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ISRAEL'S COMING DISENGAGEMENT DEBATE.

## Disharmonious Society

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**A**lmost a month into Israel's latest war, one can feel the shift. The confidence of the early days has dissipated, and in its place, resignation is setting in. Bravado has given way to sobriety. With a sadness that is slowly seeping across this society, Israelis are slowly getting used to the idea that we didn't win this one, not the way we're used to winning.

When the fighting ends, the two million people who have spent weeks sleeping in public bomb shelters will return home, but without complete certainty that the missile threat to their lives is gone. The parents who stood grief stricken by the freshly dug graves of their fallen sons will be able to tell themselves, truthfully, that these boys died defending Jewish sovereignty in the face of attacks on uncontested Israeli soil, but they will not be able to tell themselves that their sons' deaths helped bring the threat from the north to a complete end.

Those disappointments are going to make this a frustrated, even vengeful, society. Recovering from a war which will evoke 1973 and its deflation more than it will 1967 and its elation, Israel is about to enter an agonizing period of self-doubt. The army's performance will be second-guessed for months. And many formerly left-leaning Israelis will now have no doubt: The Palestinians have no interest in statehood. They voted for Hamas, not to establish Palestine, but to dismantle Israel. The players have changed, but Arab opposition to Israel's very existence--and her enemies' willingness to use force to back up their utterances--has not.

The sobering recognition that even territorial concession will not produce peace (it being lost on no Israeli that the war is being fought precisely on the fronts where Israel withdrew to internationally recognized lines) will inevitably rekindle the debate about Ariel Sharon's disengagement. And the real test of Ehud Olmert's leadership will be whether he can channel Israel's sobriety, and even its rage, into a productive national conversation.

That conversation has been mostly absent thus far. Before the disengagement, Sharon pulled off the withdrawal with no referendum, with not a whit of expressed concern for what anyone else thought about his plan. And since the pullout, Israel has faced other issues: Sharon's stroke, the election of Hamas, the barrage of Qassams, national elections, and, now, a war. Talk has taken a back seat to crisis management.

But given the likely temperament in Israel after this latest war, Sharon's tactics will no longer work, and Olmert needs to engender conversation, understanding, and even national forgiveness.

He will need, first and foremost, to honor the rage of the right. Their predictions were correct. A bitter *we told you so* is already becoming a refrain in Israeli conversations. Some have lost virtually everything. Communities were destroyed, a way of life erased. Some of these people had to disinter their murdered children and move their remains inside the green line. Many of the settlers still lack permanent homes and have spent an almost invisible year living in conditions that they did not deserve. Can a man who ran for office on a platform of pulling out from the West Bank rise to the occasion and acknowledge that unilateralism has failed? Can he get fractious and contentious countrymen to ask forgiveness from their fellow citizens, from people who have paid an awful price?

But Olmert needs to do this without caving in to the right. While validating the fury of the settlers, he must also remind them, and the rest of the country, that Israel gained substantial international capital from the disengagement. Indeed, without August 2005, it is doubtful that the IDF would have had the leeway for July 2006. Without Israel's leaving Gaza, it would be clear neither to Israelis nor to the world that the Palestinian leadership has no interest in building a state. Had Israel not left Gaza, we would not be as certain as we are that this war is 1948 once again.

That, understandably, will not assuage the settlers. But it would be a significant first step towards national reconciliation.

What Israel will need at the end of this war is to learn to listen. Given the continuing Arab resistance to Israel's very existence, even after the withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza, Israel will have to rethink her strategy. A nation that has educated its youth towards liberalism, multiculturalism, and peace may have to retool even its schools to prepare yet another generation for a life of war. About that, the right was correct. But the left cannot be painted solely as naïve. It is still correct that, the failure of unilateralism notwithstanding, long term Israeli control of several million Palestinians would be a disaster for Israel's security and, even more importantly, for her soul. But if unilateralism has failed, and there is no one with whom to negotiate, what can Israel do?

That is the conversation that Israel's leadership must now engender. No longer can this country avoid the debate that Sharon never entertained. What Olmert needs to understand is that Israel does not need another Sharon. It needs a leader who can foster discussion, who can lead a fractured, wounded, saddened nation to a slowly, painfully emerging consensus. That is a difficult task at any time in Israeli life, and in the face of the anger and deflation that will be pervasive at the end of this war, it will be virtually impossible.

But it will also be necessary. The potential for long-term social rupture in Israel is enormous. And further damage to the tattered social contract that holds Israeli life together could well be permanent. Without profound leadership, Israelis' collective relief one year ago that they survived the disengagement without coming apart at the seams could well prove to have been tragically premature.

**DANIEL GORDIS** is vice president of the Mandel Foundation-Israel and director of its Mandel Leadership Institute. His latest book is *Coming Together, Coming Apart: A Memoir of Heartbreak and Promise in Israel* (Wiley).

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