



## Experience Trumps Appeal

By Roberta Fahn Schoffman

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The elections in Israel last week came not a day too soon. As the bloody infighting in Gaza was reaching its zenith, Israelis were holding elections. The two familiar (some might say too familiar) victors -- Shimon Peres, ninth President of Israel, and Ehud Barak, new chairman of the Labor Party -- represent far more experience than appeal. But, according to most polls in recent months, and given the multiplying security threats confronting us, experience is surely called for.

The civil war in Gaza resulted in a shattering Hamas takeover. The flight of Fatah leaders, including Mohamad Dahlan, to the West Bank, and Abu Mazen's establishment of an emergency PA government headed by Salam Fayyad, brought about a separation of the territories more daunting than anything Israel could have foreseen. It all seemed to happen so quickly, almost unnoticed; it was as if Israelis figured that if they ignored the situation, the Palestinian problem would go away. And so we hummed new jingles for the Labor race, held our breath as the Knesset voted in secret ballot for Shimon Peres, and didn't pay much attention as hell broke loose in our wretched backyard.

Prime Minister Olmert, in his visit this week to Washington, will have much to discuss with President Bush. First on the growing list of urgent issues will be the grim reality in Gaza and the terrible humanitarian meltdown in its wake, as well as Israel's concern that Hamas, now in control of the "Philadelphi Corridor" bordering Egypt, will be able to upgrade its supply of weapons to include longer-range missiles. Next comes Iran, which continues to incite the Islamicists in northern Lebanon while menacing Israel and the West with its incipient nuclear capability. Not to mention Syria, which is in the process of a hefty military buildup along the Golan Heights that might -- or might not -- be for defensive purposes, depending on whether talks with Israel succeed, fail, or happen at all.

What seems certain is that we are quickly headed for a very hot summer. The tragic events of last year at this season are still fresh in our minds, especially since the Winograd Committee, charged with examining the performance of the government and IDF in the Second Lebanon War, will deliver its final report in August. No doubt many Israelis are feeling more secure knowing that this time around, Ehud Barak, Israel's most decorated war hero, will be in charge at the Ministry of Defense and Shimon Peres, Nobel Prize winner, will be working the international community.

Until just a few days ago, the analysis and commentary following last week's double elections were focused on backroom deals and what this all means for the future of Ehud Olmert and his coalition. Barak, who beat Ami Ayalon in a second round of voting, joins the cabinet as Defense Minister, while Shimon Peres vacates his dual title of Vice Premier and Minister for the Development of the Negev and Galilee. With the Finance Minister's seat still vacant since Avraham Hirschson stepped down amid charges of embezzlement, the great Israeli game of musical cabinet was underway. Loyalty or talent, voter appeal or genuine skills -- round and round it goes, and where it stops nobody knows.

What we do know is that after a long career of losing, Shimon Peres won this vote at a critical juncture. It seems as if his entire journey in public life inevitably brought him to this very time and place. Shimon Peres as President is exactly what's needed. Not just because of his clarity and optimism; imagination and hope; intellect and vision. Not just because he is widely admired abroad and brings respect to Israel and respectability to the presidency. But because he has seen a lot in his years; he has managed crises and engaged in conflict resolution. Because he has experience.

One commentator last week wrote that "Barak is still the most hated politician in Israel," and will have to work very hard to prove himself now. Maybe. But it was the failure of last summer's Lebanon war and the terrifying predictions of more violence this summer that gave Ehud Barak the lead he needed to beat Ami Ayalon. His simple mantra to voters, "I am most suited to be minister of defense" and "only I can beat Bibi Netanyahu," persuaded Laborites to back the former general. As Chief of Staff and Prime Minister, Barak showed, among other qualities, that he is strategic and bold, creative and courageous. Again, Israelis voted for experience.

Of course, even experience cannot be the sole elixir for our current woes. The whole place seems to have spun out of control and it will take more than impressive CV's to get us out of this mess. But as Ehud Olmert understood on the eve of his US departure, when he summarily appointed Barak Defense Minister (without waiting the two weeks he

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promised former Defense Minister Amir Peretz): we don't have the time for fig-leaf farewells, for empty pomp and ceremony. We finally have to get down to the most serious business of state: securing our home front, preparing for potential war, and aggressively pursuing peace – as if our lives depended on it.

In the shadow of the Hamas conquest, the Arab League plan promoted by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan looks like a bright light at the end of an ever-darkening tunnel. Olmert must now enlist the support of Washington and the international community to work quickly with those who are willing to work with us – even including Hamas if a viable ceasefire is offered. If nothing else, experience has taught us that the longer we wait, the fewer options we have.

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