

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

Events...

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BAYT Brotherhood Mission to Israel. Visits to Jerusalem, Hevron, Bet El, Golan, Galil, displaced former Gush Katif families. For info: Moische Posner 416-896-4451 moische@rogers.blackberry.net or Larry Zeifman 416-256-4000 ext. 239 LWZ@Zeifman.ca

Commentary...

Israel's New Strategic Environment By Caroline Glick

With Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip now a fait accompli, the question of whether the move was a mistake or not is no longer salient. The fact of the matter is that the withdrawal from Gaza created a new strategic environment for Israel and the central issue today is how Israel will contend with the strategic realities that are now taking form.

Ahead of the expulsion of Gazan Jews and the withdrawal of IDF forces from Gaza in August, the Israeli government pledged that it would respond dramatically and ferociously to any and all terror attacks emanating from post-withdrawal Gaza. When these warnings were challenged by the terrorist rocket barrage on the Western Negev that immediately followed the completion of the withdrawal, Israel failed to make good on its threats. Israel ignored the first salvo and then moved on to pound empty buildings and fields. No one can seriously claim that the sound-and-light show that the IDF produced constituted the kind of response to the massive rocket and mortar offensive against Sderot and the agricultural communities bordering Gaza that will deter future attacks. As was the case with Israel's tepid response to Hizbullah and Palestinian terror attacks on its territory from southern Lebanon after the precipitous IDF withdrawal from the security zone in May 2000, so today with Gaza, Israel's screeching speech and small stick have absolutely no credibility with either the Palestinian Authority or with Hamas, Fatah and Islamic Jihad.

It is true that Hamas subsequently suspended its attacks on the Western Negev. But there is little indication that this short-term suspension of attacks has anything to do with IDF counter-attacks. Hamas has an organizational interest in keeping Gaza quiet in the run-up to the planned general elections for the PA's legislative council in January. Like Hizbullah ahead of the Lebanese elections last June, Hamas wants quiet ahead of the elections so it can claim to have been the power behind Israel's retreat. At the same time, Hamas has made it brutally clear to the PA that it will not accept any move to curb or constrain its military forces and that the PA, for its part, has accepted Hamas's stance. Israeli intelligence has no doubt that Hamas and Fatah will ratchet up their terror activity after January.

Aside from having lost all deterrent power against the various Palestinian terror factions and the PA's security forces in Gaza, Israel has also lost complete control over Gaza's border with the Sinai. It is true that there have been almost no press reports of weapons smuggling and terrorist infiltration from the Sinai into Gaza in recent days; however there are three clear indicators that the lack of reportage does not correspond to a lack of news. First of all, whereas in the weeks immediately following Israel's withdrawal there were journalists stationed all along the border zone, currently, there are no news teams there to speak of. And so, the lack of reportage about continued infiltrations of the breached border may very well be a function of the fact that no one is on the ground to report them.

ADDITIONALLY, the government's warnings last week for Israelis not to enter the Sinai and for all Israelis in the Sinai to immediately return home were the result of intelligence reports regarding a Hamas plot to kidnap Israeli

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tourists in the Sinai. The plot was to kidnap Israelis in Sinai and spirit them into Gaza where their captors would demand the release of jailed terrorists in exchange for their hostages. The fact that the plot involved cross-border traffic is a clear sign that the border remains open for terrorists.

Finally, as Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom noted in a radio interview over the weekend, Egypt has taken no effective steps to seal the border.

Disputing earlier dismissals by the IDF, Shalom noted that the Palestinians have smuggled anti-tank and shoulder-launched missiles into Gaza from Egypt. Shalom's statements jibe well with earlier reports that Kais Obeid, the former Israeli Arab who now heads Lebanese Hizbullah's liaison with Fatah terror cells in Gaza, Judea and Samaria spent 36 hours in El-Arish meeting with Fatah terror commanders in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from the border zone. The fact that Egypt has allowed senior terror operatives to travel freely and openly in its territories is substantive proof that like Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, President-for-life Hosni Mubarak has absolutely no interest in sealing the border or in ending terror traffic and communications between Gaza and Sinai.

The open border with Egypt has significant strategic ramifications for Israel. Before the withdrawal, Israel could allow traffic between Gaza and Israel and Judea and Samaria because it controlled all the international passages. Today, in the absence of such control, the question of how persons and goods originating in Gaza can travel to Israel and Judea and Samaria takes on a completely different strategic significance. Today Israel has much less ability than it did five weeks ago to know where individuals crossing between Gaza and Judea and Samaria have been, whom they have met with and what weapons they have at their disposal.

And the security fence that Israel is building to prevent terrorist infiltration into its major cities is of no use against the emerging threat. It is no longer principally suicide bombers that we have to contend with - although they remain a significant threat. The security fence that Israel is now constructing will be useless against missiles, rockets, mortars and bullets.

It is not at all insignificant that a new al-Qaida cell in Gaza just distributed its first leaflet over the weekend. Al-Qaida, with its global reach, has the ability, once seeded in Gaza to bring enormous resources in weapons, technologies and financing that can easily alter the terror nexus that comprises Israel's strategic environment. In the absence of control over the international border, again, the risks that Israel incurs by allowing any entry of people and goods from Gaza into Israel or Judea and Samaria are of a completely different order than the ones it incurred by enabling such traffic before the withdrawal.

ALL OF this means that Israel must reexamine its entire strategic rationale for contending with Palestinian and international demands for enabling traffic from the Gaza Strip into Israel, Judea and Samaria. Today, free passage from Gaza to Judea and Samaria constitutes an open conduit for international terrorists into the Israeli heartland, with no Israeli supervision whatsoever.

Disturbingly, from the reports of the negotiations now being conducted between the government and the Palestinians, with the involvement of the US, the EU and the so-called Quartet's envoy James Wolfensohn, it appears that the government is completely ignoring the new strategic reality. Vice Premier Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz are behaving as though Gaza's open border with Egypt is of no concern. In spite of the fact that the Palestinian Authority has smuggled more weapons and ammunition into Gaza from Sinai than Hamas since the IDF withdrawal from the border, at the IDF's urging, the government agreed this past Sunday to enable the PA to receive ammunition from Egypt. And rather than maintaining that given the open border with Egypt, Gazans cannot be allowed into Israel or Judea and Samaria, the government is bending over backwards to enable such traffic to be reinstated. "In honor of Ramadan," the government Sunday reopened the Karni cargo terminal in Gaza.

On a simplistic level, the strategic environment that has emerged since Israel's withdrawal exposes the lie behind the government's euphemism for the move. There is no such thing as "disengagement" from an enemy that

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remains at war with you. The question is, now that Israel has lost all deterrent power over Palestinian terrorists in Gaza, and the international border has turned into a terrorist freeway to Israel's heartland, when will the government begin to reckon with the new threats to Israel's security that have emerged? (Jerusalem Post Oct 11)

[This article is in response to a recent controversial article "I'm Disengaged" in a New Jersey Jewish newspaper. - Ed.]

An Open Letter to S.A. Halevy By Yedidya Atlas

Dear S.A. Halevy,

Shalom. I don't know who you are, but your identity is not important. The issue is your article entitled "Leaving Israel Because I'm Disengaged".

Reading your article, I felt your deep anguish, your almost physical pain as you tried to express in mere words your disillusionment, frustration, and helpless anger after the events of the past month in Israel. As a journalist with nearly three decades of professional experience, I have to say that your article, while well-written, was the type of piece that one writes and puts in a drawer for a few days. Then, after calming down, one looks at it again and rewrites it without the anger, or simply leaves it in the drawer.

Yes, the Israeli government and the Israel Defense Forces and the Israeli police carried out the wholesale expulsion of Jews from their homes and, for the most part, left them homeless. There is no question that the decision itself was problematic, leaving open to doubt the manner in which it was adopted and the way it was executed.

I don't challenge your determination that the decision was evil and that the manner in which it was carried out was harmful both to those who were its direct victims - the valiant residents of Gush Katif and northern Samaria - and to the soldiers who were ordered to carry out an action that is in contradiction to the IDF job description.

And let us not forget the majority of Israel's population who were not asked their opinion (actually they were, in the last elections, when Labor party candidate Amram Mitzna ran on a platform calling for a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, and Ariel Sharon, the Likud party candidate, ran on a platform opposing such a move - and won by the largest majority in Israeli electoral history), and might well have felt betrayed by a prime minister who, after he was elected, seemingly inexplicably, did a 180-degree turnabout and adopted the platform that was formally rejected by the public.

Moreover, it has been eminently documented that "checks and balances" in Israel's current democracy appears to refer to illegal payments and dubious bank accounts. The entire Sharon Expulsion Plan was born of an unholy alliance between utter personal and political corruption on the part of the prime minister and his cronies, together with the post-Zionist ultra-left parties that still support his government from both within and without as long as he fulfills their wishes.

And lastly, it is crystal clear that Gush Katif is not the end point of this policy. There are those among the self-hating post-Zionists who see Gush Katif only as the weak link in the national religious/settler camp, the group the leftists see as their ideological enemy. The calls to continue destroying Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria, to break up the Hesder yeshiva programs that combine Torah study with military service, and other such demands, show the true face of our own internal antagonists.

So there, I've said it all. So where, you may ask, do I differ with you? The answer is simple. The facts are the facts, and denying truth does not make it go away. I don't suggest anyone stick his head in the sand, ostrich-like, and pretend everything is back to normal and we should continue as before. It isn't and we shouldn't. Nonetheless, our conclusions are poles apart.

You write, "Now, the second stage of disengagement is upon us - my own, and, I suspect, that of many formerly religious-Zionist American Jews - from the State of Israel." You summarily declare: "Too many Jews live vicariously through the State of Israel, certainly non-Orthodox Jews for whom the staple of Jewish identity is the Holocaust and support for Israel, but even Orthodox Jews who view Israel as a harbinger of the coming redemption. But what was once the symbol of our national hopes and yearnings has deteriorated into just another oppressor of Jews, a persecutor of religious Jews."

You fail to differentiate between the State of Israel, which has spiritual meaning as "a harbinger of the coming redemption," and a corrupt government that will ultimately and ignominiously go, as such governments always do. The people didn't vote for it, and they won't re-elect it when the time comes. Yes, we will suffer and struggle in the meantime, but emphatically, no, Israel, the country - the Nation and the Land - has not "deteriorated into just another oppressor of Jews, a persecutor of religious Jews."

There is still more Torah observance and study - both public and private - per capita in Israel than anywhere else in the world. Despite a hostile and corrupt government, we are not oppressed, and while it is true that the Israeli Left, in its last gasp-stand to try to cling to its Bolshevik power, is trying hard to defeat the rising sun of Torat Yisrael in all its manifestations, it will not succeed.

It is a statistical fact that 53 percent of Jewish Israeli first graders are now being educated in religious schools. The religious birthrate in the country is nearly five times that of the non-religious. In ten years, the majority of Israeli school children will be religious.

The ultimate political conclusion is obvious. Even without Mashiach, whom we really do expect to arrive any day, it is only a matter of time before the religious and traditionally oriented will be the majority of the voters. This is what especially scares the Israeli Left. There have been numerous Israeli op-eds by leftist columnists bemoaning their waning influence and this "threat" to their continued control in every sphere of Israeli society.

While many on the so-called "Center-Left" claim they were forced to approve of the Gaza Expulsion because they feared the Arab demographic threat (patently false, by the way, but they believe it to be true), the demographic threat the Left really fears is the Jewish one.

It is a political fact that, in every election, there are not only fewer voters for the Left-leaning parties, but the average age of those voters is steadily increasing. An accurate gauge of the upcoming generation of the Israeli electorate can be seen by a tally of army votes, which are counted separately from the rest of the country's. In the IDF, right-wing and religious parties consistently do significantly better than they do in the country at large.

Therefore, while it is clear that the current government of Israel behaved shamefully, and, yes, with evil intention, Israel, the State and the Nation, has not betrayed Jewish history, and Israel has not become "no better than our enemies."

I see you, an observant American Jew who, before the disengagement/expulsion, was dedicated to Eretz Yisrael, as one who has been in combat. Your "personal divorce from the State of Israel" appears to me as a clear case of shell-shock. If, as you say, "the State of Israel no longer reflects [your] values or aspirations," simply because we lost one battle - terrible tragedy though it is - I can feel only sadness for you.

I'm not concerned about your political or financial support. We can survive without it. But just as we won't give up on our leftist Israeli brethren - yes, brethren, no matter how mistaken they are and how badly they behave towards us - I certainly cannot give up on you, either.

The reason there is a mitzvah of Ahavat Yisrael - to love all Jews - is to ensure that we will love our fellow Jew even when we don't like him. If we liked everybody anyway, we wouldn't need the mitzvah. The Land of Israel's first Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hacohen Kook, z.t.l., once said he could love every Jew. Did this mean that he agreed with them, that he accepted their behavior, that he didn't actively oppose what he felt was wrong? No, he fought long and hard for what he believed in, and so should we.

We have a long and arduous war ahead of us and we, on the frontlines, cannot take time for battle fatigue and we cannot afford to be shell-shocked. We don't have the luxury to petulantly declare we're going home and taking the ball with us because we don't want to play anymore, or to wallow in self-pity because the bully took our ball away and chased us from part of the playing field. We have national obligations, and when I say "we", I also mean you.

If we believed in the right way, the *derech haTorah* - the way of Eretz Yisrael, Am Yisrael and Torat Yisrael - before we lost this battle, than we cannot simply give up and stop believing. *Eminah* (faith) is easy when everything is going your way. But *emunah* becomes real only when it survives challenges, when it overcomes suffering and hardship. If we have true *emunah*, we have no alternative but to continue the way HaShem has directed.

When Nachshon ben Aminadav jumped into the Yam Suf, the Reed Sea, the Midrash tells us that the water came up to his neck before it split. He jumped in even though the water was still high because he had *emunah*. More than 1,500 years later, Rabbi Akiva, while fleeing the Romans during the Bar Kochba rebellion, was refused safe haven in the town and camped in the nearby forest. His candle was extinguished by the wind, his rooster and donkey were killed by other animals, but he accepted what appeared at the moment to be bad, and said that whatever G-d does, will be for the good. His rebbe, Rabbi Nachum Ish Gam-Zu, went a step further when he was sent on a national mission to deliver a chest of precious stones as a goodwill gift to the Roman Emperor. While he slept, thieves stole the gems and replaced them with common earth, but the rabbi declared, "Gam zu le'tova," - "This too is good" - and, without hesitation, continued with the chest of earth to Rome.

These paragons lived in hard times, perhaps a bit harsher than ours, but they, nonetheless, did not lose faith. It behooves us to remain steadfast as well.

You tell us that, according to our secular government, our "historical narrative" is not very compelling. "It reads, and I simplify only slightly, 'because Europeans killed Jews, therefore Jews had the right to displace Arabs from their land,' you say, concluding, 'That is neither very moral nor very persuasive, so it is no wonder that the international community routinely

rejects it."

If what you say were true, you would be correct, but it isn't. It is not the "secular narrative;" it is only the "post-Zionist, secular-Left narrative."

Yes, the post-Zionist Left indeed denies Jewish history. They think we have no rights at all, and they believe we/they stole the land from the Arabs and, therefore, they want and need the Arabs to say it's okay to stay in certain parts of Israel, say, north Tel Aviv and maybe Herzliya.

But, despite their verbosity and media influence, the secular, post-Zionist Left does not represent the majority, or even a significant minority, and does not set national agenda, no matter how hard the leftists or the corrupt, evil politicians, who may succeed at times, try. Ultimately, they will fall, as has every Israeli politician who went against Eretz Yisrael.

David Ben-Gurion, subsequently Israel's first prime minister, was neither a believing Jew nor even pro-religious, but when asked at the 1937 Peel Commission Hearings in London what was the Jewish mandate for the Land, he picked up a Bible and, raising it for all to see, declared, "This is our mandate."

It may not be politically correct to admit it in public, but not all non-observant Israelis have forgotten that truth, and certainly not those who are traditionally oriented. So, it is not only the religious who recognize Israel's mandate.

Someone like you, who knows the truth, has no right to abstain from promoting it, any more than tired parents have the right to abstain from loving, caring for and teaching their errant children, no matter how badly the children behave, no matter how much damage they do.

You write, "Torah Jews know that we returned to the land of Israel because that is the land G-d promised our forefathers, the land from which we were exiled and to which the ancient prophets foretold our eventual return." And you ask, "But why should we continue to pretend that Israel's government embraces this belief? It does not, and even if it did nominally, G-d gave us more than a land. He gave us 613 commandments that are also routinely trampled by this government and much of the populace."

While we agree this government has much to repent for, we cannot malign (le'hotzei shaim ra) the citizens of Israel as if this government reflected the beliefs of the majority of the population, the actions the majority supports, or the way the majority chooses to behave. Elections in Israel show this is not the case. A growing majority consistently votes for a traditionally acceptable platform, both vis-a-vis Eretz Yisrael and public observance of the mitzvot. This is even more remarkable because, today, most of the non-observant electorate falls into the category of tinok shenishba - children who do not yet understand and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for doing something incorrectly.

Rather than maligning them, we have an obligation to reach out, guide, and teach our distant brethren (who are distant through no fault of their own) and bring them closer. Have we done all we could in this regard? I don't think so. This past year, much energy was invested in reaching out to the general populace. Had we done this for the past two decades, many of the battles we are now fighting may well have been avoided.

One proof of this is the success we experienced in the Likud party referendum held in May 2004 on the issue of the Disengagement. We won through our intensive outreach efforts, going door to door, night after night. But we have yet to expend the same resources or intensity to win the masses of distant brethren. Tactically, we may have failed, but that does not mean the overall strategy is faulty.

Moreover, as Rabbi Kook, z.t.l., wrote in Orot Hatechiya, there will come a time when the general populace that has become mired in its own self-indulgence and lack of values will cry out to their believing brethren to reach out and show them the way. Can we afford to be so hurt now as to breakaway and then fail in our ultimate sh'lichut?

You maintain, "So let us not pretend that G-d's covenant plays any role in this government's policies, and expose the secular Israeli dilemma for what it is: they cannot morally defend or justify their presence in the land of Israel, and so they are divesting themselves of it."

Again, don't confuse the ruthless and dastardly behavior of the few in power with the entire nation. I agree that secular Zionism has failed for the very reason that that it has removed G-d and Torah from its adherents' ideology. Israel is not simply a place of refuge for persecuted and poor Jews, rather, it is the place for the Jewish people because G-d promised it to our forefathers, and it is the place to be even when things are tough, according to the Ramban, the SheLaH Hakodesh, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, and the disciples of the Vilna Gaon, to name just a few.

Staying in the "tri-state area" under any circumstances is your dilemma.

You are also completely confused when you write about money, which you call "the other mainstay of the American-Jewish 'partnership.'"

"Some 'partnership': they take and we give, to the tune of billions of dollars annually," you write.

First of all, the entire Jewish community's financial contributions don't amount to more than one-half of one percent of the Israeli national budget, so

don't get too excited. The "billions" come from the American government, allocated by the US Congress, who gives it because your representatives believe it's worthwhile for the US to do so. Some few members of Congress are no doubt influenced by Jewish - and other pro-Israel - voting blocs, and by pro-Israel directed campaign contributions, but that doesn't explain the fervor of many congressmen and senators who simply believe it's a good thing to do.

Every government in the world tries to get those countries with better economies to help them financially. This is not an Israeli invention or exclusive preoccupation. The United States gives out hundreds of billions of dollars in both military and economic aid to countries throughout the world. Israel is a very minor part of that total. And while it is true that Jews in America give far more per capita than any other ethnic group, it is not uncommon for other ethnic American public figures to speak at their ethnic community dinners.

The most basic reason Jews give money to fellow Jews in Israel is that the givers believe and know that it is a partnership; it's all in the family. Just as Jews in your community support local Jewish causes - synagogues, schools, mikvaot, gemilut chesed, outreach programs - they also support similar causes and institutions in Israel because they are in Israel. For most Jews in the Diaspora, giving money is usually all they can do to be involved, to make a difference, to be a partner and to show that they are part of the family.

Yes, some Jews like and even expect kavod, honor, for what they give. And often, those on the receiving end want to honor their donors. Why? Sometimes to encourage others, and quite often because of the simple mitzvah of hakarat hatov - recognizing the good that someone has done.

You say you have a problem giving tzedaka today to institutions and causes in Israel? So don't. We'll survive. Yes, it will be harder, because invariably the institutions and causes that need help the most are those that get no or little help from the very rotten government you so despise. So what do you do? You sulk and help the rotten government by denying your involvement in the very activities the secular, post-Zionist leftist politicians want to crush? That's a good move!

You write, "How often are we told that American Jews have no right to intervene in Israeli politics - whether by protesting certain policies, or opposing or supporting certain politicians - because we do not live there?" Good morning. Is this the first time you've heard this? It's standard operating procedure by the Left to try and block support to those who most oppose their policies at home.

You "now reject that formula for the scam and farce that it is," telling us that the Israeli government "sounds increasingly like the teenager who insults his parents, rejects their values, stalks out of the house - and then opens the door and demands his allowance and the car keys. No more, at least not for me."

I hate to tell you, but you sound like a parent who says, "My kid insults me and rejects my values, so he can go find another place to sleep and eat, and, not only that, his little brothers and sisters, who haven't insulted me or rejected my values, can also go live in the street. After all, they're all related."

Terrific. You convinced me.

You write: "Let our charity dollars stay here, where there is accountability. How much money was wasted - literally - in retrospect, on Gaza and Samaria? This was good Jewish money that was flattened by Sharon's bulldozers. And how much money actually reaches its intended recipients, and is not squandered on offices, staff, bureaucracy, graft, and the like?"

How pathetic. One gives tzedaka because the Torah, that the Almighty gave us - the source of our values - says it's the right thing to do. And if you don't want to give to big organizations that use a percentage, or too big a percentage, for overhead or questionable expenses, give to others whose accountability is better and whom you can rely on to spend the tzedaka funds in the manner in which you intended. Not every tzedaka is crooked. Most are not. Get real.

You don't want to "give a dime or shekel to any entity that is even remotely connected with the corrupt Israeli government, including the army," but, fortunately, you add that you "would certainly continue to support needy Jews everywhere - including, but not limited to Israel." Fine, do so. It's called designated giving. It wasn't invented this morning.

But when you lump the army with the corrupt Israeli government, I have to take issue. Any money you give to the Israeli army is very much designated giving. You aren't paying for guns or tanks or fancy furniture for general staff offices. Invariably, you give to help needy soldiers - who, if they weren't soldiers, would be included in the aforementioned "needy Jews." Don't penalize them because they do army service and risk their lives to protect fellow Jews - not every soldier in the IDF expelled Jews from Gaza and northern Samaria.

I am a reserve officer who has received the "Exemplary Officer" commendation twice for activities in wartime, and who, together with many other fellow reserve officers in my unit, openly declared our opposition to the

Expulsion Plan and our intention to disobey any orders even remotely connected to that action. Among our reasons was the conviction that an immoral order will harm the combat capability of any soldier who takes part in such an evil activity. The immoral order will eventually put his life and those of fellow combat soldiers in danger, especially if, as a result of the immoral order, he hesitates to risk his life in battle because he can no longer rely on his commander to give orders not tainted by somebody's personal or political agendas.

Some of us paid a personal price for this stand and we are proud of it. So while you may have been here for the duration of the Gush Katif tragedy - and kol hakavod for that - you didn't have to risk anything like we did, and continue to do, on a daily basis.

For these reasons, I hope you will reevaluate your position on supporting needy soldiers and their families, for mobile synagogues for combat troops, Sifrei Torah, succot, and all the rest of the religious needs of soldiers that the aforementioned "corrupt government" does not finance because the Left wants less religion in the army, and less Jewish connection and commitment. Once again, you, by shutting off your direct assistance to these endeavors, help those very anti-religious elements to which you so eloquently declare your opposition.

It is evident that, as you say, your "anguish is intense," and that you have "lost faith in every organ of Israeli society." Sadly, your experience of being on the frontlines for awhile during this terrible experience has caused you to be "embarrassed to be a Jew." How truly heartrending. And, as is evident from my own actions, I won't tell you that soldiers cannot disobey orders. But don't judge too harshly those thousands of soldiers who lacked the understanding or the personal courage to challenge the whole system that currently rules their lives. I'm not talking about the senior command who went PC to keep their careers, or who failed to realize the scope of the evil with which they cooperated. They should have known better.

Understand that the tragedy of the expulsion from Gaza is something from which most of us are now suffering. This includes those who opposed it, as well as those who went along (only a minority actually supported it) and carried out their immoral orders. Thus far, the suicides of six soldiers have been linked to the Expulsion. Many more are dealing with severe psychological issues as they wake up from the horrific event in which they were players.

Disagree with them, condemn their actions, but have rachmanut, compassion, for they too are our brothers who, for the most part, truly did not understand.

My own children, like thousands of others, were pushed (my own son was also hit and kicked) and physically expelled from Gush Katif and its environs. My nephews were jailed. But they understood, even at the most difficult times, that it is our spirit, our faith, which is really the ultimate target of those behind these machinations.

My daughter i.m.-ed me from the N'vei Dekalim synagogue, explaining that it was clear to her that, no matter what happened, the young girls praying and singing their hearts out, "cannot be defeated and will ultimately win."

When she and a friend were finally carried out by four female soldiers their own age, the six young women exchanged telephone numbers and made plans to meet after the horrific event. The soldiers admitted they were clueless about what was happening. They had been primed by army psychologists for a situation that turned out to be false. The soldiers were confused, and my daughter and her friend, at the height of their emotional tragedy, while struggling to stay in Gush Katif and refusing to cooperate, still had the inner strength to understand that, when it was over, they had to reach out to bring these confused soldiers closer.

My own son and many others like him, after graduating high school this past year, undertook grueling physical and psychological tests to gain acceptance into some of the IDF's most elite combat units. After the tragedy in Gush Katif, my son, filled with justifiable anger, expressed reservations about his upcoming induction into an elite unit. I told him that his reaction was exactly what the post-Zionist, secular Left wanted - for young religious men not to be part of such units, not to become officers, advance and ultimately change the military, to give it a more Jewish mindset. If he didn't go, they would win, I told him. He, like many of his friends, understand. They are going to the most elite units with a Jewish mesirut nefesh - a sense of self-sacrifice. They won't let the expellers win.

You write you "expected more from Jews." So did I. I was wrong, but since I'm a combat veteran on the frontlines, I have no time to be angry, or to cop out and wallow in self-pity. I have to regroup, learn from my mistakes and continue the fight. What is at stake is the soul of a nation. If you want to give up and hide in America, go ahead. But the only one you'll really punish is yourself.

If something is wrong or broken, we have an obligation to try to correct it. This is the message of kol Yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh - all of Israel are responsible for one another. It's real; and we have to be.

Perhaps most perplexing was your puzzlement at "the behavior of the

residents of Gaza and northern Samaria, and their leadership."

"What were they thinking? Where was all the money spent, and for what end? To purchase orange flags and ribbons? To have protests where songs were sung and dances were danced - and with that, they thought they would stop a bulldozer?" you wrote.

You complained that, in the end, "they did not defend their homes as normal people in other countries have done." Rather, you said, they participated in an "eviction ceremony."

"Something is missing: if Arabs came to destroy their homes, they would defend them to the death, but if Israelis come, they will just leave, with singing, tears, and flag-waving," you said.

While I believe I might have behaved a bit differently under the same circumstances, there are still limitations as to what one can do against one's fellow Jews. I would not presume to judge people who heroically suffered through so much. It's not the Jewish way and it's not fair. Don't judge someone until you are in his place.

I know you mean well, but you're just an armchair ideologue ranting from your living room in America. You experienced brief visits to the front, but, unlike the residents of Gush Katif, you did not survive countless terrorist attacks, thousands of mortar shells and rockets exploding in your backyard, and a deliberate psychological and economic war waged against the residents by their own government.

You rail against the Judea, Samaria and Gaza rabbis "who boldly declared that the withdrawal would not occur and that the settlers, therefore, should not pack or prepare for their new future," saying they made "a monumental and unconscionable error of judgment."

Actually, the error is yours. The Judea, Samaria and Gaza rabbis never said "the withdrawal would not occur," rather they encouraged active opposition to it, hoping that, perhaps, execution of the plan would fail. Not quite the same thing.

Without adopting your cynicism, I agree that the response from the American Jewish community, its rabbinate, and its organizations was pitiful and should have been more forthcoming. Perhaps, these American mainstream groups are just too far removed from the harsh reality with which we have to deal. Perhaps the depth of Israeli government corruption and blatant disregard for its own citizens was too much for the Americans to absorb and accept.

"As of now," you conclude, "Religious Zionism is dead in the water."

You believe that, "for too long, we have endowed the secular, political state of Israel with a religious, even messianic dimension" and that "the emergence of the State of Israel was an opportunity offered by G-d after all the trauma and turmoil of the exile, to once again possess the land of Israel and build a Torah state.

"But we have failed," you say, "and the third Jewish commonwealth is slipping away before our eyes."

No, we have not failed. We have suffered a setback that requires us to be more committed and more active, to work harder in the many areas in which we did not invest sufficient resources and energies. It requires us to learn from our mistakes - and we made them - and to go on to fight for what we believe in. And again, my "we" includes you.

Yes, religious Zionists believe that Israel has Messianic significance. It is not simply, as you say, that good things are good and bad things are also good. It is that we, being finite creatures, cannot automatically fathom the reason why the Almighty does what He does or what He allows to happen (check out Tractate Sanhedrin, 98b). But we, like Rabbi Akiva, believe that, even if we don't understand, we must accept difficulties with love for G-d. Then, in the framework of the rules of this world, we try our best to do the right thing and overcome the challenges we face, in accordance with our emunah in HaShem and in the Derech HaTorah.

Are we obligated, as you demand, to make a personal and national accounting - a cheshbon nefesh - of our actions before and during the Gaza tragedy? Yes. But, again, that relates to tactics, not strategy.

We have an obligation to continue on the path in which we - and, once again, that includes you - believe. The loss of one battle, no matter how hard and shattering, is not the end of the war.

We must mend our ways, strengthen ourselves, and reach out to our brethren who need us. As Rabbi Kook, z.t.l., once said, the Second Beit HaMikdash was destroyed because of sinat chinam - needless hatred; the Third Beit HaMikdash will be built through ahavat chinam - needless or boundless love.

This doesn't mean we don't recognize evil or that we don't admit to and learn from our mistakes - both personal and national. It means that we must understand our priorities, our assigned tasks in this world, and work that much harder to unite the nation, spread the light of Torat Yisrael, and bring the Redemption that much closer.

G'mar Chatima Tova to you, my brother, and to all the House of Israel. (IsraelNationalNews.com / The Jewish Voice and Opinion Oct 16)