



Jerusalem 6:44; Toronto 8:06

Commentary...

What Disengagement Has Already 'Achieved'

By Evelyn Gordon

When Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced his disengagement plan last December, he declared that it would provide both diplomatic and security benefits for Israel. Two developments last week provide a basis for assessing the plan's effect on both these realms to date – and the results are grim.

Diplomatically, the plan has certainly not softened Europe's attitude, as the EU's unanimous vote against Israel in last month's UN resolution on the separation fence demonstrated. But in fairness, only diehard optimists ever expected it to do so.

What Sharon and other disengagement supporters trumpeted as the plan's real diplomatic achievement was President George W. Bush's April letter stating that any "realistic" Israeli-Palestinian agreement should include Israeli annexation of "existing major Israeli population centers" in the West Bank.

Disengagement opponents offered various reasons for dismissing the letter's significance. The more charitable merely pointed out that it was nothing new; the draft peace plan proposed by then president Bill Clinton in December 2000 also assigned the major West Bank settlement blocs to Israel.

The less charitable termed the letter a carefully-worded sham that did not actually guarantee American support for this outcome. Last week, Washington's reaction to a plan to build 600 apartments in Ma'aleh Adumim proved that the uncharitable were right: The Bush administration, far from having acknowledged Israel's claim to the major settlements, continues to view them as illegal entities where Israelis have no right to live.

If there is one settlement above all others that "realities on the ground" (to quote Bush's letter) dictate annexing to Israel, it is Ma'aleh Adumim. Located 10 minutes from Jerusalem, it is the largest settlement in the territories, with some 30,000 residents.

And if it will indeed ultimately be Israeli, there is no reason to prevent additional Israelis from moving there.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration found the idea of even 600 new apartments – a minuscule increase in the town's size – intolerable, and immediately began pressuring Israel to scrap the plan.

State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher declared that the roadmap obligates Israel to freeze all settlement construction, and Ma'aleh Adumim is no exception. Other administration officials, speaking off the record, announced that the US is considering sending an open letter of reprimand to Israel, and one threatened that if Bush is reelected, "he will no longer treat Sharon as he did in the first term."

What makes this reaction even more astonishing is that the road map imposes obligations not only on Israel, but also on the Palestinians – and the Bush administration would be the first to acknowledge that the Palestinians have blatantly ignored theirs, which include fighting terror, ending incitement and reforming their government.

Thus not only does the US continue to reject Israel's claim to Ma'aleh Adumim, it views this rejection as an absolute value that must be upheld regardless of Palestinian noncompliance with the road map.

If that is a diplomatic "achievement," I hate to imagine what a failure looks like.

ON THE security front, disengagement's "achievements" have been similar – as was evident from statistics released by the army last week.

The statistics were meant to proclaim the army's success: In the first seven months of 2004, fewer Israelis were killed in Israel than in the territories, for the first time since the Palestinian violence began almost four years ago.

But the data also revealed a more troubling first: For the first time, more Israelis died in Gaza than in the West Bank. From September 2000 until the end of 2003, the West Bank accounted for 29 percent of Israeli fatalities, compared to Gaza's 11 percent. But in the first seven months of 2004, Gaza accounted for 38 percent of fatalities, compared to the West Bank's 13 percent.

This is partly due to the army's success in fighting terror in the West Bank.

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*

But it also reflects an increase in fatalities in Gaza in absolute terms.

In all of 2003, for instance, not a single civilian was killed in Gaza. In the first seven months of 2004, seven were killed. In total, Israel lost an average of 2.6 people a month in Gaza through the end of 2003; in the last seven months, the average has jumped to 3.7.

The army attributes this higher casualty rate to a marked increase in

the number of Palestinian attacks.

There has also been a significant increase in the number of attacks inside Israel that originated from Gaza: Not only did Gazan terrorists perpetrate their first successful suicide bombing inside Israel in March, launches of Kassam rockets from Gaza into Israel have soared: Some 30 Kassams landed in Israel in July compared to a total of about 300, or an average of 6.6 a month, in the previous 45 months.

Both the army and civilian analysts, including many disengagement supporters, attribute the surge in attacks in Gaza to the disengagement plan.

Explanations vary: Some say the Palestinians want to prove that they are forcing Israel out of Gaza; some say Palestinian factions are battling for control of the Strip following Israel's departure; some say the planned withdrawal has simply persuaded the Palestinians that terrorism works. But there is no disagreement about the conclusion:

The disengagement plan, far from enhancing Israel's security, has thus far contributed to a marked increase in Gazan terrorism.

Since the plan has not yet been implemented, any assessment must necessarily be an interim one. But to date, the plan's "achievements" in both the diplomatic and the security spheres have been nonexistent to negative.

That ought to be reason enough for disengagement supporters to have some second thoughts. (Jerusalem Post Aug 10)

What about Reform? Jerusalem Post Editorial

The Union for Reform Judaism, which describes itself as "the largest grass-roots Jewish organization in North America," has, through its Washington-based Religious Action Center, issued a manifesto declaring its political positions vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, it has forwarded this manifesto to US Secretary of State Colin Powell, under the signature of Rabbi David Saperstein, who heads the Action Center.

Saperstein "reaffirms the Union's complete and unqualified condemnation of Palestinian terrorism against innocent Israeli civilians." It "supports the construction of the security barrier," albeit one that hews as close as possible to the Green Line. It objects to the recent ruling by the International Court of Justice.

It "salutes the relentless courage of Israel's citizens." It reaffirms "that the greatest impediment to peace is terrorism," and it criticizes the Palestinian Authority, "and in particular President Yasser Arafat, [for having] failed to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure." Finally, it pledges maximum efforts "to counter aggressively the hatred and falsehoods against Israel that appear so frequently in the Arab and international media."

So much is unexceptionable. Then there is the predictable. The authors of the manifesto "cannot ignore the suffering of the Palestinians." "Innocent civilians have been killed regularly as Israel retaliates against terrorist targets purposefully situated in civilian populations." "Life under military control in the West Bank often has been harsh...." "Many of Israel's military responses have exacerbated the situation, generating more enmity, anger, and violent responses than it has undermined terrorism." And so on.

Now to the problematic. The manifesto calls on the US (and Canada) to "work closely with Israel in strengthening the ability of the Palestinian Authority to control Gaza, rather than leaving a power vacuum that will be filled by terrorist groups." Furthermore, it urges these governments to "expedite the process of withdrawal while continuing to push for direct negotiations with the Palestinians." As Saperstein explained to The Forward, "any time you're sitting at the table, it's an opportunity."

We understand the primary purpose of these manifestos is to express an attitude, not influence policy. That attitude is: We stand by Israel. We care about the Palestinians. We believe in dialogue. We are for peace. Such views generally reflect well on the people expressing it.

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But they also betray a certain narcissism. Israeli citizens and decision makers would also cherish the luxury of moral stainlessness. But when one is caught up in the practical difficulties and moral ambiguities of fighting a terror war, it's a luxury Israelis can't afford quite as easily as Rabbi Saperstein.

How, for instance, is Israel to negotiate directly with Palestinians, when by the manifesto's own admission "Arafat has failed to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure"? In fact, Arafat has not merely failed to dismantle the infrastructure. He has actively encouraged terrorism through both commission and omission, in word and in deed. The manifesto's authors insist there are Palestinian interlocutors to be found. This may be true, but what's the point of talking with them if they are ultimately accountable to Arafat? Similarly, what's the point of strengthening the Palestinian Authority so that it can fight terror, when the Authority itself abets terror?

Indeed, reading through the manifesto, one gets the sense the authors just don't get it. The purpose of disengagement is not to serve as a preface to direct negotiation, but as an alternative to it. In his Herzliya address in December, Sharon gave the Palestinians a clear choice: Either they negotiate in good faith, and promptly meet their obligations under the road map, or he would take unilateral steps. The Palestinians scoffed. Consequences followed.

It should be clear by now that Israel is not going to strike a deal with the Palestinians as long as Arafat is in charge – one reason The New York Times recently editorialized for his resignation. Nor will a deal be concluded as long as the Palestinians continue to insist on the "right of return" in any form. In other words, a final-status agreement is not in the cards.

What Israel can do, and is doing, is to work toward an interim solution that offers Israelis a respite from violence and the Palestinians an opportunity to reform. This may upset the American Reform movement's sense of the ideal. But we'll take clear thinking over moral posturing any day. (Jerusalem Post Aug 10)

'How Do You Know?' By Sarah Honig

Why does small, uniquely beleaguered Israel achieve so much more?

When my daughter was six years old, she once demanded to know where her beloved grandmother went after she died. "To heaven," I replied.

"How do you know?" came the merciless follow-up question.

"That's where people's souls go," I exasperatedly sought to extricate myself.

But then came the clincher: "How do you know? Did a dead person ever come back to say so?"

I recalled that exchange a few days ago when viewing clips from official PA television, compliments of the Palestinian Media Watch.

Two personable preteen schoolgirls were discussing shuhada (martyrdom) in deadly earnestness, praising the virtues of the paradise guaranteed them if they explosively terminate their earthly existence in the holy mission of killing Jews. The proudly approving adult moderator asked encouraging leading questions in a serene studio setting. Children phoning in chimed cheerfully and extolled self-destruction and the pleasures of the reward awaiting them in the hereafter. No participant came close to asking what my kid had asked at a much younger age.

That in a nutshell is the yawning cultural chasm between us and those whose *raison d'être* is our annihilation. Any talk of concessions and compromise with them is senseless wishful thinking, if not life-threatening delusion.

Even if Palestinian grown-ups would, for various expediencies, ever opt to temporarily exploit our "confidence-building gestures" and unilateral pullbacks, their progeny wouldn't be placidly reconciled to our continued existence. In all likelihood it'll indoctrinate its own offspring and transmit hate via the societal genetic code.

PATV specializes in song clips passionately praising those who have already blown themselves up or youngsters leaving letters to their parents before undertaking pretend-suicide bombing missions themselves. One need only watch this frightening fare to realize that terror isn't the result of PA inability to control renegades. The PA actively sponsors, recruits, and trains the next generation of mindless murderers.

NEW FILM footage from Arafatland's summer camps show 10-year-olds forced to jump through flaming hoops. They crawl under barbed wire, learn to toss grenades, drill roadside ambushing maneuvers, practice attacking Jewish drivers, flinging them brutally to the ground and stomping them, while yelling in collective hysteria: "This is what'll be done to the enemy."

After such bloodcurdling diversions, the campers participate in a "graduation" ceremony. They march to the podium, salute, and are handed diplomas. Brainwashing is never more effective than at a young age. It cannot be imagined that any of these underage trainees could shed what was inculcated into them and become peace-loving folk who'll broad-mindedly tolerate Jewish neighbors (even if the latter all cower behind the Green Line).

Worse yet, this purposely promoted mass-psychosis isn't limited only to the territories immediately adjacent to our homes in this narrow oddly shaped state, where no center of habitation is too distant from the juvenile pre-programmed human guided missiles.

German police recently raided a mosque in Frankfurt and confiscated videos

imported from oil-rich Gulf states in which children enthusiastically act out the beheading of American Nick Berg – down to the most gruesome detail.

These were shown to small fry in religious instruction classes. They're a hit all over the Muslim world, including in its new European outposts.

This bloodlust appears too widespread to be simplistically ascribed to Jewish oppressors who drive desperate Palestinians to the ultimate extreme.

Those who slander Israel with much alacrity, both at home and abroad, would do well to ponder the UN's Human Development Index (calculated on the basis of such factors as life expectancy, adult literacy, income, and women's status). Israel, despite its objective tribulations, emerges as the 22nd best place to live from a list of 177 states. All the Arab countries feature far below us.

The PA occupies 102nd place, ahead of our free and independent neighbors Syria (106) and Egypt (120), who lose no opportunity to denigrate Israel but can hardly blame their backwardness on "Zionist occupation." The plain fact is that the Palestinians' association with awful Israel leaves them considerably better off than their counterparts in all too many Arab lands.

If any freethinkers remain in the Arab world, they ought to ask themselves where their national energies flow and why a small, uniquely beleaguered state like Israel achieves so much more. Resorting to facile excuses from the tendentious and tattered anti-imperialist lexicon is a cop-out.

The true measure of human development is that there's no mind control in our midst, that dissent and debate are integral to Jewish tradition, that in over three millennia of Jewish history no tyranny could take root among us, that no one can turn our kids into homicidal automatons, that our little girls don't dream of dying, that they don't believe everything they hear (not even from their mothers), and that they insistently inquire "How do you know?" (Jerusalem Post Aug 9)

Stop Transfer By Ron Breiman

Unlike Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin, whose failed plans gambled on tranquilizing the public with promises of "peace" and "a new Middle East," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon doesn't even bother to use anesthetic verbiage before laying his patients on the operating table.

From Beilin to Sharon, the common denominator is transfer. Forget the neutral terms "disengagement," or "evacuation" or "dismantlement." We are talking about transfer. The transfer of Jews from their homes in their own country because they are Jews. If that's not racism, what is?

HERE IS what we can do to stop the transfer scheme:

Call transfer by its rightful name. Don't launder it with bland synonyms that sweeten the horrible decree.

Make it clear that transfer is illegal. You can't transfer human beings from their homes because of their religion or nationality.

And if a democratic majority in the Knesset supports it? Then the rule of thumb, decided in the past by the saintly leaders of the Left who threatened to lie down beneath the wheels of any truck designated to transfer Arabs, is this: Such a move is anti-democratic and forbidden, and impossible to carry out.

All those who support transfer should first practice on transferring Arab settlements sitting in the center of Jewish cities, to see if it's doable before they have the nerve to try transferring Jewish settlements.

Make it clear that the transfer isn't feasible economically. Even those evacuated willingly are entitled to decide where they want to live, and to receive compensation accordingly, and not be shifted to some godforsaken backwater that will be chosen for them.

That's why the intended "evacuees" should make it clear that they are willing to be "evacuated" only to Herzliya Pituah, for example, and ask for and receive compensation at that level. There would never be enough money for that kind of transfer.

Make it clear that a transfer isn't possible militarily. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Interior Minister Tzahi Hanegbi know this. That's why they are trying to pass jurisdiction over accomplishing this contemptible task to each other like a hot potato.

Israel doesn't have the manpower to accomplish such a cruel ethnic cleansing. It is not feasible morally or numerically.

The minimum number would be five to one between enforcers and the victims – that is to say, a special force of 40,000 men, larger than the entire Israeli police force, or a huge chunk of the IDF.

Place human shields around neighborhoods designated to be transferred in numbers that will make it a "mission impossible."

Prevent provocation and injury to soldiers and policemen. These would play into the hands of the transfer architects and be used as incitement against the Israeli majority.

One of the slogans that routinely accompany "peace plans" is the

ensuring of Israel's survival as a sovereign Jewish, democratic state.

The opposite is true. The current plan will ensure Israel is neither sovereign, nor Jewish, nor a democracy.

Clarify that transfer will destroy Israel as a sovereign state. A state that retreats in the face of terror, that accepts terrorist ultimatums and burrows itself into the ground or, in the words of Hizbullah's Hassan Nasrallah, "behind spider web barriers," will find itself swept out of the Middle East by the fire of terrorism ignited in the wake of the revelation of its weakness.

Clarify that transfer will destroy Israel as Jewish state: He who relinquishes claims to the Temple Mount relinquishes all claim to the land of Israel.

Jerusalem and the Temple Mount are the heart of the Jewish people; Judea and Samaria are its arteries; not Tel Aviv or Herzliya. On the 100th anniversary of Herzl's death it is well to remember that Zionism arose in order to gather the People of Israel into the Land of Israel, before there was a "Green Line, or "occupied territories," or "the occupation."

An Israel that relinquishes the Temple Mount and recognizes it as being "abroad" is not a state and is not Jewish.

Finally, how would we react if the government of France decided that it was forbidden for Jews to live in half of Paris? Yet what is not permissible in France is permissible in Israel?

The transfer of Jews in Israel gives the stamp of approval to anti-Semitism the world over. Sharon can't call on French Jews to make aliya when he is about to transfer those Jews who are already here. (Jerusalem Post Aug 11)

The writer is chairman of Professors for a Strong Israel.

Demography and Demagoguery By Uzi Arad

Yonatan Bassi, head of the disengagement administration, justified the pullout plan (in Globes, July 29) by saying that in Gaza, "there used to be 600,000 Arabs. Now there are 1.4 million people there ... in a few more years what happened to South Africa will happen to us. The UN will decide that either we give the right to vote to everyone or we will be outcasts from the family of nations. Absurdly, the greatest danger that could befall us ... is that the intifada would end - because then we would fall asleep and wake up to a binational state."

That is the entire apocalyptic demographic doctrine on one demagogic leg. But that apocalyptic scenario has nothing at all to do with the evacuation of Gaza. True, the disengagement plan makes claims about improving Israel's demographic situation, but it is not clear how. Will the evacuation of 7,000 Israelis from Gaza change the estimate that there will be 2.3 million Arabs there in 2020 or 5.1 million in 2050? Will giving up the disengagement plan oblige Israel to grant the Palestinians the right to vote in Israel? Is it plausible that the UN, which has always favored a two-state partition, would convert to the one-state principle, against the majority of countries of the world, including Israel and the U.S.?

In effect, for the last decade, all Israeli governments have been implementing political disengagement from the Palestinian population of the territories. The cities and towns of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have long since been evacuated. The number of Palestinians between the river and sea is no longer relevant to Israel being a Jewish democratic state. The demographic process in the territories thus has become the main problem of the Palestinians, who anyway are finding it difficult to build a properly functioning administration and an economy that can sustain itself.

A population that doubles itself every generation and is unable to grow its economy at a pace that keeps up with the demographic growth rate is dooming itself to ever worsening poverty and backwardness. The problem of the residents of Gaza is not "one man, one vote." In any case they have the right to vote in Palestinian Authority institutions. The essence of the Gaza problem was and remains "one man, one job," and the disengagement plan is only going to aggravate that problem.

The Arab Human Development Report found that a third of the population in the Arab world earns less than \$2 a day. It's double that in Gaza. If they wanted, the Palestinians could take a lesson from several states in the region that managed to reduce their birth rates. While the current birth rate among Palestinians is 5.9 children per woman (in Gaza, it reaches 6.6), in Egypt it has dropped to 2.9, in Tunisia to 2.1, in Syria to 3.6, in Lebanon to 2.2, and in Jordan to 4.3. Iran has also seen a dramatic drop to 2.1 children per woman. The international institutions that support the Palestinians would do well by linking their support to more effective family planning among Palestinians, as was demanded of Egypt.

It is also important that the American and European programs to advance the Middle East, as formulated at various summits and inspired by the Arab Human Development Report and which seek to improve freedoms, education and women's status in the Arab world - reach the Palestinians as well. Such reforms, alongside the reduction of the birth rate to the regional average, could stabilize the Palestinians' demographic problem, which is more theirs than it is Israel's at this point.

But it is already clear that, first of all, there is no point in waving around an apocalyptic demographic scenario from which Israel already extricated itself.

And there certainly should not be any comparisons to South Africa or hollow threats about a binational state, as the Palestinian propagandists are prone to make. Certainly, one should not express hope for the intifada to continue, not even for rhetorical purposes.

And secondly, if the Palestinians do not restrain their demographic growth, and continue their armed and international campaigns against Israel, the apocalypse could very well be theirs. It is in their interest and ours that this does not happen. (Haaretz Aug 6)

The Defining Issue : UN & Israel By Melanie Phillips

The world terror supporters' club, aka the UN, has told Israel to tear down its security barrier. This follows the ruling by the terror court, the ICJ, that the barrier is illegal (see below). Neither of these decisions is binding, but they are intended to build up the global demonisation of Israel as a pariah state, the necessary prelude to its destruction. Meanwhile, in the US where Christian support for Israel is so strong, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church has equated Israel with apartheid South Africa and called for universal divestment from it.

These developments all signal a world that is descending ever deeper into a terrifying moral darkness. If the Jews have always been a society's pit canaries whose fate is an early warning of that society's wider collapse, Israel is surely the canary in the mine of the world. The way it is being treated bespeaks a mortal sickness. Israel is the victim of a continuing, half-century attempt to annihilate it. Yet its attempts to defend itself are denounced and vilified, its activities are misrepresented and distorted, it is judged by malign double standards to paint it falsely as a rogue state -- and all the while those doing so look the other way while a genocide is perpetrated in Sudan, sanitised even in today's papers as merely a 'humanitarian' catastrophe. The moral inversion involved was captured in a remark by Mark Steyn in yesterday's Telegraph:

"The UN system is broken beyond repair. In May, even as its proxies were getting stuck into their ethnic cleansing in Darfur, Sudan was elected to a three-year term on the UN Human Rights Commission. This isn't an aberration: Zimbabwe is also a member. The very structure of the organisation, under which countries vote in regional blocs, encourages such affronts to decency."

This is the same UN that has now pronounced that Israel should not defend itself against the war of exterminatory mass murder being perpetrated against its citizens. This treatment of Israel goes far beyond the fate of that particular region. The obsessive malice with which it is vilified and libelled, and the tacit and even explicit encouragement of the war of mass murder against it, while atrocities in Africa are not only ignored but their perpetrators given a seat on the UN Human Rights Commission, for heaven's sake, shows that not just the UN but the world order it represents are bust, broken, bankrupt.

For faced with this obscene parody of a world body that is supposed to promote and uphold peace and justice but actually ignores, promotes and upholds genocide, mass murder, tyranny, terrorism and endemic corruption, the democracies of the west not only ignore such evidence but profess to believe that the UN is a moral exemplar without whose imprimatur wars are illegitimate and whose every utterance or action possesses unchallengeable moral authority. But the correct -- indeed, the only -- moral response to the UN would be to shut it down. While the world is run by tyrannies -- and despite the US veto at the UN, it is so run -- tyranny, terrorism and genocide will of course continue unabated, and the victims of these atrocities will be regarded at best with indifference and at worst demonised as villains in order to protect the guilty. That is the twisted and lethal phenomenon of which Israel is both victim and symbol.

The scale of this moral inversion is so huge, so profound and so fundamental that the Presbyterian Church decision has provoked an incandescent protest by Dennis Prager, a US talk-show host who thought Christianity was on the side of good but now finds it has been hijacked to serve the cause of evil. Prager spells out the nature of this obscenity:

"It takes a particularly virulent strain of moral idiocy and meanness to single out Israel, not Arafat's Palestinian Authority, or terror-supporting, death-fatwa-issuing Iran, or women-subjugating Saudi Arabia, for condemnation and economic ruin. One of the most decent societies, one of the most liberal democracies in the world, is fighting for its life against Islamic fascists who praise the Holocaust and publicly call for the annihilation of Israel -- and the Presbyterian Church calls for strangling Israel!

'Apartheid state?' This Goebbels-like Big Lie, concocted by the world's anti-Israel and anti-American Left and by those who want Israel destroyed, is now an official doctrine of the Presbyterian Church. Israel is a nation whose population is one-quarter non-Jewish Arab, with the same rights, including voting and its own political parties, as Jewish citizens; a nation whose second official language is Arabic, the language of those who wish to annihilate the Jewish country; a nation that occupies a tiny sliver of land

known as the West Bank only because Jordan, overwhelmingly composed of Palestinians, invaded Israel in 1967 in order to destroy it and thereby lost its ownership of the West Bank.' And then Prager draws a conclusion as stark and bleak as it is true:

"This is one of the morality-clarifying issues of our time. To single out Israel for economic strangulation while that good nation fights for its life is an act of such immorality that holding that view precludes one from the title "good" or "God-fearing," for if they are true to God, I am false to Him. If they are good, I who support Israel am bad. If their Bible teaches them to strangle Israel and support Yasser Arafat, I am guided by a different Bible. They have drawn a line. It is now time for good people, Presbyterians specifically, Christians generally, to distance themselves vigorously and publicly from this morally sick church. And it is time, once again, for Jews to realize that the enemies of the Jews in our day are to be found on the Christian Left while their friends are far more often on the Christian Right.'

Israel is the defining moral issue of our time. Not because its situation is the worst in the world -- the genocide in Sudan is clearly in a different league. But because the way the world is treating it exemplifies a global moral sickness in which truth, goodness and the victims of an annihilatory madness are ignored, dehumanised or attacked, while lies, wickedness and their perpetrators are appeased, endorsed and supported. (NaomiRagen.com Aug 5)
The writer is a journalist with London's Daily Mail.

How to Stave off Civil War By Yehuda Avner

In April 1982, a few days after the town of Yamit was bulldozed to rubble and the Sinai settlers were compelled to evacuate their homes, Israel marked its 34th Independence Day.

It was a sullen holiday. In his broadcast to the nation, prime minister Menachem Begin said this of the razing of Yamit:

"No one knows more than I the pain of the sacrifices we made for the sake of peace with Egypt. The scenes of the final days of the evacuation of Yamit were agonizing.

"All of us were glued to our television sets. What did we see? We saw Jewish settlers raising their hands against Jewish soldiers performing their duty in accordance with the decisions of their democratically elected government.

"We saw sacrilegious violence pitted against sacred decency -- the decency of an army eschewing its weapons. Other armies mount machine guns facing such rooftops filled with unruly and lawless citizens. And when they are compelled to descend, many are carried off on stretchers, dead and wounded.

"Not so at Yamit. We all saw the behavior of our soldiers there. We saw them climbing ladders without weapons, trying to reach the rooftops. People on the rooftops pushed the ladders away. Some soldiers were pushed off. Yet not a single one used a weapon.

"Our army at Yamit shed not a single drop of blood."

A WEEK later, a Young Leadership mission of the Israel Bonds Organization called on the prime minister, and one of its members asked what exactly had passed through his mind as he watched those scenes of confrontation at Yamit.

For the briefest moment the premier stared balefully back at the questioner. Then, shifting to the front edge of his chair, he answered slowly, percussively, "What went through my mind was that a Jew must never lift a finger against a fellow Jew. A Jew must never shed the blood of another Jew.

"And by the by, we've had the experience. Twenty centuries ago our Second Commonwealth was destroyed because of senseless hatred and civil war."

Then, with a stab of the finger, his face as granite as his eyes: "I want you to know that I made a solemn oath many years ago that no matter what the provocation, I would do all in my power to prevent civil war. Yehudim anachnu! We are Jews!"

"Are you saying there was a time when a Jewish civil war was conceivable?" asked someone, a little breathlessly.

Begin didn't answer immediately. He sat forlorn and saddened, staring past the young questioner into his own thoughts, as though momentarily mesmerized by alarming memories. And then, plaintively, he said, "Oh yes. It happened twice in my lifetime."

In astonished silence his visitors listened as he led them deep into the secret cellars of the tormented world of the Irgun underground of decades ago, to shine a light on a very black hole.

It was 1944. Britain ruled the land. Whitehall sealed the country's gates. European Jewry was being slaughtered in the millions. The Hagana under David Ben-Gurion and the Irgun under Menachem Begin were at loggerheads over what best to do. The Irgun chose to revolt against the British. The Hagana chose to oppose it.

So the Devil himself came down to take a look at the Jewish backbiting, liked what he saw, and decided to stay awhile. As an outcome, the Hagana went on a manhunt. Its informers stalked and hunted Irgun members, hundreds of them, and turned them over to the British. It was "Open Season."

"First, our people lost their jobs and their children were expelled from school," reminisced Begin sadly. "Then came the kidnappings." He had leaned

back in his chair, a sure sign he was disturbed.

"Our kidnapped men were often treated grimly before being turned over to the British. Lists of our members were handed in. There were daily roundups. Arms dumps and safe houses were exposed. It was the brink of civil war."

Gloom gripped the room, and the prime minister removed his spectacles and rubbed them vigorously with a handkerchief in an effort to contain the bitter remembrance.

But then he struck a lighter pose and, in the easy tone of one whose authority on the matter was not to be disputed, said, "You know, there's a bright side to life in the underground. For living in the underground enforces seclusion and, by the by," -- he liked that expression, "by the by" -- that's a good thing, because seclusion makes for deep and clear thinking."

As the irony of it sank in, Begin smiled an intriguing little smile that narrowed his bespectacled, deep-set eyes, and lit up his shrewd Jewish Warsaw face.

"Oh yes," he mused, a bitter-sweet edge to his voice, "being isolated can do wonders in turning a dark cellar into a high watchtower."

The young delegation of 20 or so gazed back at him puzzled, yet enthralled.

"Indeed, we could see very far from the top of our watchtower in our cellar. Visibility was excellent. And what did we see? We saw our people in Europe in an endless procession of death. We saw the ghettos going up in flames. We saw the oppressor plotting against us all, Hagana and Irgun alike. And from down the corridors of time we heard the echoes of that other civil war of almost 2,000 years before.

"So, having seen all that, we were gripped by a profound Jewish instinct as old as our nation. And it cried out to us, commanded us: 'Do not retaliate. Do not raise a hand against a fellow Jew. Do not spark a civil war! Not at any price!'"

Begin, looking intrepid, sat ramrod-straight, his hands balled, when, as if on cue, the door creaked slowly open and two middle-aged tea ladies waddled in with a trolley. Without fuss, they gave the prime minister his usual glass of plain tea with lemon and sweetener, and began pouring refreshments for the rest.

By the time everyone had been served the prime minister was well into his recollection of the other occasion when Jews found themselves on the brink of civil war -- the occasion of the Altalena.

IT WAS June 1948. The fledgling Jewish state, hardly a month old, was embattled on every side. The infant IDF was still a hotchpotch of disbanded Hagana, Palmah, Irgun, and Lehi units. Everything was improvised, makeshift, provisional.

Amid the muddle, the Altalena, an Irgun arms ship, arrived off the shore of Tel Aviv, overdue. It was loaded with hundreds of volunteers and packed with desperately-needed arms.

So, yet again, the Devil looked down at the fractious sight, grinned, and dispensed a mortal brew of such malice, mistrust, and misunderstanding that Ben-Gurion suspected Begin was fomenting a putsch. So he ordered his loyalists to shell the Altalena, which caught fire. In the blaze, several volunteers were killed and wounded, and the weaponry lost.

Eyewitness accounts describe Begin as standing on the Altalena's burning deck like some figure in a parable, black from the acrid smoke, flinging up his arms and yelling frantically to his men, "No -- don't shoot back! Don't open fire. No civil war!"

That night, eyes dark-circled by anxiety and fatigue, Begin broadcast over the Irgun underground transmitter, speaking in tears about the Altalena, its arms, and its dead.

The young adults of the Israel Bonds delegation, listening to him 34 years later, stared intently, as if the pitiful spectacle was taking place before their eyes.

"Some antagonists jeered me because of those tears I shed in public that night," he told them broodingly. "Yet to this day, I feel no shame. On the contrary. There are fateful times when a choice has to be made between blood and tears.

"During our revolt against the British, blood had to take the place of tears. But at the time of the Altalena -- Jew against Jew -- tears had to take the place of blood. Better that one Jew shed tears from his heart than that he should cause many to weep over graves."

Pulling back his shoulders and lifting his jaw, he said in conclusion: "It was extremely hard to order my men to restrain their natural instinct for revenge. But I had to do it.

"Twice in my lifetime I had to do it -- to cry out, Yehudim anachnu! We are Jews! Never raise a hand against a fellow Jew.

"It was the most important decision of my life."

The writer served on the staff of four prime ministers, including Menachem Begin. (Jerusalem Post Aug 11)
