

Our Trip in Israel and the Palestinian Territories March 14-20, 2006

By Diane Balsler, Executive Director, and Rob Levy, Washington Representative



Just this past March, with the help of our dear friends from the Geneva Initiative, Rob Levy and I had a number of incredible meetings with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, leaders, and politicians. The conversations were sometimes difficult, occasionally frustrating, and always enlightening.

The main topic of discussion in our meetings with the Israelis was the political elections taking place, Olmert's unilateral withdrawal (or "convergence") plan, and the possibilities for negotiations. As we know, there have many been attacks from the right, particularly from religious parties, against withdrawing from even part of the West Bank. Labor and Meretz still favor negotiations and see unilateralism as a default plan. However, both would join an Olmert led coalition, and if need be would ultimately support a unilateral withdrawal. Among those whom we spoke to there were differences between those who rejected unilateralism outright, and others who reluctantly accepted it as the best possibility in the present situation.

We also traveled around the West Bank and witnessed many of the injustices of the occupation: bypass roads, settlements, the security barrier, and the disappearance of parts of the green line. Some of our most inspiring meetings, indeed, were with Palestinians who are working for peace among their own people.

All the people we spoke with supported a two state solution. All feared that the possibility for two real states was diminishing.

Tuesday, March 14

Akiva Eldar, Haaretz diplomatic affairs analyst

My first day in Israel I met Akiva Eldar, writer for Haaretz. He proposed that after the Israeli election Olmert should meet with Abu Mazen (Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas) to begin negotiations and at least issue a joint statement. This could be US sponsored. Olmert has since made precisely that offer (though he has since rejected negotiating with Abbas). Akiva was very critical of unilateralism, feeling that Israel shouldn't give up land for free. He was concerned that Olmert's plan includes maintaining Israeli control of Ariel and into the Jordan Valley (thereby cantonizing the West Bank). Israel and the Palestinians need to have dialogue and not give in to the radicals on either side. In as little as five years it could be the end of bilateralism.

Wednesday, March 15

Janet Aviad, board member and long-time leader of Shalom Achsav (Peace Now)

It was very interesting to meet someone who has been involved with Peace Now from the beginning. Personally, she has waited and worked for peace for 30 years. She noted the lack of activity and excitement around the elections, due, in her view, to the fact that the results were already known. She saw no real mobilization around Peretz, despite much initial excitement.

Janet felt that the security barrier is no longer something that can be mobilized around, and that the majority of the left now accepts it, except for around the Ariel Bloc. However, Rob and I met others who disagreed, and believed that the security barrier was very problematic because it prejudices borders, extends far beyond the Green Line, and takes Palestinian land, particularly around Jerusalem.

Janet felt that once Olmert becomes Prime Minister he should attempt to negotiate with the Palestinians. There is nothing to lose and Olmert needs to keep the left (Labor, Meretz) in his coalition. However, she also noted that it is not hard in Israel to argue that there is no partner for peace.

Olmert would unilaterally give up 91% of the West Bank as part of his "convergence" plan (in Hebrew the word is *hitkansut*, "gathering oneself together"). Janet expected Peace Now to support "convergence," unless it includes E1 or Ariel. Bush would likely have concerns about those areas as well.

Janet claimed that she and others in Peace Now were responsible for the Blue Ribbon Campaign, which supported the Gaza disengagement and countered the orange ribbon campaign. She believed that they will have to do the same for West Bank disengagement.

While it is true that negotiations are the best option, and, that Israel has destroyed the Palestinian infrastructure, she felt that you have to deal with the present. You have to organize in favor of unilateralism, especially because the settler opposition will be very strong. Without withdrawal, more settlements will be built.

She summed up it as follows: moral issues move the base, and pragmatics move the people.

Tour of the West Bank with B'tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories

This tour, perhaps more than any meeting, brought home the realities of life under occupation. Risa Zoll, Director of International Relations for B'tselem, took us on a tour of the West Bank in an armored jeep. B'tselem is a wonderful organization that is a real source of pride for many Israelis. B'tselem is not a political group like Brit Tzedek, but a human rights organization whose tenets are in international human rights law. As such, it does not take positions on particular policies or deal with politicians; rather, it produces in-depth reports on such subjects as settlement growth, the route of the security barrier, the situation at checkpoints, and so on – and it speaks with a resounding moral clarity and integrity. Understanding the difference between what they can and can't do as a human rights organization, and what we can and can't do as a political organization, was very enlightening.



(Israeli-only highway cutting through Bethlehem)

The trip began outside Bethlehem, where we saw two walls, one which the Israelis in Gillo use to protect themselves from sniper fire, and one, the Israeli “security barrier” cutting through the Palestinian town of Beit Jala. We also had an excellent view of the Israeli-only highway, which connects Jerusalem with a number of outlying settlements, but is entirely off-limits for Palestinians. Right by the barrier itself, we could see a sign which read in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, “Mortal Danger - Military Zone - Any Person who Passes or Damages the Fence Endangers His Life.”



(Warning sign in front of the security barrier in Bethlehem)

From there we drove through Arab East Jerusalem and into Abu Dis, where the security barrier, here very much a wall, is simply a fact of the life. We viewed one incomplete section, where apparently thousands of Palestinian workers and students jump over a low-lying section of the wall every day. There was another section of the barrier, also still unfinished, which we could see was going to go directly between two homes. Apparently, one home had successfully petitioned to be on the Israeli side of the barrier, and the other had not. Graffiti on the barrier read, “Not for another Wailing Wall.”



(Security Barrier at Abu Dis)

From Abu Dis, we drove up Rt. 60, the major Israeli North-South highway in the West Bank, another Israeli-only road (many refer to it as the “apartheid road”). Our driver showed us the various roadblocks that prevent Palestinian roads from gaining access to this highway. As things stand now, Palestinians living in a town that is bisected by the highway often have to drive half an hour out of their way to go from one side of town to the other.

We stopped at a gas station outside Ofra, an Israeli settlement rather deep in the West Bank. We wanted to go in, but the guards were checking ID’s and our Israeli-Arab driver didn’t think he would be very welcome. We turned around and headed towards Bet El, another settlement right next to Ramallah. The guards there let us in without question, so we were able to drive into one of the oldest settlements in the West Bank (almost 30 years old). The biggest surprise about Israeli settlements in the West Bank was that they look just like Israeli towns inside the Green Line. The homes are quaint, made of beautiful Jerusalem stone and surrounded by manicured lawns. There are schools, buses, children, synagogues. Except for being surrounded by Palestinian towns and guarded by Israeli soldiers at all times, you would never know you were in the West Bank.



(Home in Bet El)

In a sense, it made it easier for us to understand the mindset of a settler, especially one who may have spent his or her entire life in one of these settlements. This was home, Israel, and, yes, the government had sent the settlers there originally. How dare they now force them to leave?

As we left Bet El, we noticed a few interesting signs. One read, “Olmert – Bad for the Jews,” from settlers who oppose withdrawal. One was a poster for the right-wing Avigdor Lieberman. And the final was a giant banner up on the hill by Bet El, which featured a quote by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the founder of Breslov Hassidism: “The Happy Life Forever.”

Thursday, March 16

Zvia Greenfeld, Meretz party candidate.



(L to R: Diane Balsler, Rob Levy, Ari (Zvia's assistant), Zvia Greenfeld)

Rob and I met with Zvia Greenfeld, an Ultra-Orthodox women who was number six on the Meretz party list (she missed joining the Knesset by one seat). She is a remarkable woman, a left-wing voice among the Orthodox in Israel, one which brings universal/ethical values as well as traditional Jewish values to peace issues and economic/social issues. She works for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and for Jewish and Muslim cooperation. She speaks out very clearly against anti-Arab prejudices. She does a lot of educational work among Orthodox (and many settlers) around civic values, and sees herself basing her work on true Jewish values. In essence, she wants to bring liberal values to the religious community and religious values to the liberal community.

People are taken with her in the Orthodox community (I met an Orthodox women on my trip who said she was going to vote for Meretz because of Zvia). Her three key focuses are the separation of religion and state, environmental issues, and social justice. She also sees that Meretz's task will be to lobby within the coalition for negotiations. According to her, Kadima hasn't yet concluded that you can't get what you want with half solutions like withdrawal. She feels that removing West Bank settlements would be a significantly more difficult task given the number of influential people living in these settlements.

She is optimistic, though, about the growing support in Israel, over the past twenty years, for a two state solution. As they have been for twenty years, those who support negotiations are still ahead of their time, but, she feels, that time will come. She is not very optimistic about Olmert, however, citing the fact that when he was Mayor of Jerusalem, the city became the poorest in Israel, and over 100,000 secular Israelis moved away.

She noted that there are divisions even in Hamas (a right-wing and a not-so-right-wing) and that starving the Palestinians will give power over completely to the far right.

Labor Party Headquarters



{L to R: Hagai Alon (Peretz's campaign manager), Diane Balsler, giant picture of Amir Peretz's head, Rob Levy, Daniel Levy (Geneva Initiative)}

We traveled to Tel Aviv, to have several meetings with Labor folks in the Labor party headquarters. It was exciting to be in a campaign headquarters, with people making calls and gathering posters. (Interestingly, in Tel Aviv we saw many more posters in general and particularly for Peretz, while in Jerusalem we noticed many posters for religious parties.) That night as we were leaving there was a rally of taxi cab drivers for Peretz outside the headquarters.

Hagai Alon, Amir Peretz's campaign manager.

Hagai is a politician and a pragmatist. He feels that we are in a different era now. The issues of debate are no longer only the religious and national ones which have dominated the political scene; now, social issues are paramount. The biggest concern for Labor is raising the minimum wage, followed by pensions and free education. As for the peace issue, the big difference between Olmert and Labor is the fact that Labor stresses negotiations first. For both, unilateralism is a default position, but something they would accept. Both think that Israel will keep the big settlement blocks.

Hagai explained that Peretz sees Abu Mazen as a partner for peace. He wants Israel to dialogue with other Arab countries, such as Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan. He believes we should be backing the moderate forces.

Colette Avital, Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, #12 on Labor party list



Colette is one of the leading women in the Labor Party. She was initially not a supporter of Peretz, but has stayed in Labor after working out her relationship with him. She felt that Peretz should have done more to keep Shimon Peres from leaving the party and joining Kadima. She is very clear in her support for negotiations and seriously questions unilateralism.

Colette claims that we have reached the end of ideology in Israel, and that Israel can consider only pragmatic solutions, with public opinion polls playing a large role in determining elections. However, polls must not be the deciding factor in political life, and she will initiate a piece of legislation that would ban public opinion polls in the month preceding an election.

She has backed legislation similar to our Bring the Settlers home campaign to offer voluntary compensation for people leaving the settlements.

She is very critical of Labor's use of U.S. consultants, who have encouraged the party to campaign on one message, or "sound byte." She believes that any candidate needs to talk about both national security and economic/social issues.

Sunday, March 19

Ron Pundak, Director of the Peres Center for Peace

Ron has a tremendous history and background in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. He was a key architect of the Oslo Accords and worked with Yossi Beilin on the Geneva Accords. He believes strongly that we need to revision Zionism in the twenty-first century, and to transform political opinion around a two-state solution.

Ron believes strongly in a negotiated settlement. His organization attempts to lay the groundwork for peace through Israeli-Palestinian projects which are not explicitly political – such as supporting coexistence programs, student leadership training, Israeli-Palestinian economic cooperation, and sports programs with Israeli and Palestinian youth.

Ron is skeptical about West Bank withdrawal, which he sees as very different from the Gaza withdrawal. Disengaging from the West Bank would not be a withdrawal to the Green Line, as in Gaza. Many soldiers would stay and many more settlers would oppose it. There would be no security beyond the security barrier and this would increase Hamas support.

Gary Sussman, Hartog School of Government and Policy, Tel Aviv University



Gary sees unilateralism as the ascendant paradigm whose weaknesses have not been properly explained. However, he feels that we cannot “swim against the wave.” Unilateralism is, like it or not, the prevailing idea, so we must ride this wave until we can find a better one. There are, according to him, two kinds of unilateralism – one that shuts the door to peace and one that leaves it open. We must demand the latter and prepare ourselves for the day after withdrawal, when we will be left with the same problem: unresolved conflict. Like Ron, he also recognizes the need for a new discourse on Zionism.

Naomi Chazan, Former MK

Naomi has been a great ally to Brit Tzedek. In her view, the elections point to Olmert and unilateralism. The elections will demonstrate public opinion concerning the relative merits of negotiations and unilateral action. The results of the elections will show whether Meretz and Labor can move policy toward negotiations.

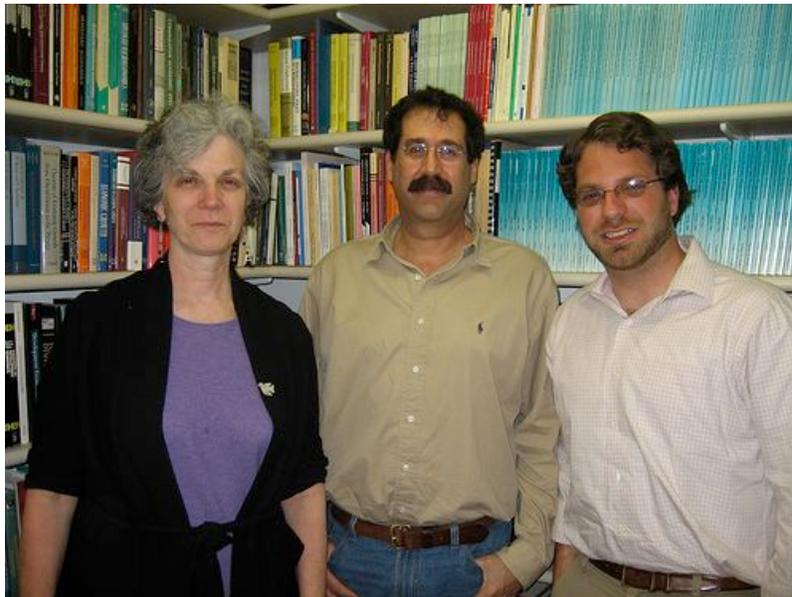
Naomi is against unilateralism, and explains the contradictions in it. If you don't practice unilateralism (absent negotiations) you are doomed to maintaining the occupation. If you do

pursue unilateralism, there is no sovereignty given to the Palestinians and there is no one in charge of the newly non-occupied territories. Look at the mess in Gaza. Naomi argues that successful unilateralism leads to negotiations.

She sees three options.

- 1) Rejectionism – This is the maintenance of the status quo and rejection of any decrease in the occupation. It risks escalating the conflict to a clash of civilizations between the Islamist movement and the West.
- 2) Unilateralism – This is conflict management, not conflict resolution. It leaves the Palestinians with responsibility but no real sovereignty. The Palestinians will not accept unilateralism. There will be no bread in Gaza, and they will blame Israel and the U.S. However, the unilateralists may be necessary to block off the rejectionists.
- 3) Negotiations – This is obviously the position of Brit Tzedek and our allies, and it can be effected in many ways: through underground channels, through the PLO and Abu Mazen, through selective engagement with Hamas in an exploratory way, and/or through coordination with the Arab League.

Daniel Ben David, Kadima candidate and economics professor at Tel Aviv University



Daniel is a macro-economist specializing in economic growth, international trade, and public policy. He served as advisor to the World Bank, and in 2000 was part of a team of economic advisors to Barak. He was #34 on the Kadima list, and therefore did not make it into the Knesset.

This was a fascinating meeting. Daniel has done a study of the growing poverty rate in Israel, and predicts a dire future for Israel if there is not a change in policy. Because he wanted to be part of that change, he entered the political arena. He initially wanted to be part of the Labor list, but got into some disagreements with Labor. Before he fell ill, Sharon courted him to join Kadima. Daniel believes that we can't wait for peace to fix Israel's problems.

As far as we could tell he is a free market economist (trained at the University of Chicago). While he has a very sophisticated understanding of the economic problems Israel is facing and will face, his solutions are far from global or progressive. His policies on peace are very mixed and generally fall in line with the Kadima platform of unilateralism. He is very concerned with keeping Israel Jewish and separate from the Palestinians.

Daniel Levy and others from the Geneva Initiative

We spent the rest of the day with our friends from the Geneva Initiative who think about all of these issues and what to do in Israel, the United States, Arab countries, and Europe. We discussed how Olmert will attempt to negotiate, and agreed that whether or not this is lip-service is largely up to the U.S. Jewish response. There can be no “permanent borders” without a “permanent agreement.”

We discussed how the peace movement needs to reframe the issue of negotiations so that it has some freshness to it. For example, referring to the Geneva Accords as such rather than as the “Beilin-Abed Rabbo plan” was a way of presenting that important endeavor with the excitement and appeal it deserved.

We also discussed the idea of “third-party plan” – relying on the use of Jordan, Egypt, or the Quartet to bring the two sides together rather than just the U.S.

Monday, March 20 - Ramallah

Yasser Abed Rabbo – Director of the Palestinian Peace Coalition, PLO Executive Committee member



Yasser was the key Palestinian negotiator of the Geneva Accords and is a good friend of Brit Tzedek’s. Trying not to be discouraged, he sees two major obstacles to peace.

1) Hamas- Let Hamas sink or swim. Hamas has no real program. He sees Israeli unilateralism and Hamas on similar paths of rejecting the other side.

2) Israel - which undermined the PLO and Abu Mazen. He feels that Israel was not really interested in negotiations when they had an opportunity and did not give or allow Abu Mazen any political achievements. Olmert will seek to define the borders of Israel including into the Jordan Valley

Yasser fears that collective punishment of the Palestinian people will strengthen Hamas. Hamas should fail not because they were punished, but because they do not have a program. He understood the Hamas victory as a protest vote, though he didn't give a real critique of Fatah.

We met also with other Palestinians connected to the Geneva Initiative, who definitely saw themselves as Palestinian peace activists still finding ways to promote the ideas of Geneva among Palestinians.

Gregory Khalil and Sanaa Hammoud, legal advisors to the PLO Negotiations Unit



(L to R: Rob Levy, Sanaa Hammoud, Gregory Khalil, Diane Balsler)

Our last visit was a lunch meeting with Gregory Khalil and Sanaa Hammoud, both legal advisors in the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO. They treated us to a wonderful Arabic restaurant in Ramallah.

Both were staunch activists, trained at U.S. law schools, who felt compelled to return to help their people. They felt that unless something happens soon the dream of two states would not become a reality. They explained that Gaza and the West Bank cannot be separated, as they depend on each other for economic resources. Unilateralism would prevent that coordination.

They explained many of the injustices of the occupation – East Jerusalemites being cutting off from the West Bank, high occupancy rates and low employment rates, and the security barrier cutting through the middle of Palestinian towns.

They were concerned that “parallel unilateralism” (i.e., Hamas on one hand, unilateral withdrawal on the other) masks true bilateralism. The two sides cannot act independently of each other. We also need a response to the argument that “Israel is taking risks for peace.”

Conclusion

There were many things that Rob and I got from this trip: new and/or stronger allies and a growing presence for Brit Tzedek within the broader peace camp in Israel. We both learned a lot emotionally as well as politically about the current state of the conflict and its real effect on Palestinians and Israelis. We came back re-inspired and re-committed to our work.