

## SOME REASONS TO BE HOPEFUL – 5769

Gerald M. Steinberg

In my long-practiced role as the voice of reason and pragmatism, I attempt to find sources for optimism in the usually gloomy picture that is painted by many other Jewish and Israeli pundits. This is admittedly not an easy task, and we have good reason to be nervous, and on many different dimensions, in this difficult era. But Rosh Hashana is also an appropriate time to confront and expose the exaggerated fears, and to recognize our strengths and accomplishments.

On this note, literally, we can start with the lingering sounds from Paul McCartney's highly successful concert in Tel Aviv. The ex-Beatle ignored the threats and demands that he join the anti-Israel boycott – and the images and music from his concert are the best advertisement showing that Israel is, at least in some senses, an almost normal country.

While the inherent hostility and, in many cases, the hatred of Israel is still quite visible, we have scored some significant achievements in this most dangerous war to delegitimize and demonize Israel. The strategy of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) which exploits the rhetoric of human rights and international law as weapons, and justifies terror and incitement, has been pushed back in the past year. The promoters of the British academic boycott against Israel have failed to make progress, and they are increasingly recognized as obsessive antisemites who irrationally single out Israel for hatred. Similarly, even in the more radical church groups led by "replacement" theologians and pro-Palestinian fanatics, divestment campaigns have faltered.

In this propaganda war, we have also become better in launching counter-attacks. While preparations continue for the Durban Review Conference, scheduled to take place in Geneva in April 2009, we are much better prepared than the last time. In 2001, Israel and the United States went in to this UN sponsored hate-fest very naively, and were unprepared for the NGO Forum where most of the damage was done. This time, a solid strategy has been developed, and the counter offensive began well in advance. Canada, which had been a major sponsor of NGO participation in 2001, announced that it was boycotting the 2009 version, and the US House of Representatives recently adopted a consensus resolution calling for American leadership to prevent another catastrophic attack on universal human rights values. Even the European Union, which has funded some of the most offensive NGOs involved in the Durban process, is beginning to revise its destructive policies in this area following exposure by NGO Monitor.

In the shooting wars, Israeli deterrence has grown in the past year, and the IDF is much better prepared for future rounds of fighting than in 2006. The de-facto cease-fire in the rocket attacks from Gaza has held for longer than most experts expected, largely due to the fear of

Hamas leaders that they would not survive an Israeli military operation. The separation barrier has been very successful in preventing access for Palestinian mass terrorists, but attacks have increased in Jerusalem. As in previous waves of violence, these will hopefully be contained in the coming months. And in Lebanon, Hizbollah remains deterred by the damage from the 2006 war, at least for the time being, and its swaggering leader, Hassan Nassralah, still spends most of his time underground, to avoid being targeted.

Iran remains a problem, as Ahmedinejad's continues to threaten to "wipe Israel off the map", and the effort to acquire nuclear weapons keeps moving while the world's major powers debate sanctions and scold Teheran. But Israel has shown that it is planning for and, if necessary, capable of standing up to the Iranian threat – we are not going anywhere. The bellicose and often absurd statements by Iranian leaders, and the fake photos designed to show retaliatory capabilities that simply do not exist, reflect the panic and fear over a confrontation with Israel. While far from hopeful, the situation is under control. This is not a repetition of the 1930s, and the Munich analogy does not apply to an era of Jewish sovereignty in which we can defend ourselves.

Looking inward, where we should theoretically be able to have greater control over our destiny, the process of throwing out failed and corrupt leaders has begun, hopefully to be replaced with a group of responsible and qualified ones. Fringe ideological groups are becoming weaker as pragmatic realism grows, although this has also led to more violence as these groups seek to impose their agendas.

Israelis are again discussing how to reform the political system inherited from 19th century Poland, based on multiple small political parties controlled by manipulators, dreyers and machers, which has resulted in the failed leadership and political gridlock for many years. This is a necessary step in returning the alienated younger generation of Israelis, who see politics as a dirty and immoral business, in which honest and dedicated people have no chance.

Finally, despite all of these difficulties, the Jewish renaissance that is taking place in Israel is going strong in many different dimensions. The debates over how to integrate 4000 years of Jewish history and traditions into a modern society are fascinating and important. The old religious/secular conflict is gradually receding as a more positive and tolerant (and sometimes kitschy) approach to the Jewish experience grows. This also makes Israel more accessible to the Jewish Diaspora, and the tens of thousands of youngsters from Birthright and similar programs that are swarming around Israel are all signs of hope.

For all these reasons, and more, I send all of my readers best wishes for a shana tova, and for a year of health and optimism.

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