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Marcia Freedman Talks Peace

By Manny Frishberg

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The national president of the peace organization Brit Tzedek V'Shalom stood behind a folding chair, one of a small circle set up in the Stroum Jewish Community Center in North Seattle. A small, compact woman with a crown of silver grey hair, she could barely be heard until someone brought out a microphone.

The meeting, sponsored by Kadima and held the Sunday before Thanksgiving, was Marcia Freedman's second day in Western Washington and her voice was already showing the strain. She had spent the previous evening on Bainbridge Island and awaited another stop in Seattle before heading down to Olympia for an evening appearance at Temple Beth Hatfiloh.

Freedman is something of an historic figure in Israel — an early champion of women's rights and a member of the Knesset in the 1970s. In government she worked for reproductive rights and helped reform Israel's abortion laws, as well as focused attention and services on the problem of domestic violence. But, she explained, she committed herself to living full-time in the United States when she agreed to become the president of the American Jewish Alliance for Peace and Justice 18 months ago.

Like most commentators on the Middle East in the past few weeks, Freedman described a new hopeful atmosphere surrounding the prospects for peace in the region. She said there are a number of factors coming together now that make her more optimistic.

"There are three major new developments in the Middle East, both with the Palestinians and the Israelis, and here in the United States, that are opening a window of opportunity that could...begin to lead us in the direction of a negotiated settlement," she said. "What's happening on the Israeli side is extremely interesting and pretty unexpected. I don't know anybody, including myself, who ever would have predicted that Ariel Sharon would have some major change of heart. But that seems to be what's going on."

Many people on the left and in the peace movement, she said, do not trust Sharon's word "and only trust what he does," Freedman said. While saying she agreed with the sentiment, she also said she would put her money on his going ahead with the planned evacuation of the Gaza settlements.

“The fact that Ariel Sharon said two months ago, or three months ago to the central committee of his own Likud Party, ‘We cannot continue to maintain an occupation over an unwilling population indefinitely’ ... has totally changed the discourse in the country,” she added. “My thought is that it’s better to be believing him and find out that you were wrong than to not believe him and find out that you are wrong,” Freedman said.

She predicted that there would be a change in the Israeli government in the next year — most likely the formation of a national unity government with the Labor bloc, with the other option as a call for early elections. She said Sharon has until March to get his budget adopted, and that she doesn’t think he will be able to do it with a parliamentary minority. A third of his cabinet has resigned in recent months over the Gaza issue.

“The other thing that happened that is extremely important, obviously, is the death of Yasser Arafat,” Freedman said. Among the frightful possibilities that have not come to pass since his passing, she continued, was the outbreak of chaos in the West Bank and Gaza with an outright bid for power by Hamas or the development of a political vacuum with no one stepping into the breach. Instead, said Freedman, the old guard leadership had acted to replace the charismatic one-man leadership style of Arafat with a newly minted respect for the rule of law by immediately announcing a date for new elections in January.

“It’s looking very promising and it’s also very iffy,” she said, “because we don’t know what’s going to happen.”

An additional piece of hopeful news she mentioned was that Hamas is reportedly considering entering into the January elections, at least at the local and legislative levels.

Freedman said it was important to recognize that Hamas has both a political and a military wings and that, like the IRA and Sinn Fein in Ireland, once the political entity becomes involved in the governing process, the role of the military wing is significantly weakened.

The third factor she listed as a positive development for Israeli-Arab peace is the reelection of George W. Bush. Freedman admitted to being a strong Kerry supporter, but said “it is a good thing for this particular issue at this particular time that Bush was reelected, and it’s a good thing for this particular issue at this particular time that the new Secretary of State is going to be Condoleezza Rice.”

Brit Tzedek V’Shalom has been spearheading a signature drive for an Open Letter to the Next President, which they began circulating, along with a number of other American Jewish organizations, before the Nov. 2 elections. Freedman

said Elliott Abrams, who holds a position in the National Security Council, has told them he will meet with them on behalf of the administration and accept the petitions. She said it is up to the U.S. to put the necessary pressure on Israel to create the conditions on the ground for successful Palestinian elections. They should withdraw troops from the main population centers and open up the roadblocks and checkpoints to allow freedom of travel within the territories.

Thus far, Sharon has said he would be willing to do so.

“Since President Bush does believe that it is the will of God that everybody has elections, then he is very committed ideologically to move forward,” Freedman said.

The letter calls upon the president to “commit our nation to vigorous and persistent engagement” in the process of seeking a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian disputes, and “that you appoint an internationally respected envoy at the highest level” within the first 100 days of the new administration.

“Because it was Bush who was reelected,” Freedman said, “he could immediately say yes, and he has given us the declaration of recommitment to get involved in setting up a Palestinian state during his term as president.”

Freedman noted that Bush had also given a commitment to Tony Blair to consider appointing a high level emissary when the British prime minister was in Washington recently. “So we’re going to be submitting a petition to a White House that has already met our demands, pretty much — which is pretty good going.”