resulting loss of revenue by hosting Holocaust-denial conferences in Gaza and terrorist training camps in Rafah, but it will still have to explain to the Palestinian public why it's better to renounce public aid to wage war.

Meanwhile, Hamas will have to confront the Egyptians (and the Jordanians) and tell them what the PA under Hamas now stands for. And Egypt and Jordan will have to change course, accordingly. Egypt has an increased military presence along the Gaza border and several officers in Gaza to help "stabilize" the security situation — which so far has meant keeping the flames low enough not to bother Egypt but high enough not to let Israel off the hook completely. What will Egypt do now? Cooperate with Hamas in Gaza while it dreads Hamas' twin, the Muslim Brotherhood, at home? Will it act more decisively to stop the ever growing flow of illegal weapons being smuggled into Gaza from the Sinai, or turn a blind eye even as the increased militancy in Gaza might embolden the Brotherhood in Egypt? No more ambiguity for Egypt either.

The Arab world will also be watching wearily. Hamas now will have to show to the Arab world that an Islamic party that wins a democratic election — everyone's nightmarish scenario — is not as bad as it seems. For now, the Palestinians have chosen an Islamic option over a secular one. Let them have it. Let them enjoy life under Sharia. It is their choice — that is what self-determination is about — and we must respect it. After all, the spectacle of an Arab government that is defeated in a fair and free election, and that as a consequence resigns (resigns!), has no precedent in the Arab world. This is good news. Let's have some more and put Hamas to the test of democracy:

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this experience will tell us if Islamists can embark on a road that leads to the Turkish model or whether Palestine will become a Sunni Iran. If democracy succeeds under Hamas's leadership, there is a legitimate government in power that enjoys support and popularity in Palestine and might be more honest and more competent than its predecessor — not a difficult task, given the ineptitude of Fatah. Otherwise, we can tell once and for all that co-optation is not the way to moderation, but a recipe is self-defeating appeasement.

Hamas hoped that a narrow Fatah victory would allow Hamas to enter government in junior positions while pursuing violence against Israel — much like Hezbollah in Lebanon. Their victory forces them to make a choice now, and the international community, while respecting the democratic verdict of a fundamentally fair electoral process, must hold them to account. The issue is not whether Europe, the U.S., or Israel should talk to Hamas. The issue is whether there is anything to talk about with Hamas, and the burden of proof is on Hamas to demonstrate they are capable of becoming interlocutors. If Hamas meets the true test, namely accepting the road map, renouncing violence, disarming its own terror network, recognizing Israel and embracing the two-state solution, then no obstacle should remain for a dialogue with Hamas. Otherwise, they can taste Israeli steel, courtesy of the U.S. and the full backing of the EU of Israel's right to defend itself.

Don't hold your breath though.

In commenting on this electoral upheaval, Jerusalem Post's editor David Horowitz has written

Some may seek comfort in the belief that an ascent to government could prompt a greater sense of responsibility, a move to moderation. But Hamas's intolerance is based on a perceived religious imperative. No believing Muslim, in the Hamas conception, can be reconciled to Jewish sovereignty in the Middle East. To deny that, for Hamas, is blasphemy. And that is the ideology to which the Palestinian people, for whatever reason and by their own free hand, have just tied their fate. That is the guiding ideology with which Israel and the West will now have to grapple.

The appeasers and the apologists are already cuing up to argue that Hamas has already embarked on the road to realism. But unless Hamas reneges on its ideology and endorses a new course, then Israel's claim that there is no Palestinian partner is vindicated. The resulting Israeli policy of unilateralism is vindicated. Israel's argument that the Palestinians do not want peace is vindicated. Israel's argument that Islamists' nuances and differences of opinion are just tactical, not strategic, is also vindicated. And the prospects of a Palestinian state will become even more remote.

The uniform message that the world gives Hamas should thus be: Take off your veil, and expose your true face for the entire world to see in the naked and transparent light of democracy. (National Review Jan 26)

The writer teaches Israel studies at Oxford University.

Illusory Differences: Fatah and Hamas, birds of a feather.

By Arlene Kushner

The principles of its constitution include the following:

- he Israeli existence in Palestine is a Zionist invasion.
- The Zionist Movement is racial, colonial, and aggressive in ideology, goals, organization, and method.
- Liberating Palestine is a national obligation...
- Liberating Palestine and protecting its holy places is an Arab, religious, and human obligation.

Based on these principles, the constitution calls for: Complete liberation of Palestine, and eradication of Zionist economic, political, military, and cultural existence.

And how is Palestine's liberation to be achieved? Armed public revolution is the inevitable method to liberating Palestine.

Absent the strong Islamic religious element, this constitution might well be a document of Hamas. But it is not. It is the constitution of Fatah.

As Fatah appears to have lost at the Palestinian polls on Wednesday, it's worth a closer look: Is Hamas that much worse?

Its early years remain murky, because it chose to function in a clandestine fashion. What is known is that in the mid-50s, Yasser Arafat went to Kuwait, where he organized some 20 Palestinians. For this, he drew on the membership of the Union of Palestinian Students, which had been organized by Arafat and his coterie at Cairo University in 1952; the union was affiliated with the radical Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, then in its heyday. One of the cofounders of the group, with Arafat from the beginning, was Mahmoud Abbas, today President of the Palestinian Authority. At first Fatah's main activities consisted of recruitment and the publishing of a highly politicized magazine called *Our Palestine*; the first edition appeared in 1959.

A close associate of Arafat's, Khalil Wazir (a.k.a. Abu Jihad) then went to Algeria to open Fatah's first office. Algeria had just undergone a revolution, carrying out a war of terror to boot out the French. The ideologue of that revolution was Franz Fanon, who espoused the philosophy that violence was a catharsis for oppressed peoples — an end in itself and not just a means to an end.

There is solid reason to believe that Fatah adopted this as its model: Charles De Gaulle referred to French withdrawal from Algeria and the

granting of Algerian independence as "Peace of the brave." Arafat used that very same phrase frequently. An early Fatah leaflet, entitled "Revolution and Violence, the Path to Victory," was essentially a collection of quotations from Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*.

By the early 60s, Fatah's goal was the launching — from Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt-occupied Gaza — of commando raids against Israel. It went public with this in 1965 for a specific reason: The year before, the PLO had been founded with Egyptian support, and had adopted a pan-Arab stance; Fatah opposed its position.

The policy of launching border attacks continued, and escalated, until the Six Day War in 1967. The defeat of Arab armies by Israel left a power vacuum in the PLO — a vacuum that Fatah promptly filled. By 1968, Fatah had gained control of the PLO, and within a year Arafat was at its head, where he remained until his death just over a year ago.

From that time until the present, Fatah has essentially controlled the PLO. When, as a result of the Oslo Accords, the PA was spun off from the PLO, Fatah members controlled this entity as well. (After its founding, the PLO had declared itself the official representative of the Palestinian people, wherever they were, and of their nationalist aspiration. The PA was established as a temporary administrative entity in specific areas in Gaza and the West Bank.)

This scenario, however, presents an inherent inconsistency. If Fatah has remained committed to the destruction of Israel, how is it that the PLO, an organization controlled by Fatah, signed off on the Oslo Accords with the intention of negotiating peace with Israel?

Actually, the Fatah Central Committee never did approve. But the answer, more broadly, is that the PLO never intended peace with Israel, whatever the façade it presented to the Western world. In June 1974, the PLO had adopted its "Phased Program," which stated:

Any liberation step that is achieved constitutes a step for continuing...to pave the way for completing the liberation of all Palestinian soil.

Quite simply, in the wake of the Arab defeat in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, it was evident that the "liberation of Palestine" would not be possible all at once. Thus was a "Strategy of Stages" conceptualized. It was entirely consistent with the goal maintained by the Fatah majority of the PLO, viz., that Israel had to be eliminated. Negotiations were sanctioned in order to gain a foothold, weaken Israel, and make the next step possible.

PA Minister Nabil Shaath acknowledged this approach in 1996, when he said (in Arabic) in a talk in Nablus:

We decided to liberate our homeland in step by step...Should Israel continue [to make concessions in negotiations], no problem...If and when Israel says 'enough'...we will return to violence. But this time it will be with 30,000 armed Palestinian soldiers and in a land with elements of freedom.

In the years since the founding of the PA, a good-cop/bad-cop strategy has been adopted. The PA is the good cop, Hamas the bad one. Arafat played this game to the hilt, professing inability to control the people who launched terror attacks while he was seeking peace. Abbas, in his own fashion, has done much the same. He would have liked to control the "gunmen," but doing so was too difficult.

Whatever the talk of moderation by Abbas, whatever his expressed desire for negotiations and final settlement for a two-state solution, the harsh reality is that the Palestinian Authority has been comprised to a very significant degree of members of Fatah, which calls for Israel's destruction via armed revolution.

The difference between Hamas and Fatah, until very recently, has been largely a matter of what face was presented to the world. The face of Hamas has been considerably more honest. In continuing to promote terrorism while joining the political fray, Hamas has actually further radicalized the public agenda: Fatah now speaks more openly about continuing the revolution.

In light of this history, and the current situation, the Western dismay at Hamas winning over Fatah is bewildering. In the end, it may not matter much. (National Review Jan 26)

The writer is a Jerusalem-based investigative journalist and author.

Don't Deal with Terrorists By Daniel Pipes

This article replies to USA Today's house editorial, "Ballot box gains for Hamas pose dilemma for U.S., allies," that argues in favor of prodding Hamas "to make its new image more than cosmetic."

As Hamas, the Islamist terror group, surges in the polls with a prospect of joining the Palestinian Authority or even running it, governments worldwide must decide on their responses.

An increasing number of voices are calling for Hamas to be recognized, arguing that the imperatives of governance would tame it, ending its arch-murderous vocation (it has killed around 600 Israelis) and turning it into a responsible citizen. Even President Bush made this argument in early 2005: "There's a positive effect when you run for office. Maybe some will run for office and say, 'Vote for me, I look forward to blowing up America.' ... I don't think so. I think people who generally run for office say, 'Vote for me, I'm looking forward to fixing your potholes, or making sure you got bread on the table.'"

The historical record, however, refutes this "pothole theory of democracy." Mussolini made the trains run, Hitler built autobahns, Stalin cleared the snow and Castro reduced infant mortality — without any of these totalitarians giving up their ideological zeal nor their grandiose ambitions. Likewise, Islamists in Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan have governed without becoming tamed. If proof is needed, note the Iranian efforts to build nuclear weapons amid an apocalyptic fervor.

Hamas might have hired a spin doctor to improve its image in the West, but its leadership candidly maintains it has no intention of changing. Responding to a question on whether Bush is correct that U.S. engagement with Hamas would moderate the terror group, Mahmoud Zahar, a Hamas founder, laughed and declared that this tactic "will not succeed." In recent days, Zahar has publicly reiterated that Hamas still intends to destroy Israel.

Fortunately, U.S. policy remains steadfast: "We haven't dealt with Hamas, and we won't deal with Hamas members who are elected," says U.S. embassy spokesman Stewart Tuttle in Israel. That is a good start; ideally, there should be no dealings at all with a Palestinian Authority that includes Hamas in its leadership.

It was a mistake to permit Hamas to compete in elections. Like al-Qaeda, Hamas should be destroyed, not legitimated, much less courted. (USA Today Jan 25)

The Alternative to Wishful Thinking Jerusalem Post Editorial

If dictatorships tend to be aggressive, democracies are often self-effacing to a fault. When attacked, we often respond with efforts to understand our attackers "rage," rather than with our own indignation and anger.

In general, we have reason to be proud of the fact that we hold ourselves to different standards than our enemies - which we are, tellingly, reluctant to label as such. Sometimes, however, our ability to deny and self-abnegate reaches absurd proportions, to the extent that we humiliate ourselves. How else can a decision to allow a convicted terrorist, Marwan Barghouti, to justify his own crimes from prison be interpreted?

The US reportedly pressured Israel to allow Barghouti to be interviewed, but it is not clear that much pressure was necessary, given that the jailed Fatah leader seems to have become the latest Israeli candidate - after Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas - for the position of the Palestinian leader with whom we can "do business."

According to this persistent way of thinking, Israel should be on the lookout for Palestinians who are radical enough to maintain the support of the Palestinian "street," and yet secretly harbor desires to cut a reasonable deal with us. Policy makers in Israel and the US are widely convinced that they can identify such closet moderates, who must be cultivated in place of the true radicals, in Hamas for instance, who seek Israel's destruction.

This is not to say that true Palestinian moderates do not exist, or that they should not be supported or recognized in some way. On the contrary, it is those on a never-ending quest for "moderate" radicals who tend to shun true moderates, by dismissing them as unauthentic and having no hope of achieving influence.

Barghouti, in his spate of prison interviews, left no doubt as to his authentic support for terrorism. When asked by British Channel 4 television whether "the time for using guns and bombs has gone," he responded, "The Palestinian people, and it should be very clear, have got the full right to resist against the Israeli military operations in the occupied territories in any way." He continued, "I support the Palestinian intifada and Palestinian resistance. I'm talking with you in jail; I'm not on the outside. And I still say that."

Well, why shouldn't he say that. According to the prevalent Israeli-American form of realpolitik, it is even good that he did, because if he were to unmask his true moderation, he would no longer be "authentic" and then where would we be?

Barghouti's main message was to endorse Hamas's participation in the elections and call for a unity government. Indeed, the political positions of Fatah and Hamas seem to have converged along with their joint participation in terror attacks. Fatah emphasizes its support for negotiations, Hamas its support for "resistance," but both parties support both tactics.

As another Israeli-American favorite for the moderate radical slot, Jibril Rajoub, explained on Al-Jazeera on January 11, "We [Fatah] never removed the resistance from our platform, and we never will. As you know, it was Marwan Barghouti who founded the the Al-Aksa Brigades, according to a decision by Yasser Arafat... We have never had a dispute with Hamas or anyone else regarding the principle of resistance... We believe that certain fighting tactics should have been stopped, especially following 9/11..." (translation by MEMRI).

The search for a moderate radical Palestinian leader is widely thought to be the province of "optimists," as opposed to the "pessimists" who believe that all Palestinian factions are equally out to destroy Israel. There is an alternative, however, to wishful thinking on one hand and giving up hope on the other.

The alternative is to stop placing bets on individual Palestinian leaders and to instead repeatedly insist on core principles: that true peace can ultimately be founded only on true democracy and the rule of law, and on Palestinian

acceptance of the national Jewish right to sovereignty in Israel.

The refusal of supposed moderates, like Barghouti, to abandon either the "right to resist" or the "right to return" demonstrates that they have not given up the quest to destroy Israel. The refusal of Israeli and American policy makers to recognize this and say so, far from advancing the cause of peace, contributes directly toward the perpetuation of the conflict. (Jerusalem Post Jan 24)

What's at Stake in Hebron By David Wilder

On January 19, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, quoted in Haaretz, "warned that 'the conflict between settlers and the government is a struggle for supremacy.'" Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert "declared war on law-breaking settlers in the West Bank, and described illegal acts by settlers as 'the undermining of the rule of law.'" What is the cause of such blatant demagoguery?

Hebron's Jewish community has come under fierce attack due to disturbances in the city a week ago. How did Hebron's leadership relate this turbulence and the youth involved? Quite simply, these youth are neither hoodlums or hooligans. Rather, they are some of the most ideologically motivated people in Israel today. These young people are true lovers of their land, of Eretz Yisrael. They are still crying the pain of expulsion from Gush Katif and northern Samaria. Their hearts are still bleeding for our land abandoned to our enemies.

They hurt the hurt of thousands of homeless Jews, who committed no crime but to live in Gush Katif. These youth want to prevent more expulsions, here in Hebron, in Amona, and in other places throughout Judea and Samaria. Enough is enough! No more expulsions, no more homeless, no more abandoned Jewish property.

Eretz Yisrael belongs to Am Yisrael, the Jewish people.

AND WHAT about the excessiveness, the seeming violence? Sixteen-year-olds don't react the same way as 50-year-olds. Sometimes the reactions are exaggerated, but then again, remember what they are struggling for.

Is ideological motivation a "struggle for supremacy"?

Clearly, all honest people must be able to live with themselves, with their actions and their conscience. True Jewish ideology has its roots in an eternal Torah, which has existed, not for 50 years, but for thousands of years. This Torah, as David Ben-Gurion told the Peel Commission, is the justification for our national existence in Eretz Yisrael.

Religiously observant Jews have no problem obeying the law of the land, as long as that law does not force them to overtly transgress their beliefs. Should the Knesset pass a law demanding that one meal a day must include pork, or that Shabbat must be desecrated by each and every Israeli citizen, of course it would not be heeded. Eretz Yisrael is no different. Chopping up our land, or demanding that it be abandoned is certainly no less serious than eating treif meat. Why is one publicly acceptable and the other decried?

The present conflict has nothing to do with law and order, or governmental sovereignty. Rather, it is entirely political. An unwritten law of Israeli society requires that preceding elections, or during the rule of a transitional government, major national actions and decisions should be postponed.

For example, despite Shimon Peres's signing of the Hebron Accords in 1996, he refrained from implementing them due to upcoming elections. In January 2001 then-attorney general Elyakim Rubenstein, publicly scolded prime minister Ehud Barak: "An election-eve agreement with the Palestinians should be such that it does not raise even the suspicion that it was subject to time-related considerations - namely, election considerations. Thus, great care and constant awareness of these suspicions is required, and even more so in the case of a minority government whose prime minister has resigned."

Currently, Attorney-General Menahem Mazuz has ordered the justice minister to refrain from convening a special panel to appoint Supreme Court judges, due to the upcoming election. He has even gone so far as to disallow new appointees to the Kiryat Ono religious council, because of the impending election.

WITH REGARD to the contested housing in the market stalls area, Hebron's Jewish leadership has been in constant communication with officials in various government offices in an attempt to reach a suitable agreement, satisfactory to all involved.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and senior officers in the IDF are clearly in favor of a negotiated settlement, as opposed to a forced expulsion. The government has already expressed a willingness to rent the structures in question to Hebron Jewish residents. This being the case, we can only ask, why the hurry?

Why not allow the process to be completed, without eviction scenes on Israeli and world television. And should, God forbid, the attempts to reach an agreement fail, the opportunity to evict us will still remain a viable option.

In January 2003, then-Jerusalem mayor Olmert issued a 166-page book, together with Dore Gold, called *Illegal Construction in Jerusalem*, which enumerated over 6,000 instances of illegal Arab building in the capital. The conclusion declared: "Illegal construction has reached epidemic proportions."

Yet, an overwhelming majority of those illegal structures are still

standing. Why then is there such an urgency to forcibly remove nine families in Hebron and destroy nine buildings in Amona, when so many other illegal structures are being overlooked?

The answer, it seems, is that Acting Prime Minister Olmert has undertaken to use Hebron and Amona as a means to politically prove his worth: "I too know how to throw Jews out of their homes, whatever the cost."

The real question is: are we dealing with the rule of law and order, or an attempt to usurp political power for political purposes?(Jerusalem Post Jan 25)
The writer is spokesman for the Jewish community of Hebron.

A Community on the Rebound By Michael Freund

The energy in the room was simply dazzling. This past Sunday night over 1,500 young Israelis crammed into Jerusalem's Malha sports arena for what was billed as the final Championship Game of the annual Gush Katif Basketball Tournament.

Though just five months had passed since most of the players, and spectators, had been evicted from their homes by Israeli soldiers, that didn't stop them from having a few hours of good, ol'-fashioned and much-deserved fun.

They cheered and clapped, bellowed and roared, as the two teen squads, formerly of Neveh Dekalim and Netzer Hazani, faced off against each other on the court in what had become a yearly tradition for Gush Katif youth.

Each team had won the tournament six times previously, so this was shaping up to be "the mother of all championships," the winner of which could claim bragging rights as the true title holder. At first glance it might seem strange that a game between teams representing communities that no longer exist could elicit such drama and emotion. But anyone who doubts the ability of sporting events to lift people's spirits need only have seen the smiles and cheers on display that evening. And anyone pessimistic about the future of religious Zionist youth could not help but be reassured.

TO BE sure, the Gush Katif evacuees have known better days. After the trauma of being tossed out of their homes insult was added to their injury by a government that failed to prepare appropriate lodging and adequate solutions for the evictees.

According to statistics compiled by the Gush Katif Council, which continues to represent them, some 25% of those expelled continue to languish in interim accommodations. This includes 224 families, many with large numbers of children, who are stuck in hotels, and another 109 families dwelling in tent cities near Yad Mordechai and Netivot.

The majority of those expelled from Gush Katif have yet to be given the full compensation promised them by the government, and 50% have not yet even received an initial down payment. Only 3% of business owners and farmers have been compensated for the destruction of the enterprises they toiled for years to build.

Worse yet, the government's Disengagement Authority has been strangling the evacuees with red tape and bureaucracy, often requiring them to locate and submit piles of old documents in order to prove they lived in the area. In at least one instance an applicant was asked to provide phone bills from 17 years ago.

And since their plight has gotten little attention in the Israeli media, the myriad social, economic and employment problems they face continue to fester.

A FORMER youth counselor from Gush Katif told me how the withdrawal from Gaza had hit the young people in the community especially hard. At least three youths he knew personally were so broken-hearted they had to be institutionalized in mental hospitals. Just a few weeks ago he intervened successfully when a group of four young girls, formerly of Gush Katif, began talking about possible suicide.

It was in part to give these kids something to cheer about, as they try to rebuild their lives, that gave birth to the idea of convening the tournament one more time.

Indeed, most of those attending the event, known as the Yulis Tournament after 14-year-old Itai Yulis who passed away in 1991, were bused in from the caravans, hotel rooms and other temporary quarters where they have been living since the expulsion, giving them an opportunity to get away, however briefly, from their problems at home.

The event was co-sponsored by Ra'anana's HaMinyan HeChadash synagogue, the Jerusalem Municipality and the LeMaan Acheinu organization, underscoring the fact that people from across the country have not forgotten our brethren from Gush Katif. Not surprisingly, there were many poignant scenes outside the arena, as former Gush Katif residents greeted one another, many for the first time since being banished from Gaza.

BUT THE real excitement, of course, was on the court, where the two teams played a gritty and determined four quarters of hoops, complete with foul shots, three-point baskets and a good deal of sweat.

Though Neveh Dekalim ultimately prevailed by a score of 54-46, even supporters of the opposing team came away content because it was obvious to everyone in that arena that the spirit of Gush Katif had not been extinguished. Of course, many of the families and young people leaving the arena had to go back to the challenging task of reconstructing their lives and their futures,

despite all the uncertainties they face.

But their energy and commitment, to both the Jewish people and its destiny, remains strong, and they will almost certainly play an important role in helping to shape the future of the country. As NBA Hall of Famer Wilt Chamberlain once said, when asked why he never fouled out a single time in his career: "I've learned I can't help the team sitting on the bench."

Even with all the difficulties they have been forced to endure, it's a safe bet that the youth of Gush Katif won't be sitting on Israel's national bench for very long, either. Brimming with idealism and filled with vigor, they will undoubtedly rebound from the blow they have suffered and continue to score baskets both on and off the court.

For, as the old basketball adage goes, "The harder you fall down, the higher up you will bounce back." (Jerusalem Post Jan 25)

The writer served as an aide in the Prime Minister's Office to former premier Binyamin Netanyahu.

An open letter from Arnold Roth.

Superintendent Ian Domnitz
Israel Prison Service, Jerusalem
Dear Mr Domnitz,

I would be grateful for your help in getting to the root of a troubling matter.

Marwan Barghouti, the leader of Arafat's Fatah movement in the West Bank and closely identified with what the BBC calls "one of its militant offshoots", the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, was arrested by the Israeli authorities in April 2002 and charged with the killing of 26 people and belonging to a terrorist organisation. On May 20, 2004, the Tel Aviv District Court convicted Barghouti of three terror attacks in which five Israelis were murdered. He was convicted of attempted murder, convicted of membership in a terror organization and convicted of conspiracy to commit a crime.

On June 6, 2004, Barghouti was sentenced to five consecutive life terms and 40 years. He is therefore a convicted terrorist and a convicted murderer. It is worth adding that at the trial of Barghouti's nephew and aide Ahmed Barghouti, revelations were made that Uncle Marwan hid the terror gang members who carried out the Sbarro restaurant massacre in Jerusalem in August 2001. Fifteen innocent civilians died there that day. Fair disclosure: one of those murdered was my 15 year-old daughter Malki (I make no pretence to being dispassionate about this particular thug.)

In light of these matters, why, in your capacity as Israel Prison Service spokesperson, did you - an accomplished and fluent speaker of the English language - refer again and again in a BBC World Service radio interview yesterday (January 24, 2006) to Marwan Barghouti as "security prisoner"? My recollection is you used that expression half a dozen times or more in a single interview, speaking deliberately and fluently. No slip of the tongue seems to have been involved.

It's clear enough that, for their part, Barghouti and gang want his multiple convictions for murder and terrorism to be expunged from the record, the faster the better. Claiming him as a security prisoner or a political prisoner plainly serves Barghouti's interests. The question for Israelis is whether this is (a) justified and (b) in the interests of Israelis.

These are highly charged times. In the run-up to today's elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, left-wing extremists like Joseph Beilin have called for Barghouti to be released from his Israeli jail-cell. Beilin has said the murderer should be go free because he "heads one of the Palestinian camps that do want peace and so this is the moment to end his sentence". In the give-and-take of Israel's robust democracy, Beilin's position may be deeply offensive to many Israelis and thin on both logic and jurisprudence. But Beilin speaks as a political activist, which means he is perfectly at liberty to be as offensive as he chooses.

But it's an entirely different matter for the official spokesperson of the Israeli Prison Service to express himself in what seems to be a partisan manner.

Which brings me to my questions. Does the Prison Service agree with you that Marwan Barghouti is a 'security prisoner'? If yes, does this entitle him to privileges to which a mere murderer would have no right? If no, will you immediately issue a public statement clarifying that the final determination of Israel's criminal justice system, convicting Barghouti of the most serious crimes, will not be undermined any further by those responsible for running its jails?

If the global war on terror means anything, it is essential for us to be clear about this. Barghouti is no security prisoner. He is no more than a loathsome felon.

I await your response.

Sincerely,
Arnold Roth (NaomiRagen.com Jan 26)
The writer is the father of Malka Chana Roth Z"L.
