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## A Passover prayer for a challenge of biblical size

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Jews everywhere are about to commemorate the Exodus of the ancient Israelites from the land of Egypt. For Israeli children, the immediate cause for celebration is the exodus from school into a long Passover vacation. But for us, as parents of two Israeli junior high students, school breaks only intensify our ever-present anxiety. This year even more so, because even by local standards the prelude to this holiday season has been inordinately disturbing.

First came the assassination by Israeli forces of Hamas leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin, bringing with it heightened fears of a renewed wave of terrorism. We frankly expected a mega-attack in the days immediately following the killing of Yassin, a man responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent Israeli civilians but a hero on the Palestinian street. It didn't happen. Instead, a sickening story dominated the nightly news: Husam Abdu, the terrified young Palestinian teenager who for about \$22 and the promise of sexual bliss in the afterlife agreed to blow himself up, along with as many Israelis as possible, at a military checkpoint in the West Bank. Abdu was disarmed, but alas, he was only one of many Palestinian kids ready to die.

And now, with Passover upon us, we wait for the next big boom. For the last 3 1/2 years, we have kept our kids off public buses. With school now out, we are telling them to stay away from crowded areas as well. We veto trips to the mall or the movies. Instead we huddle at home, watching a season's worth of "24" on DVD, seeking comfort in four hours of rapt immersion in someone else's endless, implausible problems.

Unfortunately, it is hard to find comfort in our leaders. We are not uplifted by the political maneuvering of a prime minister who finds himself under the Damoclean sword of possible indictment on corruption charges. Ariel Sharon's call for a Likud Party referendum on his plan to "disengage" from the Gaza Strip offers a handy diversion from his failure to protect the public from harm, cultivate moderate Palestinians as peace partners and provide a model of moral leadership.

Opinion polls in the aftermath of Yassin's death reflected a long-standing contradiction in the public mind: Whereas 60% of Israelis believed killing the Hamas leader was the right thing to do, 80% thought it would lead to increased terrorism. If that's the case, why on earth do it? The answer is painfully simple: These are not rational times. The urge for revenge, the compulsion to meet violence with violence, and - perhaps above all - the abject paucity of heroic, determined leadership give rise to a climate of demoralization and despair.

Yet as parents it is our duty to be rational. Too many children on both sides are falling victim to the failure of their elders to arrive at a solution. Even those children who have been spared any direct trauma, who know no one who has been physically harmed, who exhibit no signs of anxiety or depression - what will be the long-term effects of our brutal environment upon them? This mad, intractable conflict is surely a form of psychological pollution that infiltrates the system slowly and silently, like lead poisoning.

Not long ago, during a walk around the neighborhood with kids and dog, we passed the spot where a few weeks back a bus blew up. It was our son who, with dismaying matter-of-factness, pointed out the hand-painted sign: "Jewish blood was spilled here."

At the very heart of the Passover tradition is the obligation to teach our children the lessons of the Exodus, of oppression and redemption, as if we and they experienced it firsthand.

At the Seder, during the recitation of the Ten Plagues, we spill 10 small drops of wine as a reminder that we must not gloat over the deaths of our enemies, who are made, just as we are, in the image of God. But tradition also holds that at the Seder we impart to our children a central lesson of Jewish history: "In every generation there are those who rise up and seek to destroy us."

Our challenge as parents - and as Jews and Israelis - is to find the balance between these two competing imperatives. Our leaders face an even greater challenge: to take us out of the barren desert of war into a promised land of peace. We know well that this cannot be accomplished without the determined, active engagement of the American government.

This year in Jerusalem, our Passover prayer is that men and women of courage and vision will finally find the way to divide this troubled land between its two peoples - a task that today seems as difficult as the parting of the Red Sea.