

OPINION / Can we change Hamas? It's worth a try

By Rabbi Menachem Froman

Maybe now, as the guns have fallen silent, it is time to talk a little about peace. Solomon, the wisest of people, listed the contradictions apparent in the human experience: "A time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace," (Ecclesiastes 3). War is life's negative polarity.

Maimonides, the greatest Jewish scholar, wrote that every sentence in the Torah was there to bring peace to the world. The Creator's name in both the Jewish and Muslim tradition is "peace."

How, then, does the Torah and the Creator permit war? The answer is that our world is full of contradictions: Sometimes waging war is a way of reaching peace and this must always be kept in mind. When one goes down the war path that ultimate goal must never be forgotten. During the "Gaza War" the question of how Israel defined its goals for the operation kept resurfacing time and again. It is morally and pragmatically wrong to stop half-way. "Changing the security reality" and "obtaining a lasting calm" are worthy goals. But as Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said: "Have no fear at all," and go all the way. Do not fear to define the operation's targets as mid-way stops en route to the final goal of peace.

For that we need our actions to match our thoughts. We should not fear being called naive; a radio commentator calling us surreal or a politician thinking we're crazy. On the contrary, when reality is crazy then logic and common sense require us to seek crazy solutions.

In brief, there are two ways to win the war: Either force your enemies to capitulate entirely or make them change their mind so they cease defining themselves as your enemies. Do we currently have the capability of entirely effacing Hamas? On the other hand, can we change Hamas' hostile stance? From years' experience dealing with Hamas leaders and their ideology, I can say that there is such a chance and we should try.

The election of the first black president of the U.S., Barack Obama, makes one believe that surprising changes can happen. Hamas' basic hostility toward Israel and the U.S. is rooted in its feeling that "the world is against it." However, that may soon change. Obama is about to give Hamas an opportunity to change its hostile stance. From my acquaintance with the Hamas leadership and its state of mind, it will not remain indifferent to such an overture and will be willing to take action to prove it is not part of the forces fighting world peace. It may consider a peace treaty with the Jews as serving its interests of gaining recognition by the U.S. and the West.

Should we assist Hamas in reaching that decision? Should we reach an agreement with it that will change its stance toward us and the world? Answering that question requires a detailed debate on many issues, including the nature of Islam, its accommodation of change, expected developments in the international arena and relations between the PLO and Hamas, as well as how we view our ties with our neighbors.

For now, perhaps it's best to raise questions concerning the goals of the war in Gaza. After all,

aren't peace talks the best way to "change the security reality" and obtain "a long-term calm"? Isn't it best to use the blow Hamas suffered to have it change its position?

It certainly is, but it's easier said than done. It's easier to remain entrenched in one's preconceptions. Changing those preconceptions requires new ways of thinking. For instance, to successfully negotiate with Hamas, one needs to understand how the religious organization thinks. From my personal experience, those who understand that best are religious Jews. If so, then we should send our rabbis to speak to Hamas. Common sense shows chances of their succeeding in talks are greater.

Even the people who claim to lead the Israeli peace camp and Kadima - which splintered from Likud because it allegedly wanted to make peace - are scared to say the "Gaza War" was fought to obtain peace. In a situation where peace is considered an unrealistic objective, we need men of faith to return our former glory. Men of faith who will bring back our faith in our original beliefs, Zionism's original belief as is written in Leviticus: "I will give peace in the land."

The writer is the rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Tekoa, and has many years' experience of engaging in dialogue with Hamas.