

Letter from Daniel Bar-Tal on Gaza War

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This is probably one of the most difficult periods in my political life as a Jew living in the State of Israel. The events of the war in Gaza hit hard my foundations of hope that a peaceful resolution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians can be achieved in the near future. Moreover, my trust in humanity has been weakened, seeing the ease with which human beings rally for war, exercise blind patriotism, express desire for vengeance, delegitimize the opponent, and develop insensitivity to human life, denial of responsibility, self-righteousness and moral entitlement. This is in contrast to the great difficulty that human beings have in mobilizing for peace. We see over and over again that it takes many years and many efforts to persuade people of the importance of peace, but it takes an extremely short time to convince people of the need for war. It is even more difficult to establish moral considerations.

I have been agonizing for weeks whether to write an open letter. I could not bring myself to paper and pencil or to the keyboard, feeling despair and helplessness. But only a responsibility to voice another opinion as an alternative to the officially presented views that are supported by the great majority of Israeli Jews brought me to write this letter. It is important that you know that there is a minority of us, Jews in Israel, who care about moral considerations and opposed this war.

What can I say when I know that about 1300 Palestinians were killed, at least half of them innocent civilians, including children, women, and old people, over 4000 were injured, thousands of homes were destroyed, and tens of thousands became homeless? Also on the Israeli side, 13 Israelis were killed, including three civilians, hundreds were wounded, and thousands had to escape from the hundreds of rockets that were fired on Israel. I could repeat the arguments of the Israeli government that over the years many hundreds of rockets were fired on Israeli territory west of Gaza, including populated settlements; that no government would allow its citizens to be hurt; that "after eight years of restraint, Israel has decided to act against the terror attacks coming from the Gaza Strip. Israeli restraint was misinterpreted as weakness by Hamas and members of the vertical axis of extremism led by Iran";...that "Israel had given a mutual agreement to preserve peace its final chance when it agreed to the Egyptian-brokered Period of Calm agreement in June 2008, whose terms were repeatedly transgressed by Hamas." It is natural that those who sent soldiers to war have to defend it and rationalize it. This is a human principle.

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Daniel Bar-Tal with his daughter Galiya

But these arguments do not tell the whole story. Even if we accept the Israeli arguments without background and complexity, they cannot account for the scope of civilian losses and destruction on the Palestinian side. The brutality and scope of Israeli actions testify to deeper roots in the darker side of human beings. They express the wish to erase the feeling of failure in the Second Lebanese War during the summer of 2006; they reflect a deep sense of collective victimhood because of the continuous firing of rockets on civilian settlements in the south by the Hamas military arm— this sense of victimhood led to the urge to revenge in order to punish the harm done and prevent further firing. In addition, they are derived from the continuous dehumanization of Hamas as an organization. Finally, they are based on the conviction that Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, allowing Palestinians to live their lives, and instead the latter engage in terror.

But the reality is much more complex than the narrative perpetuated by the Israeli political and military establishments, which successfully constructed the beliefs of the Jewish public in Israel. This is an irony because one of the objectives of the war was to carve the consciousness of the Palestinians so they would recognize the harm that Hamas is causing the Palestinian cause and Palestinian life. This objective was not achieved, and instead the war strengthened the hatred and mistrust of both sides towards the other, reinforcing the support of hawkish opinions on both sides, and as a result, the peace process is further damaged. Moreover, it is hard to detect any meaningful political gains for Israel in the balance of this war. We are back to the same lines that existed before the war—with terrible losses and destruction.

The psychological analysis of the situation illustrates the selective, biased and distorting transmission and dissemination of information by Israeli channels of communication. It does not mean that alternative information does not exist in Israel, but very few are interested in knowing what is really happening. Thus, most Israeli Jews do not know what Israel perpetrated

continued on following page

through decades of occupying Gaza; most Israeli Jews do not know that Hamas was originally founded by the Israeli authorities to provide an alternative to the national movement of PLO; most Israeli Jews do not know that Hamas is a religious fundamentalist movement that also provides welfare, health and educational services to the Palestinian people; most Israeli Jews do not know that Hamas was elected democratically (on the insistence of the U.S.) to lead the government of the Palestinian Authority because of Fatah corruption, and mostly because of the fruitless negotiations with Israel which did not provide any political solution to the conflict; most Israeli Jews do not know that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy of "No Palestinian Partner" led to unilateral disengagement from Gaza without negotiation with the Palestinian Authority. This was done in order to delegitimize the Palestinian Authority in an attempt to maintain control over the West Bank. Moreover, the disengagement did not free Gaza but turned it into one big prison. Israel controls the entrances to Gaza and controls every aspect of human life in Gaza. It decided to change the support of Gazans for Hamas by carrying out a siege that allowed minimal living and brought Gaza to economic disaster. Israeli Jews know that even after disengagement, Hamas continues to fire rockets on Israeli civilian settlements, but few know that during 2005–2008, hundreds of Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces. Few know that the tunnels were built mainly to smuggle civilian goods that could not be brought to Gaza, and not only weapons, as the great majority believe. Few know that there is a relationship between Israeli violence and Palestinian violence, preferring to see the latter as irrational, fanatic, and immoral, and the former as defensive, moral and justified.

Few Israeli Jews are aware that Israel, for two years, had at least two alternative strategies to prevent further escalation; either to talk with Hamas and negotiate a long-term cease-fire, or take decisive actions for peace (for example, to ease conditions of life for the Palestinians by removing many of the checkpoints and to remove illegal settlements as required by Israel's promise to the U.S.) vis à vis President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority to show the Palestinians that the peace process can yield tangible fruits that lead to prosperity and security. Even when we turn to the period before the war, most Israeli Jews do not know that it was possible to negotiate a continuation of the ceasefire with Hamas and do not remember that it was Israel that broke the ceasefire of November 4, 2008, by killing six Palestinians. Hamas is not my cup of tea, since it is a religious fundamentalist organization that also practices terrorism, but it is also a social movement with wide support in Palestinian society because it provides an alternative to the humiliated Palestinian national identity. This movement is not homogenous, and it is possible to detect in it different voices, including some that support negotiation with Israel and acceptance of a two-state solution.

All these omissions are not surprising in view of the fact that the two sides involved in conflict have been deeply embedded in the culture of conflict. They systematically try to construct the views of society in the

direction of presenting their own society as moral, just, peace-loving, or moderate, and the rival as immoral, intransigent, violent, irrational, or extreme. In addition, each side views itself as the victim of this conflict. This process has gone on for decades. Only for a few years during Rabin's time did it look as though the peace process was gaining momentum. But since the year 2000, when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak implemented the policy of "no partner", the peace process has been dying. It is true that Palestinians have their share in the failure of the Oslo process. But the tremendous asymmetry of power puts the responsibility for the continuation of the conflict mostly on the Israeli side. It is Israel that has almost all the cards to solve the conflict; it occupies the land, holds East Jerusalem, controls the life of the Palestinians, controls the resources of the West Bank, constantly expands Jewish settlements on the West Bank, exercises preventive and punishing violent acts and has (at least until now) the almost unconditional backing of the world's sole superpower.

The contours of the potential settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are more or less clear: If it happens, it will be in accordance with the Clinton proposal, Taba understandings, the Geneva agreement, and the Arab League proposal: Israel will have to return to 1967 borders with some swaps of land in order to hold the most populated clusters of Jewish settlements just beyond the Green Line of 1967, Jerusalem will be divided, most of the Jewish settlements inside the territories will be dismantled, and the refugee problem will have to be solved by a common agreement, with their compensation and settlement mostly in the future Palestinian state. Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert openly outlined these principles to the Israeli public but did not take any concrete steps to implement them. The Israeli public, while recognizing the need for a two-state solution (because of the demographic fear), objects to the outlined principles. The majority of Israeli Jews object to dividing Jerusalem, withdrawing to 1967 borders and dismantling most Jewish settlements in the West Bank. In fact I must admit that I do not see any Israeli government evacuating about 60,000 Jewish settlers from the West Bank. The Israeli Jewish public, since the destruction of the peace process in 2000, has been moving steadily towards hawkish-nationalistic views. The present war provided an additional blow to the peace camp. It is almost certain that the next Israeli government will be very hawkish after the February 10 elections.

The rest will be written in the history books. The Gaza war did not erupt spontaneously but was well prepared, including its scope, the type of weapons used, and so on. Also, it was consciously decided to use disproportionate force in order to save lives of Israeli soldiers and teach the Palestinians a lesson. The results of the war are tragic for both nations. It provided unequivocal evidence to each side that the other side is evil and immoral. Now a few of us here and there can only evaluate the tragedy, explain the events and pray for a miracle from outside forces that will come and save us from the worst human instincts. ♦