

ISRAEL NEWS
A collection of the week's news from Israel
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Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation

News...

Diaspora Home-Buying in Israel Takes off By Daniel Kennemer

"Purchases by foreign residents have taken off beyond anybody's wildest dreams," said Stuart Hershkowitz, head of the Bank of Jerusalem's international department. "It's a real revolution. In the past, I dealt with a million-dollar purchase every couple of months. Now, it's almost on a weekly basis."

Foreign residents started a wave of property purchases about 18 months ago, as Palestinian violence began toning down, he said. Interest rates were low, but rising rates have yet to put a dent in the buying frenzy, "so it's not a purely economic phenomenon," he said. "Very few people are buying because they think it's a great investment." Generally, the rule is to look for a 4 percent to 5% return on investment, but return on investment barely reaches 3% to 4% here, Hershkowitz said. Speculation has been largely in Modi'in, because "people think that prices there will go up."

In the first half of the year, the Bank of Jerusalem handled more than NIS 100 million in mortgages to foreign residents, up at least 30% to 40% from a couple years ago, Hershkowitz said. Foreigners are also purchasing bigger and more expensive apartments than in the past, he added, noting that currently the trend is to buy around 200 square meters for close to \$5,000 per square meter, up from 100 to 150 square meters for about \$4,000 a year ago. Residents of North America, France and the UK are particularly active in the local housing market, he said.

The main reason for the wave is the buyers' desire to connect with Israel. "Almost all are not living here, and vast majority do not rent them out, even if they come to Israel only a few days out of the year," he said. "They want to have a place here. Period. You can't imagine how many people have told me, 'I have a dream to own a place in Israel.'"

"All segments of French Jewry are buying. Everybody," Hershkowitz said, noting that their purchases are particularly concentrated in smaller and less expensive apartments in Ashdod, Netanya and other cities. The middle and lower classes are well represented among French homebuyers, he said.

This is in contrast to the pattern dominant among North American and British Jews, in which primarily the upper-middle class and wealthy are buying a second home in Israel. The British Jewish community is the fastest growing segment among foreign homebuyers, but those coming from the US are still the biggest group, buying the most expensive dwellings, Hershkowitz said.

Nonetheless, those interested in purchasing properties are from all over the world, he said, indicating a pile of letters and printed e-mails sent by potential homebuyers. Return addresses ranged from Encino, California and Yulis, Texas, to Allahabad, India. "It's a worldwide Jewish phenomenon," he said.

"Foreign resident purchases have been very centralized - limited to specific neighborhoods, not even cities," Hershkowitz said. No foreign residents are buying in Jerusalem's Kiryat Hayovel neighborhood nor are they investing in Beersheba, "not even in Haifa," he added. Instead, they are buying in Baka, Rehavia, the Geman Colony, Katamon, and Talbiyah in Jerusalem - and to some extent in Herzliya Pituah and Caesarea.

English-speaking haredim are specifically drawn to Jerusalem's Ramat Eshkol and Sha'arei Hessed neighborhoods. "Sha'arei Hessed is the hottest neighborhood in Jerusalem for wealthy haredi Anglos," Hershkowitz said. Netanya's Sderot Nitza is attracting British Jewish vacationers who are building their own community, "not one French or American" resident has purchased along the boulevard.

Middle-class American Jews are buying primarily in Beit Shemesh and Modi'in, or small apartments in Rehavia or Katamon, where 60 to 80 square meters can be bought for less than \$400,000, to be close to family members that have immigrated. "With financing, it's not an impossible task," Hershkowitz said. Until now, this has remained a "very localized phenomenon," he stressed, noting that only a few thousand purchases have been made in the recent wave, "not tens of thousands."

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In those few blocks in Jerusalem and along the coast, however, the Anglo-French wave has raised prices substantially, "in contrast to the rest of Israel, where prices have been down significantly over the last few years. While prices today are not on the rise in Israel as a whole, they are certainly on the rise in those neighborhoods where foreign residents are buying - up 10% to 15% in the last year alone," he said. I.B.I. Group data,

released recently, confirm that in Jerusalem prices rose 10.8% between the first half of 2002 and the second half of 2004. In contrast, prices fell 12.8% in the Northern, 9.8% in the South, and 9.1% in the center of the country. Only in the Sharon, did prices rise, by 2.7%.

Prices in Jerusalem's top neighborhoods and the coastal hot spots are likely to keep rising, as demand increases for what remains a very limited resource, Hershkowitz said. "There's only one Rehavia." Hershkowitz is confident that this is not a bubble. "It will last for a very long time," he predicted. "The trend is just beginning. It's still in its early stages." (Jerusalem Post Aug 21)

Commentary...

The Unbearable Ease of Destruction By Asher Ragen

As family after family is evicted from a home and a community, as the synagogues are emptied and the nurseries abandoned, the scale of destruction and suffering seems overwhelming. Equally overwhelming is the ease with which four decades of work and love invested in communities can be effaced. Is it really that easy to destroy what we have built? Is nothing about this state permanent?

Destruction on this magnitude demands an explanation. Yet search as one might through the "critical" analysis of the barrage of experts and pundits, no rational explanation is to be found. Hopefully the magnitude of suffering witnessed now daily will warn us of those flippant, vacuous answers heard too often. One needs to do better than callously remark, "Well, we couldn't stay there forever". None of us will live forever, either. The "forever" argument, intimating a knowledge of a future decades away, sounds doubly strange coming from a leadership that lacks a vision for the coming January, let alone "forever". It does not explain why this had to happen; why now? Why in this manner? Why was this done without elections? Why did the people not even get a chance to plead for themselves? Surely if forever is our time scale, a few more months would hardly matter.

Perhaps sometimes it is necessary to destroy. But the previous occasion - the destruction of Yamit - should serve as a yardstick. When Yamit was destroyed, it was done for the sake of a peace agreement with the largest Arab nation and the bitterest of enemies. It was done after Saddat arrived in Jerusalem, and after the peace agreement was ratified by an overwhelming majority in the Knesset. There was a real sense that the Middle East was about to change forever. Against such a background, the pain and suffering experienced in Yamit could be contextualized. It offered such tremendous benefits to the entire state, that it truly seemed wrong to let the settlements of Yamit stand in the way.

But what benefits are being offered here? The Palestinians have patiently explained, repeatedly, that this will change nothing. On the contrary, they are now assured of two crucial facts: Terrorism works, and there is no limit to what Israel will give. Some people believe that "at least no soldiers will have to die in Gaza". While I admire a fervent belief in the powers beyond our control, such religious zeal should really not interfere with rational security considerations. When the qassam missiles fall again in Sderot and beyond (and fall they will), Israel will immediately wait until there are significant civilian casualties. It will then threaten to really, really, retaliate. And when (surprise!) this threat is ignored, it will once again send soldiers into Gaza. Except this time they will face a well armed and prepared enemy, intent on exacting the highest price. And as for Sharon's threats - well, not everyone is as frightened by the old man as his party yes-men.

The final straw being grasped at simply illustrates the disengagement

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from logic that this process entails. We are now told that we must leave Gaza because of the "demographic threat". Demography never killed anyone, however. And drawing artificial lines in the sand will not reduce the number of Arabs intent on murdering Jews. Slice and dice the state of Israel as you like, the Jews will remain a miniscule minority in the Middle-East. And at any rate, "demographic threats" materialize over generations. Or not. If one insists on looking for a rational within the confines of academia, he would do better to turn to the department of Psychology.

Because not everyone watching the scenes from Gush Katif is moved to tears. Some people have complaints about the aesthetics of the deportation. These multiple "Miss Manners" have very clear ideas about the etiquette of being thrown out of your home. They lament the "barbaric" lack of decorum exhibited by parents who have just had everything taken from them.

Perhaps this reaction is the most revealing of all. It comes closest to explaining why this is all happening. The rational underpinnings for the "disengagement" are slim indeed. But the irrational, violent hatred aimed at the victims of this madness compensate adequately.

The rhetorical arsenal deployed against the citizens of Gush Katif is overpowering. For the most part, these people have never been convicted of crimes, they serve in the army, run productive business and pay taxes. They have been described alternately as messianic fanatics, religious zealots, or violent threats to democracy. Mostly they are farmers. Throughout these difficult days they behaved with a dignity of spirit that strangely enough is uplifting.

As much as we are learning about the settlers (though anyone who spent any time with them is hardly surprised), we are learning quite a bit more about the Israeli left. To anyone who thought the people on the left simply possess a soul deeply attuned to human suffering; to anyone who believed their cries of empathy for every displaced Palestinian, every uprooted olive tree, were born of a basic human solidarity that just cannot overlook a suffering human being, regardless of the context; this week was an eye-opener. It seems that they are quite able to look upon human suffering and dismiss it with the quip, "Well, they had it coming".

Since the destruction of Gush Katif is not a means to anything, it must be the end in itself. There is a desire, a yearning even, to "take on the settlers" and destroy these communities regardless of any political advantage. The battle has been described by some as "Israelis vs. the Jews". This formulation is worth noting. One might think there was no dichotomy between Israeli and Jew. Israel is the Jewish State, is it not? But for some creating this dichotomy, this clear distinction between Israeli and Jew, is actually the purpose of this entire exercise.

To these people, the main obstacle to achieving peace is the pesky Jewishness of the conflict. Israelis, Jordanians, and Lebanese could get along just fine. It's the Jews and Arabs who can't live in peace. It is not quite that the settlers are being singled out because they are Jewish. Or that everyone who supports their eviction is somehow not Jewish. But the willingness to inflict so much pain, without even telling them why, bespeaks of a fundamental disconnect within the nation. Of people who insist on not viewing the settlers as their own people.

At its core the disengagement is a literary move. The settlers, with their long beards and multiple children, represent the unmistakable Jewishness of the nation. The thousand of soldiers and police men represent the Nation. By manufacturing these images that pit Israeli soldier against Jewish settler, a distinction is created that can never again be ignored. It is the most painful literary exercise in history.

The irony is that on one level they are correct. The core of the problem is the Jewishness of the nation. But by seeking to rip it out of their own body, they are making the most typically Jewish move of all. In this century the assimilated Jews of Germany reacted to the virulent anti-Semitism of the Germans by attacking the uncultured *ostenjuden* from Poland. It was because they insisted on being so damn different that the Germans hated the Jews. But of course when the time came, the Germans made no note of this internal Jewish hairsplitting. The Palestinians are equally unimpressed with this display of enmity that the Jewish state has put on. They are all Jews and they are all settlers, and their fate should be the same. When Abu-Mazen speaks of marching to Jerusalem, he is not thinking of just East Jerusalem.

Among the numerous tragedies that unfolded this week, there is also this: in a year, all of the politicians who supported this plan will be gone. Just like the architects of Oslo, they will be relegated to the overflowing dustbin of Israeli political failures. But the self-inflicted wounds of this psychotic episode will continue to bleed. One can only hope that we they have not been fatal. (Naomi Ragen.com Aug 19)

The writer is a Ph.D candidate at Harvard's School of Near Eastern Studies, a reservist in the IDF, and the son of author Naomi Ragen.

Jewish Gaza Will Be Rebuilt By Michael Freund

The siege of Gaza Jewry has begun. It is hard to believe that we have reached such a point in the nation's history. After so many years of struggle and sacrifice, those once celebrated as pioneers by successive Israeli governments are now jeered at as they face expulsion from their homes.

Yesterday's heroes have been transformed into villains, with Gaza's Jews demonized as obstacles to peace and treated with contempt by much of the media.

Withdrawal under fire, once derided as capitulation to terror, has now become government policy, as the Palestinians celebrate their success in chasing out the Jews and speak of Jerusalem as now being within their reach.

And, in an unprecedented move, the Israel Defense Forces have been deployed against the citizens of their own state, with the express purpose not of defending the Jewish people but of exiling them from parts of their ancestral patrimony.

Is this the end of Zionism? Could it be that the 2,000-year old dream of the Jewish people to return to all parts of our land has been vanquished?

Some Israelis certainly seem to think so. In an article this past Monday entitled "The dream is over," Haaretz commentator Yoel Marcus wrote with barely concealed joy about a "farewell to the idea of Greater Israel," going so far as to label those who still cling to such a vision as "Land of Israel lunatics."

Veteran journalist Nahum Barnea, in a July 1 column in *Yedioth Aharonot*, went a step further, asserting that "Israel can live without Gush Katif. It can even live without Jerusalem."

But I, for one, refuse to call it quits. Despite the heartbreaking scenes from Gush Katif over the past few days, and the folly of the government's withdrawal, this is no time to yield to despair or give up hope.

To be sure, Zionism suffered a terrible blow this week as the Jewish state unilaterally retreated in the face of terror. While many on the Left may be cheering this move, anyone with even an ounce of human, Zionist and Jewish dignity still remaining surely recognizes just how painful and traumatic this turn of events is for the Jewish people.

But this is hardly the first setback we have suffered in our long and sometimes torturous return to Zion, and it is almost certainly not the last.

Indeed, every ideological movement inevitably encounters stumbling blocks and impediments on the road to reaching its goals, and Zionism in this regard is no exception. The real test of a movement's strength lies not in whether it can avoid such difficulties, but in its ability to get up after a fall and continue marching forward.

TAKE GAZA, for example, from which Jews have been expelled seven times in the past two millennia. The Roman emperor Gavius threw out Gaza's Jews in the year 61 CE. Subsequently, they were exiled by the Crusaders, Napoleon, the Ottoman Turks, Arab rioters in 1929, the Egyptian army in 1948 and now by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Each time, however, the Jews eventually returned, guided by their determination and their faith that this land truly does belong to us. They rebuilt Jewish Gaza, the land of our ancestors, and I have no doubt they will do so again one day, once the situation permits.

Economists like to speak about what they call the "elasticity of demand," which is essentially a measure of how consumers respond to changes, such as price.

I would argue that Zionism and the belief in Greater Israel is essentially inelastic, meaning that even in the face of setbacks and defeats the Jewish people will continue to cling to the justness of our cause.

People on the Left such as Marcus and Barnea might very well differ, but their perspective is ultimately narrow and shortsighted, and it ignores the long sweep of Jewish history.

For even in the darkest and most foreboding periods of the Exile, Jews never doubted that they would one day return. Massacres and pogroms, Inquisitions and expulsions never broke our collective spirit, and neither should the events of this week.

The fact is that Sharon and the Left may be able to withdraw from Jewish history, but they cannot withdraw from Jewish destiny. They can bend and twist and stretch classical Zionist and Jewish beliefs, but they cannot break them.

For even in the face of uncertainty the dream of return lives on. It might take years or even decades to achieve, but of one thing we can all be sure: The Jewish people will eventually bounce back from this fiasco, just as we have throughout the millennia.

And soon enough, the sand dunes of Gaza and the hills of northern Samaria will once again most assuredly be ours. (Jerusalem Post Aug 17)

From Beirut to Gush Katif By Evelyn Gordon

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, as The Jerusalem Post correctly noted in its editorial on Tuesday, is hoping that disengagement will produce diplomatic benefits for Israel. As he declared in his speech to the nation Monday night: "Now, the Palestinians [will] bear the burden of proof. They must fight terror organizations, dismantle its infrastructure and show sincere intentions of peace in order to sit with us at the negotiating table. The world awaits the Palestinian response."

But as the editorial also correctly noted, the closest analogue to the current unilateral withdrawal from Gaza is Israel's unilateral pullout from Lebanon in 2000. And if there is one thing that the Lebanese pullout conclusively proved, it is that no such diplomatic benefits will be forthcoming.

When Israel left Lebanon in May 2000, the UN formally certified that it had indeed vacated every inch of Lebanese territory. The government consequently assumed, just as Sharon is now assuming with Gaza, that the onus would henceforth be on Lebanon: Either Hizbullah would have to voluntarily stop attacking Israel, or the Lebanese army would have to deploy in the south to prevent such attacks; if neither of these two things occurred, the world could be expected to treat Lebanon and its Syrian occupiers as the aggressors and support an Israeli military response.

What actually happened, however, was the following:

Hizbullah, defying the UN's certification of the international border, claimed an additional piece of Israeli-held territory for Lebanon and used it as a pretext for continuing attacks against Israel. In the intervening five years, it has kidnapped four Israelis and killed more than two dozen.

The Lebanese army flatly refused to deploy in the south to prevent such attacks.

Despite the continued attacks, the European Union still refuses to declare Hizbullah a terrorist organization.

Every Israeli military response to a Hizbullah attack continues to elicit an immediate UN condemnation.

The international community has refused to exert either diplomatic or economic pressure to persuade Lebanon and Syria (which effectively controlled Lebanon until this spring) to act against Hizbullah. The UN Security Council did call on Hizbullah to disarm, but neither the council nor any member state has threatened penalties for noncompliance.

This July, after Syria withdrew from Lebanon, Hizbullah formally joined the Lebanese government, but announced that it had no intention of either disarming or halting "the resistance" [i.e. attacks] against Israel. The new Lebanese prime minister, Fuad Saniora, then announced that the government supported this decision. Yet even this open defiance of the UN's demand that Hizbullah disarm failed to elicit a condemnation from either the UN or any member state, much less actual pressure on Lebanon.

Even the US, which does consider Hizbullah a terrorist organization, responded not with outrage, but with lavish praise for the new government – "you will not find a more supportive partner than the United States," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Saniora in Beirut – and offers of financial aid. THUS THE pullout from Lebanon, despite being praised by the entire world at the time, produced neither international pressure on Lebanon to halt anti-Israel attacks nor greater international understanding for Israeli military action against such attacks. And the international community is not even pretending that its response to the Gaza pullout will be any different.

Indeed, the world has already made it clear that far from "awaiting the Palestinian response" to Israel's gesture, what it is awaiting is further Israeli concessions.

The UN, the EU and the US have all said openly in recent weeks that following the withdrawal, they expect Israel to move rapidly to realize the road map's plan for a Palestinian state in all of the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem. None of the three has conditioned this demand on positive developments in Gaza following the pullout.

Moreover, pursuant to that goal, they have issued a list of specific concessions that they expect Israel to make immediately after the pullout, all of them potentially devastating to Israel's security. Yet even the US, traditionally both the most sympathetic to Israel's security concerns and the toughest on Palestinian terror, has declared that Israel must make these concessions even if the Palestinian Authority has not yet started taking action against the terrorist organizations:

Israel must give the PA full control of the Gaza-Egyptian border, thereby forfeiting its ability to prevent arms and terrorists from pouring into Gaza after the pullout.

It must also create a "safe passage" between Gaza and the West Bank, thereby forfeiting its ability to prevent terrorists or weapons from pouring into the West Bank via Gaza.

It must preserve the customs union between Gaza and Israel, which allows goods to move between the two without customs inspections, and also end the stringent security inspections it has instituted in place of such checks – thereby forfeiting its ability to prevent arms and explosives from entering Israel via Gaza.

It must substantially increase the number of Gazans allowed to work in Israel, thereby increasing the odds of terrorists entering Israel in the guise of workers.

It must allow the PA security forces to acquire large quantities of additional arms, even though PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly declared that such arms will not be used against the terrorist organizations, and despite the fact that, to date, such arms have been used almost exclusively against Israel.

In short, far from showing greater understanding for Israel's security needs following disengagement, the international community's response has been to demand that Israel concede all the safeguards most essential to its post-pullout security.

But given the Lebanon precedent, that is hardly surprising. The only surprising part is that Sharon, or anyone else, should ever have expected otherwise. (Jerusalem Post Aug 19)

More than Ever, Mr. President, Speak up for Israel By Gary Bauer

During her recent trip to the Middle East, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas for having taken "important steps" against terrorism.

This statement, in addition to others made by senior members of the Bush administration, has produced considerable disquiet among those committed to fighting terror and devoted to the realization of a secure and sovereign Jewish state.

In the past, the Bush administration publicly acknowledged that Israel should not be expected to negotiate with the late PA leader Yasser Arafat because he was duplicitous and remained committed to employing armed violence as a principal vehicle by which to achieve his goals. Yet today it maintains that Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, is a worthy partner with whom Israel can achieve a settlement.

Would this were the case. The facts on the ground, however, tell a different story. Certainly, Abbas is more diplomatically astute than was Arafat, but in reality they are birds of a feather. Never at any time has Abbas declared his objection to terror on moral grounds. While he repeats the mantra that terror is counter to Palestinian interests, he at once unequivocally declares that he has no intention of dismantling the terrorist infrastructure, including even elements of Fatah, the terrorist subsidiary of his own organization.

Abbas has pleaded with those who organize suicide bombings – Hamas and Islamic Jihad – to take part in his government, and has even invited Hamas terrorists to join his security forces. Would President George W. Bush authorize his administration to negotiate with a leader who was trying to enroll Osama bin Laden's killers to join his army?

Following the London terror attacks, Prime Minister Tony Blair stated it was a delusion to believe socioeconomic status alone was responsible for the growth of terror. It is an evil ideology, he said, which breeds in the religious, educational and social structure of certain societies which act as incubators for terror. And the fact of the matter is that the PA today remains one of the world's greatest breeding grounds for transforming human beings into lethal weapons.

DESPITE THE culture of terror perpetuated by the PA, the US provides substantial grants to the PA and recently authorized for it a major portion of the \$3 billion annual package being provided by the G8 of industrialized nations. It is troubling that these grants were not accompanied by a caveat that the PA first be obliged to dismantle the terror infrastructure, end the incitement and ensure these funds be monitored in a transparent manner to guarantee they will not once more be funneled into terror activities or the secret bank accounts of corrupt Palestinian officials.

It is thus incumbent upon Bush to ensure that the provision of these funds is made conditional on the PA undertaking corrective measures to curtail terror.

The road map, to which Israel has committed itself, visualizes the goal of a Palestinian state existing peacefully side by side with Israel. But as Israel withdraws from Gaza and northern Samaria, terrorism is again escalating. Israeli civilians have been subjected to mortar and rocket attacks, and suicide bombers have been dispatched to commit carnage and create mayhem.

Under such circumstances the creation of what could only be described as a terror state controlled by virtual warlords would only send a message to terrorists the world over that terror does indeed pay.

In his efforts to reassure the Israeli public, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has been quoting Bush that Israel should be entitled to retain the major settlement blocs in the context of a final settlement. However, Rice has recently been giving particular emphasis to the fact that this would depend on Palestinian consent, which will undoubtedly not be forthcoming.

It is critical for the president to voice unqualified support for Israel's retention of these settlement blocs, which are of existential importance to the Jewish state's very future.

MEANWHILE, Abbas continues to reiterate that no solution can ever be found to the Israeli-Palestinian impasse unless Israel agrees to the "right of return" of the descendants of the Arabs who fled the region during the 1948 war. This is more an ideological than a political position, reflecting a

determination never to come to terms with Israel as a sovereign Jewish state.

"The right of return" is, in fact, a prescription for the demographic destruction of the Jewish state. Accordingly, it would be highly constructive for the president to forthrightly and explicitly restate that there is no validity to the Palestinian demand for the right of return.

Israel needs the moral and political backing the US alone can provide.

In view of the domestic turmoil Israel is enduring with the displacement of thousands of citizens from their homes, and due to the increasing statements emanating from figures in the Bush administration which might imply a return to the discredited policies of moral equivalency (whereby the distinction between the terrorists and their victims is frequently obfuscated), this is the appropriate moment for Bush to speak out and convey words of reassurance to the Israeli public.

This would, furthermore, also be a good time to send a message to the world reiterating that the US will never come to terms with those who have still to learn that the appeasement of evil and terror is a prescription for disaster. (Jerusalem Post Aug 18)

The writer is president of American Values. This piece is derived from a letter to Bush co-signed by the writer and Isi Leibler.

Words Left Unsaid By Herb Keinon

For Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, loving the settlements means never having to say you're sorry. That, at least, is what emerged from his two public appearances during the past dramatic week - the first during his taped address Monday, on the eve of disengagement, and the second at a press conference with President Moshe Katsav on Wednesday, as the heartbreaking pictures began flowing in from Gush Katif.

Sharon was unable in either case to mouth words Katsav said last week: "I apologize." He was unable to say "I'm sorry for having urged you to go to Gush Katif; I'm sorry for having raised expectations that you could remain there forever; I'm sorry that by changing my mind I have caused you so much pain and sorrow."

He just couldn't do it. He could express his admiration of the settlers, say that they were "exceptional," the "best people we have." He could praise them for their achievements. He could laud them for their place in Israel's history. He could try to give them solace by saying that their blood, sweat and tears over all the years - literally - were not in vain. He could take all the responsibility on his shoulders-something expected of a general of his reputation-telling them to blame or criticize him, but not to take it out on the soldiers or police.

But he couldn't apologize. To apologize, pointed out one of his top aides, would be to admit error, and that is something he simply doesn't feel is the case. To apologize, the aid added, would mean admitting that the entire settlement enterprise, something he was so instrumental in setting up, was an error. He wouldn't admit it because he doesn't believe it.

He thinks the times have changed, the data have changed, the world situation has changed, but Sharon doesn't think that the movement of men and materiel into densely populated Arab areas after 1967 was a mistake. After all, Sharon says continuously, look what the settlement movement accomplished: the Cave of the Patriarchs and Rachel's Tomb are in Jewish hands; the US recognizes both that the Palestinian refugees won't be able to return to pre-1967 Israel, and that the major settlement blocs will remain a part of Israel forever.

SHARON IS no orator. This much was clear from the five-minute address-billed beforehand as the speech of his lifetime-which he delivered Monday. He didn't give what so many were waiting to hear: an in depth, point-by-point explanation for his dramatic change of heart. Instead, he merely telegraphed a few issues: demographic realities, absence of a true Palestinian negotiating partner, defensible lines, taking the diplomatic initiative, setting a new domestic agenda.

Generals don't need to explain. They command, and the troops follow. The way Sharon has marketed his plan to the nation, or hasn't, shows that even though he may have some high-powered political marketing people around him, this particular area of expertise is not necessarily his business. Sharon's two predecessors-Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak-loved to talk. When they held the job of prime minister, they spoke to the nation non-stop on the morning radio shows and the evening news broadcasts. They came to political power in the cellular phone-age and were in constant contact, some would say too much.

They created the image of prime-minister-as-regular-guy talking about everything in front of every microphone, not some somber father-figure who was only heard from when there was something really important and dramatic to say. Sharon has gone to the other extreme. He doesn't feel the need to talk much, even when the nation is thirsting for words.

One of the criticisms of his policy is that he hasn't adequately explained why he launched it. No one speech, interview or press conference has laid out in a systematic fashion his thinking and logic. Which doesn't mean that the logic doesn't exist. It's just that the country hasn't been presented with it. To glean the logic, one needs to listen to what both he and his top aide, Dov Weisglass, have said publicly over the last 19 months in speeches, interviews,

statements and press conferences.

Essentially, five key points emerge. First of all, it is important to remember what was happening in the country when the plan was launched in the Fall of 2003. The two key assets that Sharon had said were essential in beating the Palestinians during this terror war-internal unity and a sympathetic ear in Washington-were starting to unravel. Domestically the Fall of 2003 was the time of the "pilots" letter, when a group of reserve pilots said they were not willing to take part in targeted assassinations.

It was also when a group of reservists in elite units publicly said they would no longer participate in operations in the West Bank. Internationally it was a time of impatience with the conflict, growing international isolation and condemnation of the decision to build the security fence. It was the time of Yossi Beilin's Geneva initiative, which received a sympathetic hearing around the world, including in Washington, where Colin Powell, then secretary of state, met the initiators. Sharon feared the Geneva and other outside initiatives, and felt compelled to initiate something of his own in order to set the pace and rhythm.

He couldn't wait for the Palestinians, since Yasser Arafat was still in charge and it was impossible to deal with him, so he had to do something on his own. Unilateral disengagement was born. Secondly, the conflict with the Palestinians was in full force, and Israel needed room to conduct the battle militarily in the way it felt necessary. There was a lingering fear that, as in the country's past wars, just as Israel was turning the tide on the battlefield, the world would step in and rein the IDF in.

The war was still raging in 2003, although Israel had begun to bring down the numbers of Israeli dead. Still, Sharon needed leeway from the US to carry out the measures he felt necessary to beat the terrorists-the targeted assassinations, the nightly incursions and arrests, the roadblocks and construction of the security barrier.

Disengagement helped him gain that leeway. The US was calling for a political horizon, and disengagement provided one. With this political horizon, US President George W. Bush could keep at bay the Europeans-clamoring for him to restrain Sharon-by saying, "sure, Sharon is using tough measures, but he is dangling something truly significant out there at the end of the stick: withdrawal from Gaza."

DEMOGRAPHICS, AS Sharon alluded to Monday, was also a key consideration. There are some 5.3 million Jews in Israel, as well as some 1.3 million Arabs. There are another 1.3 million Palestinians in Gaza, and depending on whose numbers are believed-between another 1.8 to 2.8 million Palestinians in the West Bank. However you count the Palestinians, the picture is that either now-as some claim-or within the next 10-15 years, there will be more Arabs than Jews from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. This is an untenable situation for a country that wants to retain its Jewish and democratic character, and Sharon hopes that by lopping off 1.3 million Palestinians, he will buy the country some demographic breathing room.

Then there is the argument about defensible lines that Sharon mentioned briefly Monday. According to a security assessment provided in 2004, of the 22,500 various individual types of attacks that had taken place from September 2000 to July 2004-stabbings, shootings and bombings-some 57 percent took place in Gaza against soldiers or the Jews living there. Sharon, again drawing from his deep military well, looked at the situation and concluded it was untenable in the long term, and that being inside Gaza provided the Palestinians with a huge target.

Withdraw, remove the target and-according to this logic-you reduce the fatalities. And, finally, the plan was motivated by the thinking that after disengagement, Israel could sit behind the new lines for as long as it would take for the Palestinians to get their house in order. Sharon has long been an advocate of long-term interim agreements.

No quick fixes; rather, see how things progress over the long term. Withdraw from Gaza, he concluded, and then Israel would be able to sit comfortably in this new "parking place" until the Palestinians would dismantle the terrorist infrastructure, reform, and prove to the world that they could behave in a responsible manner. "Now the Palestinians bear the burden of proof," he told the nation Monday night. "They must fight terror organizations, dismantle its infrastructure and show sincere intentions of peace in order to sit with us at the negotiating table. The world awaits the Palestinian response-a hand offered in peace or continued terrorist fire. To a hand offered in peace, we will respond with an olive branch. But if they choose fire, we will respond with fire, more severe than ever."

That was the rhetorical high-point of Sharon's brief address, an address in which rather than systematically explain his program, he harkened back to his military training-again-and essentially said simple: "Follow me."

"The responsibility for the future of Israel rests on my shoulders," he said. "I initiated the plan because I concluded that this action is vital for Israel. Believe me, the extent of pain that I feel at this act is equal only to the measure of resolved recognition that it was something that had to be done."

"Follow me," said the former paratroop commander. "Trust me," he implied. "I'm Ariel Sharon. I know what I'm doing." (Jerusalem Post Aug 21)