

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

Even if Hezbollah and Hamas promise a change in tactics, America – or for that matter, Israel and other Western states – should not accept them as legitimate political parties. (New York Sun Mar 22)

Commentary...

Can Hezbollah and Hamas Be Democratic? By Daniel Pipes

If Al-Qaeda renounced terrorism, would the U.S. government welcome its running candidates in American elections? Had the Nazis denounced violence, would Hitler have become an acceptable chancellor for Germany? Not likely, because the tactics of Al-Qaeda and the Nazis matter less than their goals.

Similarly, Hezbollah and Hamas are unacceptable because of their goals. These organizations are important elements of the Islamist movement that seeks to create a global totalitarian order along the lines of what has already been created in Iran, Sudan, and in Afghanistan under the Taliban. They see themselves as part of a cosmic clash between Muslims and the West in which the victor dominates the world.

Washington, trying to be consistent in its push for democracy, prefers to ignore these goals and instead endorses involvement by Hezbollah and Hamas in the political process, pending their making some small changes.

These signals began last week when President Bush stated that although Hezbollah, a Lebanese group, is "a terrorist organization," he hopes it will change that designation "by laying down arms and not threatening peace." White House spokesman Scott McClellan then elaborated on this comment by specifying the two alternatives: "Organizations like Hezbollah have to choose, either you're a terrorist organization or you're a political organization."

Bush himself explained further what he meant a day later, presenting elections as a method to shed the terrorist designation:

I like the idea of people running for office. 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 know, I don't know if that will be their platform or not. But 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.

Hamas a Palestinian organization, Secretary of State Rice then noted, could also evolve in the right direction once it enters the democratic process:

When people start getting elected and have to start worrying about constituencies and have to start worrying not about whether their fire-breathing rhetoric against Israel is being heard, but about whether or not that person's child down the street is able to go to a good school or that road has been fixed or life is getting better, that things start to change.

The theory implied here is that running for office – with its emphasis on such mundane matters as fixing potholes and providing good schools – will temper Hezbollah and Hamas.

Count me skeptical.

The historical record does not support such optimism. When politically adept totalitarians win power democratically, they do fix potholes and improve schools – but only as a means to transform their countries in accordance with their utopian visions. This generalization applies most clearly to the historical cases (Adolf Hitler in Germany after 1933, Salvador Allende in Chile after 1970) but it also appears valid for the current ones (Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh since 2001, Recep Tayyip Erdo#287;an in Turkey since 2002).

Then there is the matter of their undemocratic intentions. Josef Goebbels explained in 1935 that the Nazis used democratic methods "only in order" to gain power. Looking at Islamists, then-assistant secretary of state for the Middle East Edward Djerejian explained in 1992, "While we believe in the principle of 'one person, one vote,' we do not support 'one person, one vote, one time!'" Khomeini's Iran indicates that Islamists do manipulate elections to stay in power.

Washington should take a principled stand that excludes from the democratic process not just terrorists but also totalitarians using the system to get into power and stay there. It is not enough for Islamist organizations to renounce violence; being irredeemably autocratic, they must be excluded from elections.

In a famed Supreme Court dissent in 1949, the eminent justice Robert H. Jackson argued for the arrest of a neo-Nazi rabble-rouser in Chicago on the grounds that not doing so "will convert the constitutional Bill of Rights into a suicide pact." The same imperative for self-protection applies also to international politics.

Sharon's Terror Masters By Caroline Glick

During the course of his negotiations with Damascus-based Palestinian terror masters in Cairo this week, PA chieftain

Mahmoud Abbas made two revealing statements.

First, on Tuesday, Abbas said that upon receiving security control of Jericho, he would release from custody all of the Palestinian terrorists who have been incarcerated there since May 2002.

Those terrorists, who were transferred to Jericho from Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters as part of a British and US deal with Israel, include the assassins of tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi in October 2001 and Fuad Shubaki, the PA's chief arms purchaser who oversaw the Karine A terror weapons ship purchase from Iran that was intercepted by Israeli commandos on the Red Sea in January 2002.

On Wednesday, Abbas went a step further. He told the terror masters who are now based in Damascus that after the exit of Israeli forces and civilians from Gaza and the transfer of control over the international border with Egypt to the PLO, they would all be invited to move their headquarters to the Gaza Strip.

That is, Abbas said that in the aftermath of the implementation of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to forcibly expel 8,000 Jews from their homes and end all IDF counterterror operations inside Gaza, Abbas will respond by transforming it into a base for global terrorism. This offer can be viewed as particularly credible given that it was made in the presence of Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Mualem, whose government is now facing increasing international condemnation for enabling these global terrorists to operate in its capital.

Surprisingly, the Sharon-Peres government reacted with near hysteria to Abbas's statement about releasing the terrorists in Jericho. Government members and spokesmen took to the microphones immediately after Abbas's statement was published and said that if he dared to free Ze'evi's killers, Israel would contemplate ending the peace process and hunt them down. The government's reaction was frankly inexplicable, given that Sharon and his fellows have given credence to Abbas's demand that Israel release all Palestinian terrorists from its jails. Acting on this demand, the government has already released 500 terrorists from prison and is planning on springing another 400 in short order.

Indeed, every single demand that Abbas has made on Israel, like every step he has taken to placate the various Palestinian terror groups, has been met with understanding by Israel. Israel has accepted his policy - practically if not publicly - of taking absolutely no action against any terror organizations, leaders or infrastructures.

After all, if it hadn't, the government would not be transferring security responsibility over Palestinian population centers to the PA as it did in Jericho the day after Abbas's statement about the prisoner release.

Israel has accepted Abbas's demand that it stop trying to catch terror fugitives. Israel has accepted his demand that it allow the Palestinian mass murderers who violently took over the Church of the Nativity in April 2002 to return to Bethlehem from their European exile and receive amnesty for their crimes.

The government has made no protest against Abbas's order to execute 15 Palestinians who are accused of having helped our security forces fight Palestinian terrorists. And Israel has made no protest over the fact that according to IDF sources, wanted Palestinian terrorists are being sheltered in Abbas's offices in Ramallah.

Given all of this, why should the government care if Abbas lets Ze'evi's murderers and Shubaki leave Jericho? As it stands, their incarceration has been a farce.

Journalists have reported repeatedly since their transfer to Jericho of their relative freedom within the compound. More than being imprisoned, they are being sheltered there from Israeli forces. Of course the answer is public opinion. The public would simply not accept such a concession by the government and it would fall.

Given the government's fear of the public, it becomes clear why it is that our leaders have been mute about Abbas's declared intention to turn Gaza into a new Afghanistan.

Since Sharon announced his withdrawal and expulsion plan last year, the

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point has been made repeatedly that the only thing that prevents Gaza from becoming a capital of global terrorism is the IDF troops stationed there and controlling the international border with Egypt.

Last summer Maj.-Gen. (res.) Doron Almog, who headed the Southern Command from 2000 to 2003, wrote in the Middle East Quarterly that if Israel transferred control of Gaza's border with Egypt to the Egyptians or Palestinians, Gaza would become a "mini-Afghanistan."

Former director of Military Intelligence Research and Assessment Department Maj.-Gen. Ya'acov Amidror has warned repeatedly since Sharon unveiled his plan that in the absence of the IDF, Gaza would become a focal point for global terror groups from Hizbullah to al-Qaida.

Sharon has ignored all such warnings, has fired cabinet ministers and cut short the service of security officials who have doubted the wisdom of his withdrawal policies and has plowed ahead, demonizing and criminalizing his detractors.

So what do we expect Sharon to do now that Abbas has announced his intention to prove all Sharon's naysayers correct?

The only thing he can do, if he wishes to continue to force through his plan, is to keep his head down and hope that no one notices what is happening. In this bid he is being ably assisted - to the point of ostensible collusion - by the Israeli media. Not only has the government made no comment on Abbas's offer to move global terror masters from Damascus to Gaza, but the Israeli media, to their shame, have had a near complete blackout on the issue.

Neither Channel 2 nor Channel 10 mentioned it in their news broadcasts Wednesday night. None of Thursday's newspapers had any report of it. Israel Radio devoted less than one minute of laconic coverage to Abbas's offer 10 minutes before the end of its two-hour-long morning news magazine Thursday morning.

Israel's overwhelmingly left-wing media's lockstep support for Sharon's withdrawal plan is being matched by the support Sharon is enjoying from the left wing of the American Jewish community.

According to a report this week in The Forward newspaper, Americans for Peace Now, like the Israel Policy Forum, two of the most left wing groups on the American Jewish political and organizational spectrum, are now actively colluding with the Israeli Embassy in Washington and consulates throughout the US to combat opposition to Sharon's policies among American Jews and American Christian supporters of Israel.

On Monday, Ambassador Danny Ayalon participated in a forum on Capitol Hill sponsored by American Friends of Peace Now together with the PLO representative to Washington and the Jordanian and Egyptian ambassadors.

In June, Vice Premier Ehud Olmert is scheduled to be the keynote speaker at the Israel Policy Forum's annual dinner. In an interview with The Forward, Arye Mekel, the consul-general in New York, said that neutralizing opponents to Sharon's withdrawal policy is "the No. 1 priority on the agenda of the consulates at the moment, and it's the task that is keeping me the busiest." In their discussions in Cairo, the various terror chieftains have been employing the explicit vocabulary of jihad to describe their various positions.

Reportedly on Thursday, Islamic Jihad and Hamas accepted the idea of a "thahadiya" or a temporary cessation of attacks for a defined time period. In jihad rhetoric, the purpose of a "thahadiya" is to regroup to enable the forces of jihad to fight their infidel enemy more successfully in the next round.

The significance of the resort to jihad-speak has been completely ignored by the Israeli politicians and commentators praising Abbas's policy of mainstreaming violent terror organizations.

One of the most absurd aspects of the Cairo discussions as a whole is that in all its concessions to the Palestinians since Abbas replaced Yasser Arafat last November, Israel has justified its moves to the public and to the Americans as payback to Abbas for his achievement of a cease-fire with the terrorists. And yet, if he already has a cease-fire agreement, why is he negotiating one now? And again, if he is a peaceable man, why is he employing the language of jihad together with leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad?

And further, why is Egypt being praised by Israel and the US for hosting this terror parley, whose clear aim is to legitimize terror and whose direct result is Abbas's offer to turn Gaza - where Egypt has supposedly agreed to block terrorists from entering after Israel withdraws - into an epicenter of global terrorism?

Unfortunately, the answer to all of these questions - unasked by the Israeli media - is internal Israeli politics. Once Sharon abandoned his natural support base and preferred instead the embrace of the Left, he has boxed himself into a situation where he can do nothing except advance the Left's agenda of appeasing terrorists.

In moving down this road, Sharon, like Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak before him, rendered his political fortunes completely dependent on the whims of the terrorists.

As a result, he cannot admit that what Abbas is doing is not simply antithetical to peace but also manifests a strategic threat to Israel's security - and indeed, to global security. If Sharon were to tell Israelis the truth about Abbas and his terrorist chums or about their Egyptian sponsors, he would be admitting that all his detractors in his own political camp were right all along.

Given this state of affairs, the inevitable conclusion is that the only thing left for the Israeli public to do is to demand new general elections.

With Sharon now fully committed to a policy that is manifestly dangerous to the state, he must be replaced by a leader who has not so committed himself. It is the only chance that Israel has to prevent the establishment of a new base

for global terror on the outskirts of Ashkelon.
(Jerusalem Post Mar 18)

Looking Beyond the Sasson Report By Moshe Dann

For nearly 40 years Israel has struggled with the issue of what to do with Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip (Yesha). When Israel won the 1967 war, fortune bestowed upon us a gift, with strings attached - a large Arab population which considers itself "Palestinian."

Regaining sovereignty over the historic heartland was seen by some as a divine gift. Others saw it as a burden.

While we saw the victory as fulfillment of biblical prophecy and part of the process of Redemption, our political opponents saw in it the seeds of oppression and occupation. We went out to settle the land; they tried hard to give it away.

That is the context in which the recently released report on "illegal building" by Jews in Yesha, prepared by attorney Talia Sasson, should be understood.

For years Peace Now, Israel's Left, the Arab world and much of the international community have opposed the right of Jews to live in the territories. In fact, a month before the Sasson Report was released, Peace Now referred to its involvement in helping prepare it. Naturally, a report prepared under government auspices, without peace now involvement, would have been more evenhanded and objective.

But Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took no chances. The Sasson Report was ordered like a mafia hit on the settlement enterprise - at the cost of a cool NIS 1 million.

Despite its intent and recommendations - Sasson is one of the severest critics of the settlement movement - the report shows that "illegal" construction in Judea, Samaria and Gaza by Jews, permitted by the Oslo Accords (still the only negotiated agreement), was a national, bipartisan effort supported by every Zionist party, excluding Meretz.

If there was collusion, deceit and trickery it was remarkably open. No secret deals were made; there was no corruption. Money was spent to help citizens do what Zionists do: settle the Land of Israel.

Banks lent mortgages. People paid taxes. Municipal services were provided. That's how governments operate.

The most unfortunate aspect of the Sasson Report is its attempt to turn Jewish settlement into criminal activity. Sasson refers to violations of "local law" - meaning a combination of Jordanian and Israeli rules - concerning required building permits.

Government ministries and the IDF, which gave their tacit approval to settlement building, may not have adhered to official procedures, but in strategic and historical terms that is hardly "illegal."

Sasson herself notes the absence of legal definitions and jurisdictions in Yesha, but then recommends that the outposts be destroyed. It seems that "law" is being concocted (she cites no legal authorities or precedents) and then applied retroactively.

THE GOVERNMENT used the same Catch-22 mechanism a few years ago, when it refused to give broadcasting licenses to Arutz 7 and Radio West, then prosecuted them for being "illegal."

The report charges that "privately owned Palestinian land" was taken, but offers no accompanying documentation or corroboration. Moreover, the report does not even mention extensive illegal building by Arabs not only in Yesha but in the Negev and Galilee.

The number of illegal buildings erected by Jews is a tiny fraction of the illegal building done by Arab citizens of Israel, who are more likely to build illegally than Jews living in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

Focusing only on the Jews of Yesha is not only discriminatory but nationally self-destructive.

What's behind the move?

Commissioning and implementing Sasson's report places Peace Now's agenda at the political center of a Likud-led government. If adopted, the report will further erode the Likud's ideological position (which may be Sharon's intention) and the country will become even more fragmented. Adopting the report is a further step toward the growing centralization of power in Sharon's hands, reinforcing his efforts to isolate, demonize and destroy the settler movement.

Sasson's report is unclear about who has sovereignty in the territories. According to Israeli law, because Yesha is "occupied territory," sovereignty resides with the area's military commander. IDF approval for building infrastructure and providing security would seem to make the Jewish presence "legal."

Sharon himself, in October 1999, declared that outposts were necessary for security to protect the core settlements and roads. The Migron outpost near Psagot in Samaria, for example, was built a few years ago with IDF assistance because of its strategic location overlooking a main road. It saved the army from having to deploy there.

The report raises a fundamental question: Do Jews have the right to live in anywhere in Yesha? And if we are "occupying Palestinian land," by what right do Jews have to live anywhere in Israel?

This may explain why the Left is so adamant about giving up Yesha. They hope that a retreat from the West Bank and Gaza will buy legitimacy for the rest of Israel.

In the process, however, this move undermines the rights of Jews on both sides of the Green Line. As such, the Sasson Report is an attack on Zionism, and on the state itself. (Jerusalem Post Mar 23)
The writer is a journalist living in Jerusalem.

Don't Wait for the next Attack Jerusalem Post Editorial

Now it's just about unanimous. In an interview Sunday with The Jerusalem Post, new EU envoy Ramiro Cibrian-Uzal said of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas: "For the time being he has managed to achieve a cessation of violence... There is a temporary neutralization of terrorist activities against Israel. It's not enough. The final result has to be a situation in which terrorism completely disappears from the area."

A US State Department spokesman was also careful, stating that the cease-fire Abbas brokered in Cairo was "not negative," but that he must go further to achieve "a renunciation of violence, a dismantling of terrorist capabilities and a full and complete embrace of the notion of peaceful engagement and peaceful dialogue."

Completing the encouraging picture, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon termed the result "a positive first step." The picture is of a process that is not easy or without risks, but one that is roughly on schedule and going in the right direction.

Moreover, the US and Israel seem to be in sync over the larger picture, namely that there will be no "shortcuts" in the road map; that is, no skipping over its middle phase of establishing a Palestinian state with provisional borders before entering final status talks in the third phase.

So why are we, just as things seem to be going right, haunted by an unsettling sense of *d j vu*? Our concern is that once again, we have entered a cycle of "helping" a "weak" Palestinian leader by not holding him to standards that all agree are necessary and that the leader in question claims to support.

Now let us agree, up front, that Abbas is, at some level, both weak and worthy of help. Many knowledgeable observers have trouble imagining him fully controlling terrorist elements within his own Fatah, let alone Hamas and Islamic Jihad. And, for all his faults, Abbas not only openly campaigned and was elected on a platform of ending the terror war against Israel, but his principal opponents are hardly a preferable alternative.

Our point, however, is that those who believe that Abbas is weak and worthy should be the first to be concerned about the complacency and lower standards that are already setting in. For all the talk of what Abbas hasn't done and must do, what is actually happening tells a different story.

What we see is that the terrorist groups, which Abbas and his Egyptian hosts legitimate by negotiating with them in the first place, did not even agree to a "cease-fire" (*hudna*), but merely to a "calming" (*tahdiyah*). A cease-fire would not be enough because it leaves the terrorists intact and fully armed. A "calming" is even worse, because it is explicitly no more than a pause to rearm, train and reload – which, security officials report, is already happening.

Even the notion that all this is "not enough" or is "a first step" rings somewhat hollow unless there is reason to believe that a second step will follow. The prime minister is acting as if his refusal to skip steps in the road map is incentive enough for full Palestinian compliance. But why should it be, if all the benefits of compliance – such as generous aid packages and continuing Israeli pullbacks, prisoner releases and confidence-building measures – continue to flow?

At this point, it seems that Abbas will only come under serious financial and diplomatic pressure to use his 60,000 armed men to break up terrorist militias when, God forbid, terrorist attacks resume.

If the US, Europe and Israel all agree that is unacceptable to allow terrorist groups to hold any peace process hostage and threaten Israel and the new Palestinian government, that recognition should be reflected in tangible pressure on Abbas to fulfill his commitments now, not after the next attack. If we wait, we are not strengthening Abbas but instead setting him up for failure, with all the preventable losses in Israeli and Palestinian lives that such failure would entail. (Jerusalem Post Mar 22)

Thank You, Tom DeLay By Caroline Glick

Israelis and Palestinians alike owe a debt of gratitude to US House of Representatives Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Because of DeLay, last week Washington was forced, at least perfunctorily, to engage in a debate that in spite of the more than four-and-a-half-year-old Palestinian terror war, it had until now refused to countenance. It revolves around a single question: Does the Palestinian Authority need financial assistance?

Until now, it has been taken on faith that of course the PA needs money. After all, the Palestinian economy has failed. Unemployment among Palestinians reaches "all-time highs" every month. But will this economic disaster be mitigated by the infusion of billions of dollars of aid into the PA's budget as "everyone who is anyone" seems to think?

In a dispatch in last week's Jerusalem Post, Khaled Abu Toameh gave a glimpse of how the PA makes its budgetary decisions. The Palestinian Legislative Council just decided that at a time when some 80 percent of Gazans live beneath Third World poverty lines, its priority is buying Palestinian politicians new luxury cars.

Each of the PA's 26 ministers is set to receive a \$76,000 Audi, while each of the 86 "mere legislators" will suffice with cars costing the PA budget

\$45,000 apiece. All told, the PA will spend almost \$6 million on vehicles for the Palestinians most able to buy their own luxury cars. And this allocation does not include what must necessarily follow: The politicians will approve a budget for chauffeurs and receive disbursements for gas and insurance for their PA-supplied vehicles.

As well, no doubt, as in the past, senior PA officials will also receive these perks. Since on average each Palestinian ministry has four or five directors-general and another dozen deputy directors-general plus 10 to 20 department heads, it can be safely assumed that in the next few weeks the PLC, (if it hasn't already), will be approving the outlay of tens of millions of dollars for cars and drivers and gas for all of these PA VIPs.

The cars are just one tiny example of the waste, graft and pilfering of PA funds by its politicians, militia commanders and bureaucrats, which have rendered the Palestinians one of the poorest Arab societies in the world today. It should be emphasized that this impoverishment has occurred during a decade which saw the 2.3 million Palestinians receive more international donor aid per capita than has ever been transferred to any group by the international community in the history of foreign aid.

WHEN DISCUSSING the question of international assistance to the PA, it is necessary to relate to two other aspects of PA spending. First is the fact that the billions of dollars that have been stolen from the PA's budget over the years were taken by all the heads of the PA – from Arafat to Abbas to current Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei to Muhammad Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub. That is, it was not only Arafat and his economic adviser Muhammad Rajid who were stealing the billions. Commenting on this state of affairs in 1996, Abbas himself told a senior UN official: "You simply have to accept the fact that we are all corrupt."

Aside from the direct involvement of Abbas and his cronies in grand larceny for their personal enrichment is the fact that over the past 11 years, since the PA was formed as a repository of international aid dollars, millions of dollars in additional funds for the PA and relief institutions have been diverted from development programs to terrorism. Even today Fatah terrorists are paid salaries from the PA. Abbas now wants to extend the terrorist support program by putting Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists on the PA payroll as part of his much-vaunted "reform" program.

Given the PA's endemic corruption – from petty theft to grand larceny – and the fact that much of the stolen monies have gone to financing terrorism, both the Palestinian people and the Israeli people owe a debt of gratitude to DeLay for his efforts over the past several weeks which prevented the transfer of \$200 million in direct American government payments to the PA.

DeLay bucked heads with the Bush administration, the Israeli Embassy, AIPAC and its new partner, Peace Now, and with Jewish members of Congress in order to make sure that none of the \$200 million dollars that the Bush Administration promised to the Palestinians last month will be transferred to the PA budget. All these groups believed, as Labor Party Minister Matan Vilna'i told the Forward newspaper last week, that "Abbas should have some discretion over deciding which projects are funded. It is important that he is perceived as having control – at least of some of the funds – in order to strengthen his authority – to empower him."

That is, all those who attack DeLay believe that "in the interests of peace" the US should support the continuation of the PA's kleptocratic, terror-supporting tyranny over Palestinian society.

That the Israeli government has been pushing Congress to approve direct aid to the PA is made all the more ironic by the fact that the Foreign Ministry launched a strenuous protest of the EU's announcement last week that, in spite of mountains of documentary evidence Israel provided, Brussels could not conclusively determine if some of the billions of dollars it has transferred to the PA since 1994 have been used to finance terrorism.

It is reassuring to know that in this period during which Israeli policy has become near-schizophrenic and the Bush administration appears convinced – in spite of all evidence – that Abbas is a man who can be trusted, at least one powerful man in Washington is not buying into the current peace charade.

Thank you for your courage and your wisdom, Tom DeLay.
(Jerusalem Post Mar 22)

Why We Hold Fast By Yehudit Tayar

Come the Fast of Esther next week, I'll be observing the traditions of the day with a very special intensity. That's because something is getting lost. Something is being ignored here in our beloved Land.

We are in the month of Adar; the month of miracles and joy and unity. Yet here we are today in a nation of disunity, defeatism and sorrow.

Together with many other "settlers" I feel myself being swamped by propaganda from a defeatist and sensationalist press that has been playing up "warnings" about "extremists" in our midst. But the residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza that I know are not extremists; they are patriots.

I've been reading newspaper accounts about informational packets being distributed to our men and women in uniform – our sons and daughters – to prepare them, psychologically, for the horrendous idea that there will be deaths, both among the security forces and the settler community, as the government tries to implement the disengagement plan.

The government has forced our nation into a heartbreaking and surrealistic situation where loyal, law-abiding citizens are being labeled

"dangerous fanatics" while that very government is holding talks with PA officials who themselves are real dangerous fanatics. Mahmoud Abbas is a Holocaust denier; Muhammad Dahlan was responsible for a murderous attack against a school bus in Kfar Darom.

For over four years the residents of Gush Katif and Yesha have lived under a relentless onslaught of Arab violence. Imagine how we feel to now be facing not just those physical threats, but also what we see as psychological warfare aimed at us by the media.

And yet miracles cannot be ignored. How else to explain the support we are receiving both at home and from abroad? How else to explain why, despite everything, there are scores of wonderful families who wish to join us in Katif and in Yesha.

They understand the values the government has forgotten. They understand that protecting the Land of Israel is inextricably linked with protecting the future of the Jewish people. The insurance policy for Jewish continuity is the "settler" presence on the Land.

And even as the government and PA are negotiating yet another agreement, we settlers remember all the previous agreements signed to ensure "quiet." We remember that each time Israeli governments turned over parts of our Land, Jews paid for it with their blood.

We know that just as a tree cannot live without its roots embedded deep in the soil, we, the Jewish people, cannot live without our connection to this Land.

In our generation we have witnessed many miracles. And we have survived numerous wars aimed at Israel's destruction – regardless of its boundaries. We have survived the terrible mistakes made by previous governments, who instead of protecting the interests of the citizens of Israel made concessions that brought us to where we are today.

I do not know whether these mistakes were the result of greed, corruption, weakness or a desire to curry favor with a heartless international community.

Many of us view the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as unrepresentative and politically dishonest. Instead of ensuring that the same mistakes are not repeated, Sharon is initiating even more dangerous plans to uproot thousands of Jews on the basis of talks with Muslim leaders who – we are convinced – remain committed to the continued terror against Israel.

How else to explain the machinations of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak? Is he not the one culpable in the first place for the flow of weapons and terrorists from Egypt into Gaza? Now we read that his forces will "police" the corridor between the Sinai and Gaza.

Yet the most heartbreaking mistake of this government is that its policies are splitting the nation and our army.

We know that without religious and moral responsibility all will be lost. So now, as ever, but especially in the month of Adar, the Hebrew month that symbolizes the miracle of Jewish survival against all odds, we will cling to our religion, our history and our Land.

Thousands of years ago Esther led the Jewish people in a national fast to overturn a threatening decree. This year, as we observe the Fast of Esther, we will be praying that our loyalty will rescue the modern State of Israel. We will be fervently praying that today's Israel stand witness to a new Purim miracle, one resulting in the unity of our people and our Land.

The writer, who lives in Samaria with her family, is a veteran spokesperson for the settlement movement. (Jerusalem Post Mar 20)

'Hechsher' Rewards Ethical Business Practice By Yehezkel Laing

A person walks through the doors of an establishment on Jerusalem's Jaffa Road, checks to see if there is a kashrut certificate on the wall and decides to buy something based on that.

Nothing out of the ordinary there for religious Jews.

Only this isn't a restaurant, it's a hardware store, and the certificate is awarded to businesses based not on whether their food is kosher but whether their business practices are.

Some 30 such certificates already grace the walls of Jerusalem establishments from wedding halls to restaurants and another five to 10 are being added each week.

The business hechsher is the brainchild of a new organization called Ma'aglei Tzedek, or Circles of Justice. Ma'aglei Tzedek was formed a year ago by four observant men and women concerned about social and economic issues in the light of Jewish values - Assaf Banner, Efrat Degani, Shmuli Bing and Hili Tropper, all aged 27.

The organization's roots go back some five years when the group started an organization called Shachen Tov (Good Neighbor).

Once every week or two they gathered and distributed food to up to 1,000 poor families. The organization opened 15 branches countrywide, all run by volunteers.

But they eventually came to feel that their work was dealing too much with the consequences of poverty and not with the cause.

"We saw municipality workers not getting paid for months," says Banner. "We heard social workers talk about how there was a big problem of prostitution and trafficking in women. But we heard no clear Jewish voice speaking out against these problems. We went to some rabbis and they said, 'You're right. Give us a microphone and we will speak out against it.'" And so Ma'aglei Tzedek was born.

The idea of the business hechsher emerged when one of the rabbis associated with Ma'aglei Tzedek, Avi Gisser, of the settlement of Ofra, was at

a wedding at a fancy wedding hall. He was talking to one of his students when the student got up and hugged the waiter who came to serve them. It turned out the student volunteered at an organization called Elem which helps street kids.

The waiter was one of these kids.

The rabbi expressed satisfaction that the troubled youngster had found gainful employment, but his student dampened his enthusiasm. He told him the boy worked for six hours a night usually until midnight or 1 a.m., and received only NIS 70 for his labors. And he had to spend a portion of that on taxi transportation to get to and from the hall.

When Gisser discovered what was going on he wrote an article in the first issue of the Ma'aglei Tzedek quarterly magazine outlining the problem and then suggested the idea of a business hechsher that would protect workers' rights. Customers would then shop only in stores displaying the certificate. The group liked the idea, formed a working committee, met with lawyers, and then wrote out a social contract outlining workers' rights.

"Holders of the certificate must meet seven requirements," says Tropper. "They must pay minimum wage, traveling expenses, overtime, training time, properly register work hours, not employ foreign workers, and provide access for the handicapped." All but handicap access are required by law.

Many leading religious Zionist rabbis, including Ya'acov Ariel, Shlomo Aviner, Aharon Lichtenstein and Mordechai Elon, have signed a declaration in support of the new kashrut certificate. The rabbis are also to issue a declaration saying they will only officiate at weddings which take place at wedding halls with the hechsher. Well-known secular figures have also signed on, such as authors Amos Oz, David Grossman, Meir Shalev, Natan Zach and AB Yehoshua. "It's one of few documents in Israel that people across the spectrum can agree upon," says Banner proudly.

So far the group has launched a pilot of the project in Jerusalem. To begin with it has targeted only wedding halls, cafes and restaurants. "But our goal is that all places of business will have the certificate countrywide," says Banner.

To enforce the kashrut and check for compliance the group has its own volunteer corps of inspectors. These are yeshiva or university students who go through a brief training seminar given by a lawyer and an accountant. Once a week they go in pairs to an assigned establishment, to check the handicapped access and meet with workers.

"We want to create a presence," says Tropper. "Maybe the first or second time the owners will be able to hide things from us but afterwards we will begin noticing any problems." Workers can also call a hot line staffed by a volunteer lawyer to get help.

The response on the part of the business owners, according to Banner, has been twofold.

"Some have said it's great idea and are quickly willing to adopt the certificate. Others say let's wait and see if it's worth our while. We tell them it may cost them a little more to put in an access ramp and pay their workers fairly, but on the other hand they will get free publicity on our Web site, Ma'ariv's Web site, and in the weekly Torah sheet Me'at Min Ha'or [put out by Rabbi Hanan Porat], which will publicize the names of all the 'kosher' establishments."

Banner compares the success of the project to the riddle of which came first, the chicken or the egg. "A lot depends on the public. The more people ask if an establishment has the certificate the more powerful and effective it will become."

One sticking point for the group is Shabbat closure compliance. Shabbat may be the world's first legislated protection for workers' rights, requiring that every person and even animal rests once a week.

What's more, Israeli law requires all establishments to shut on Shabbat. But the group is afraid that if they demand that establishments close on Shabbat they will lose the secular public, and thereby the certificate will lose its universal value. On the other hand, if they fail to demand Shabbat closure, they may lose the religious public.

Among leading religious Zionist rabbis there is disagreement. Ariel says the certificate may not be issued if the establishment is open on Shabbat, while Aviner is willing to permit it. "There is disagreement amongst ourselves and we are discussing it. We haven't decided yet," says Banner. However, they have agreed to grant the business hechsher to non-kosher restaurants and cafes.

The group is involved in a number of other activities. Four times a year it publishes a magazine containing articles by leading rabbis on economic and social issues in light of Jewish law. Some 3,500 copies are printed for each edition, distributed mainly to yeshivot and batei midrash. The latest issue is due out next week. The group also holds workshops by social workers and Bank of Israel economists to educate rabbis about economic and social issues.

Occasional conferences are also held. Their first conference was titled "Social Devastation." "We thought a maximum of 600 people would show up," says Banner. "In the end some 2,000 came, both young and old." Another conference was held recently on prostitution and trafficking in women. (Jerusalem Post Mar 21)
