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Middle East



Holding the whole

by **Shelley Ostroff**
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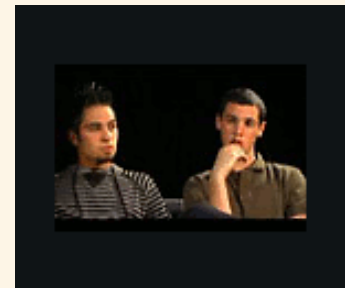
JERUSALEM – Israel’s military power and diplomatic efforts are crucial to its survival, but at this point they are clearly insufficient for ongoing security. Since the recent Cast Lead operation, and the concomitant reported rise in anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism around the world, it is not only the people in the South of Israel who feel threatened, but also Israelis and Jews living in other parts of the globe. Legitimate or not, our current strategies are creating more and more enemies and less and less places where we are safe. Something in what we are doing is painfully counterproductive. We have triggered even more rage, revenge and damage to our long-term security. Our actions and policies are based on the premise that we have no choice because we clearly have no partner for peace. Our challenge is to creatively find choices even in the face of a reality that seems to be increasingly threatening and limited.

In the face of threat and chaos, people crave reassurance and order. Statements such as, "We have no partner," or "All they understand is force," provide a sense of order but also deny windows of opportunity offered by different perspectives. There are enormous ramifications to how we define reality and where we choose to put our attention. Very different policies will emerge from the question, "How do we weaken or destroy our enemy," than from the question, "How do we promote a culture that reduces enmity and in which peace and cooperation thrive". We focus primarily on the first and severely neglect the second. Hitting the enemy even harder this time will only go so far in creating a lull in the ongoing battle which will only be intensified the next time round.

Peace can rarely last in cultures where there is a sense of injustice, exclusion or disenfranchisement. Peace generally thrives in a situation where everyone has benefit from it. Given the fact that the real threat is the psychological enmity and distrust between the nations, it is shocking that so few financial and brain resources in Israel have been invested in the psychological dimension of peace building in comparison with those invested in reactive defensive military options. The military action addresses only the symptom, but does not heal the culture that forges the symptom of violence. It does not work towards the active building of trust and goodwill.

Diplomacy of negotiations around land and prisoners is insufficient in building lasting peace. It needs to be supplemented by a diplomacy that emphasises the real gains

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for both sides from mutual cooperation, and that works towards building trust and goodwill. It needs to work on undoing stereotypes and generalisations, increasing opportunities for meaningful relationships and financial and social cooperation around common interests. It needs to address the deeper issues of dissent and instil the promise of a future where all people will feel they have hope and opportunity.

Not only are our relations with the Palestinians based on a domination-submission paradigm, Israel's internal policies are also plagued by paradigms of power over the other: win and lose, privilege and disenfranchisement, inclusion and exclusion. Such mind-sets and policies can only engender resentment, rage and conflict. Locally parties appeal to the electorate on identity parameters such as religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, country of origin, as well as, of course, nationality. Even within Israel, we bunker ourselves into smaller ghetto-like identity groups, and there are many rifts between them. We have not yet matured enough to bring forth a non-partisan leader who is willing to serve all the people to whom he or she is ultimately responsible and over whom he or she has inordinate power. This means that whatever the outcome of the elections, certain groups will feel included and others excluded.

US President Barack Obama is beginning to offer the world a different path. He is trying to move beyond habitual fear-driven modes of blame, threat and divisiveness in the face of conflict, to a peace-building, inclusive, trust-engendering model of security and mutual accountability, with the stated intention of prosperity and well being for all. Americans, who were until recently becoming more and more unpopular in many countries due to their politics, were able in a historic moment to transcend old paradigms, prejudices and fears and to make a bold choice. In doing so, within days they went from being hated by many to being hailed as courageous and generous citizens who offered the world new inspiration and hope. Clearly it will not be easy for Obama to promote these values in a world that is steeped in divisive paradigms, but this is perhaps the opening of a new global path.

One can dismiss the relevance of Obama's type of leadership in the Israeli context by emphasising the differences in the political realities of the two countries - but that would be too easy. It is worthwhile to learn what is relevant from the processes that contributed to his world-wide radical success in a time of threat and crisis. Only actions based on a true vision of respect and inclusivity can contribute in a serious way to reversing the trauma vortex, healing the past and building the social, psychological and material foundations for a different future. Such a future must be based on mutual accountability, interdependence and social responsibility in the widest sense of the terms. These are the cornerstones of real discussions and actions towards a constructive and lasting peace within Israel and with our neighbours.

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*Shelley Ostroff, PhD is a consultant living in Jerusalem. This article was written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews).

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