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Encountering Peace: The disposal of myths

By GERSHON BASKIN
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We have been repeating the same truisms that fit appropriately with our justifications for our positions in this conflict.

Talkbacks (5)

Too much of what is commonly known about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is generated by the constant repetition of truisms that fit the justifications of one side's explanations. Too few of us bother to weigh the possibility that there might be another interpretation of reality. If so, it might also suggest that our own may not be the exclusive version of truth.

I am writing this article on the basis of two pieces that appeared in this newspaper. The first, the article entitled "Proximity? It's a start" from March 4, and a more recent article by Ben Dror Yemini – "A Fatal Blow to peace" on April 7. Both are filled with peace process truisms that have become cornerstones of Israeli popular thought. I will challenge them.

The March 4 piece states: "...that this time the Palestinians will reconcile themselves to Israel's existence and negotiate for a viable settlement accordingly..." It is a well-known fact that the Palestinians have never really recognized Israel. Correct? Actually, no. Even in the Palestinian National Conference in November 1988 the PLO accepted the two-state solution as their strategic choice, reconciling themselves to the fact that Palestine would be established on only 22 percent of the land between the river and the sea. In September 13, 1993 Yasser Arafat exchanged letters of mutual recognition with prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Arafat stated: "The PLO recognizes the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security."

In return Rabin wrote to Arafat that "the government of Israel has decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process" (hardly a balanced act of mutuality – we received recognition of our state and they received recognition of their leadership).

Surely the editors of The Jerusalem Post and Yemini would claim that the Palestinians never recognized Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, but only the existence of Israel. This is perhaps true, but until the Annapolis summit of November 2007 there was never an Israeli demand that the Palestinians recognize the Jewishness of Israel. Nor has Israel made that demand from any other state that we have diplomatic relations with – not even from Egypt or Jordan.

Most Palestinians view this demand as a new hurdle they are being forced to jump over when they have never received any Israeli assurance regarding their own national rights. They also see it as a trick to remove the refugee issue from the negotiating table, and as a means to facilitate plans from the likes of Avigdor Lieberman to expel the Palestinian citizens of Israel who are living on their own land for generations.

Of course it would be nice if the Palestinians recognized that the State of Israel is the



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nation-state of the Jewish people. It would please me personally, especially if we could say that it is the national-state of the Jewish people and of all of its citizens, but I can also live and make peace with the Palestinian people sufficing with their state-to-state recognition of Israel as neighbors seeking to live side by side in peace. The Jewishness of Israel will be decided by the Jews who are Israelis and not by the Palestinians.

BOTH THE editorial and Yemini relate in detail to the Palestinian refusal to accept Ehud Barak's "generous" offer in Camp David in July 2000. To this point I would like to use the tools of simple rational thought and then present some facts about what was really offered.

Camp David was convened after Barak demanded from Bill Clinton that he head a summit of the leaders. At the 14-day summit, Barak actually refused to negotiate directly with Arafat, and there were no direct Barak-Arafat negotiations. When the summit concluded as a failure, after agreeing that negotiations would continue and that no blame would be placed on one of the parties, both Clinton and Barak praised each other and Arafat took the blame for the failure.

But even after the second intifada exploded in the end of September 2000, negotiations continued. In January 2001 another summit was held in Taba (this time without the leaders) and substantial progress toward an agreement was achieved. Between Camp David and Taba, the negotiating teams met 52 times. The Taba "offer" came a lot closer to reaching an agreement than at Camp David – so where is the logic that Camp David composed the most generous offer possible?

The truth is that no Palestinian in the world could have accepted the Camp David offer. It was composed of 89% of the West Bank with two Israeli sovereign west-east corridors cutting the Palestinian state into three cantons, with Israeli sovereignty over all of Palestine's external borders – what the Palestinians called a "sovereign cage." Additionally the offer did not include any Palestinian sovereignty inside Jerusalem with the exception of the outlying neighborhoods, and no Palestinian control over the al-Aksa Mosque. Camp David exploded when Barak demanded to build a synagogue on the Temple Mount.

The Taba talks were based on the Clinton parameters issued at the end of December 2000. As a member of Barak's team of experts on Jerusalem prior to Taba, we were told by Barak to design our proposals on the basis of the political division of Jerusalem according to Clinton. Although it took Arafat 18 months to formally accept the Clinton proposals, his team at Taba was also instructed to work on the basis of the Clinton parameters. Great progress was made in Taba, but it ended before it could reach agreement because it took place 10 days before elections that brought Ariel Sharon to power and Barak had no public legitimacy by that point.

BOTH THE opinion piece and Yemini expand on Ehud Olmert's offer to Mahmoud Abbas. Yemini states that Abbas rejected it because it fell short on the refugee issue, stating that he "demanded a mass right of return." In the Palestinian narrative there was no real offer. Olmert's offer was leaked to the Israeli press along with the Palestinian rejection. Abbas's spokesman responded: "Olmert's plan showed a lack of seriousness." Later Abbas also commented that the gaps were too wide.

Interestingly, both Abbas and Olmert now say that with more time it would have been possible to reach an agreement. They both say they found a partner on the other side. Surprisingly they both concur that the main obstacle was not Jerusalem or refugees, but territory.

Lastly, it is essential to deal with the so-called Palestinian refusal to enter negotiations until there is a settlement freeze. Both the editorial and Yemini stress this point repeatedly. They say that the Palestinians never demanded such a freeze in the past and always negotiated while Israel built more settlements. That is true, and that is why Palestinians believe it must be stopped now.

Even with Palestinian refusal to enter negotiations while settlement building continues, there has never been a better partner for peace on the Palestinian side than there is today. The main problem is that there is no real partner for peace in Jerusalem.

The writer is co-CEO of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (www.ipri.org) and an elected member of the leadership of the Green Movement party.

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