



Days of Reckoning

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In this season of reckoning, Jews the world over will perform the ritual of cheshbon nefesh – soul searching, a personal accounting for actions of the past year. One week before the High Holy Days, Israel already began the process of closing some accounts. For its part, the High Court of Justice ruled, determined after three years of legal battle, that the security fence at Bil'in must be moved to accommodate the rights of Palestinian land owners. Other accounts have been put on hold, pointedly the release of the final Winograd report on the performance of Israel's political and military leaders during the Second Lebanon War, which the High Court ruled can be delayed for several months, to allow those named to prepare a defense. And new accounts are even now being opened, most ominously with Hamas, who sent rockets flying into the heart of a basic-training base south of Ashkelon early this morning.

Whether the settling of these accounts portends a brighter year is far from clear. For the most part, we, the public, are in the dark because of the uncharacteristic silence maintained by Israel's political and security leaders surrounding the most critical issues on our minds. No leaks, for instance on the content of the Olmert-Abu Mazen talks. Silence on the Israeli flight over the Syrian-Turkish border. No word on developments regarding the kidnapped soldiers. And for the first time ever, the Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Chief of Staff have all canceled their traditional Rosh Hashana interviews that sum up the past year and look forward to the one ahead.

Undoubtedly the Qassam attack on the IDF base in Zikkim near the Gaza border will evoke a response. With 69 soldiers wounded, one critically and others seriously, the stakes have suddenly gotten much higher. Whereas parents of school children under constant, indiscriminate fire in Sderot failed to sufficiently raise the attention of the government, parents of the new recruits stationed at this vulnerable southern base may yet succeed. The public is clamoring for a solution, for an end to missiles and the fortification of cities.

This is eerily reminiscent of Israel's precarious situation of just over one year ago, when the IDF was focused on the Shalit kidnapping in the south while tensions rose higher in the north. Now the military establishment is carefully balancing troop placement and priorities between Gaza and Syria. A reckoning is sure to come for the Zikim attack, either in the form of massive air or ground movement into Gaza, or by stopping the supply of gas and electricity. The current state of alert is high, and will remain so even beyond the holiday season around Israel's border with Gaza, at checkpoints in the West Bank and among the troops deployed in the Golan.

While this morning's Qassam attack was an unexpected blow, it is no surprise that Hamas is ratcheting up its activity. Experts have long assumed that Hamas will try to be the spoiler of the current process, to disrupt the Fatah-Israeli negotiations and derail the November peace conference. Certainly, the prospect of Secretary Rice's visit next week and the cautious progress toward a declaration of principles between Olmert and Abu Mazen, as reported by Palestinian negotiator Dr. Saeb Erekat, would have been enough incentive. But the dramatic abduction last Saturday night of Hamas leader Mahawish Al-Qadi raised the bar significantly. In a daring raid, Al Qadi, who was involved in the Gilad Shalit kidnapping, was nabbed from deep within Gaza by Israeli commandos dressed as members of Hamas' Executive Force.

A poll earlier this month conducted by Dr. Khalil Shikaki of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research gives Hamas cause to worry about their stature among the Palestinian people. Fully 73% oppose the Hamas military takeover of the Gaza Strip, with only 22% in support. Fifty-two percent disagree that the Haniyeh government should stay in office despite its dismissal by President Abbas, while 40% agree. And 49% agree, and 44% disagree, that the government of Prime Minister Fayyad should stay in office. In general, West Bankers feel more optimistic about their future, with 56% expecting economic conditions to improve, and 47% expecting improvement in the levels of democracy, freedom of speech and press. Among Gazans, only 21% expect economic improvement and 28% expect their democratic situation to improve.

Israelis were also polled last week by Mina Tzema of Dahaf in Yedioth Ahronoth. The general mood is good,

according to 86% of those surveyed, and the same number think Israel is a good place to live. Seventy-two percent view the security situation as bad, but 82% trust the IDF to defend the country. Still, a full 25% are not sure Israel will be around for a long time to come. As for the situation regarding the peace process, 82% think it is bad; only 13% think it is good. Yet 52% view the economic situation as good, with 44% seeing it as bad. National unity is seen by 36% to be good and 61% to be bad.

That last gap could grow even wider if the progress being whispered about the Olmert - Abu Mazen talks turns out to be true. Haim Ramon, the rehabilitated former Minister of Justice who was suspended for sexual harassment, is back in the Cabinet as the consigliere of Prime Minister Olmert. He alone seems to have Olmert's complete trust, even though he is not a member of the newly formed exclusive "kitchenette", the security-diplomatic forum limited to Olmert, Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, and dedicated to the proposition that continued silence prevails and no leaks are sprung. Ramon seems to be playing to Olmert what Olmert played to then Prime Minister Sharon – a floater of diplomatic balloons, tester of waters, checker of the people's pulse. As senior Yedioth Ahronoth reporters Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer wrote last weekend, "Haim Ramon is the dove that Ehud Olmert sends to the Palestinians with an olive branch in his mouth."

According to Barnea and Shiffer, Ramon proposed in meetings with Salam Fayyad and General Omar Suleiman, Director of Egyptian Intelligence, the formulation of a document of principles, which, "for the first time in the history of the conflict, would set an agreed-on and binding basis for the essence of a comprehensive arrangement." Based on the Clinton parameters, the document will cover the four core issues of the conflict: borders, security, Jerusalem, refugees. Barnea and Shiffer also reported that Ramon told the Palestinians that "the moment Israel built the separation fence it determined its border in the West Bank," meaning that some 3% to 8% of the West Bank would be annexed to Israel. In a land swap, they continued, "the Palestinians would be compensated for the territories they lost with identical territory inside the Green Line." In proposing a land corridor between Gaza and Hebron, Ramon reportedly told the Palestinians, "You will be able to say that you received 100% of the territory. We will be able to tell our public that we included the settlement blocs, as Bush promised in his letter of April 14, 2004." The security plan formulated by American Gen. Keith Dayton would be the basis of new security arrangements, continued Barnea and Shiffer. East Jerusalem would be divided between the two states and in the holy basin each religion would be responsible for its holy places. On refugees, the most complex issue, they explained, Ramon is reportedly pressing for the right of return to be realized in the Palestinian state with an international foundation established to pay for rehabilitating the refugees.

Ramon, of course, is not talking.

As we in Israel rise in silent prayer during these Days of Awe, let us pray that our leaders find the wisdom, courage and resolve to bring this conflict to an end -- even if they aren't sharing the details. It is much better for our leaders to be getting something done and not talking about it, than getting nothing done and calling press conferences. Let's hope that lurking behind this quiet approach are vociferous, intense efforts for a renewed process that will bring us all a year of peace.
