

Settlements: Strategic Assets, Divine Rights or Obstacles to Peace
Dr. Eric R. Mandel

Once a year, I organize and lead an educational seminar that explores a facet of contemporary Israel. This year, our seminar looked past the often misleading headlines on settlements. We spoke at length with people who influence the debate, live the consequences of the decisions, and make the greatest impact both in Israel and abroad. The speakers spanned the political spectrum.

Etzion and Hevron Blocs/ Peace Now Perspective

Our trip began in the Etzion Bloc and Hevron Regions (Judea) south of Jerusalem. Our first interview was with **Shaul Goldstein**, Head of the Gush Etzion Regional Council. Mr. Goldstein said that “Gush Is history. It is what connects Jews, which is what makes a nation.” He said he doesn’t believe the Palestinians are a nation; they have been created. For context, the Palestinian national narrative is less than 100 years old and many consider it beginning in 1964 with the formation of the PLO. It is defined unfortunately by only what Jews have done to this Arab people, not on a positive perspective. “The fact that Palestinians live here does not mean it is not Jewish land.... The land has meaning that the current European Union cannot understand....uprooting Jews is not the solution....don’t be apologetic, we have demands also, not only the Palestinian Authority has demands....to negotiate, we first have to realize this is part of our land.” Goldstein and others confirmed that there are good Arab relationships but they are kept quiet because of fear of reprisals.

Next we met with **Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**, chief Rabbi of Efrat, and a moderate and former charismatic leader of Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City, who led many members of his community to make *aliyah* to Israel. He said that Golda Meir specifically created Efrat after 1967. He said that the “West Bank is not the Boars taking over South Africa (a reference to the Dutch white settlers)”.... “Liberal Americans don’t want to be confused with the facts”...“I believe in a 2 State solution, but I want a synagogue on the Temple mount” An Arab leader he knew was hanged with his genital cut off because of collaboration. Not one inch of Efrat is Arab land but Efrat allows Arabs to keep vineyard even though not on their land. [This] has led to good relations.” “Right of Return is code for destruction of Israel.” “Liberal America sees anyone who is weak must be right....Jews should be allowed to live in a Palestinian State.”

We next traveled south along the route of the Patriarchs towards Hebron and a meeting with **Rabbi Dov Lior**, Chief Rabbi of Hebron and the large settlement Kiryat Arba. Rabbi Lior represents those most fervently wedded to the Greater Israel paradigm (keeping all of Judea and Samaria within Israel). Rabbi Lior said, “Occupation and conquest is a lie because the West Bank under Jordan was only recognized by the British and Pakistan.” “Nations of the world had a moment of uplifting at the San Remo conference, recognizing the rights of Jews to the whole land of Israel.” “The antagonism of the Arabs is not solvable...we should listen to what the Arabs say, they want to wipe us away...Arab right of return should be to Arab countries...there was never a Palestinian State, so don’t create one.” “Palestinian nationalism was created ex-nilo...it is a *mitzvah* like Shabbat to help create a state...to move ahead in Arab societies you do it by force.” I asked Rabbi Lior if he would advise Israeli soldiers to disobey orders and not evacuate Jews from Judea and Samaria if a peace deal mandated that. He said that he “tells soldiers to follow orders but they must not break Torah laws.’

We then did 180° turn and returned to Jerusalem to meet with the Chairman of Peace Now, **Mussi Raz**. He was a Major in the army reserve and served in Gaza, the West Bank and during both Intifadas. He said that he doesn’t see the Israeli media as left wing, despite widespread assertions of a liberal bias. He had just returned from a conference in Jericho with like-minded Israeli and international peace leaders and Palestinians. It was startling to hear him say that the PA is corrupt, they want to kill us and he personally doesn’t trust them, but yet he recommends proceeding with a peace treaty.

Binyamin and Shromron Regions of Samaria (Northern West Bank)

The following morning, we met with an icon of the settler movement, **Israel Harel**, founder of the town of Ofra and founding editor of Nekuda Magazine. (The town of Ofra is a legal settlement next to the hilltop “illegal settlement” of Amona which we visited.) This area is the battleground between the settler movement and those who want to move ahead with the peace process and dismantle settlements. “Unfortunately, well-meaning independent arbiters don’t physically come to areas like this and understand the topography. They draw lines on a map to divide territory creating dangerous consequences. The illegal settlement of Amona overlooks the town of Ofra and one well placed Palestinian machine can paralyze the whole town.” He said Amona was to be destroyed after the Gaza evacuation in 2005. It is “the Alamo because it protects Ofra”...The land in Samaria is stony due to the abandonment of the land for centuries, there is no farming due to little soil, so it is myth that **Jews** are stopping Arabs from farming... ..Israelis are not yet in mind of a sovereign state, how does the government respond to its citizens, how does the citizens respond to government, it is our duty to settle the land and any government that stops it may not be right...there is no potential for a civil war...No relations (with Arabs) since Intifada, they are enemies... ..Recommend Egypt give some of Sinai to Gazans”... Harel was eloquent and realistic of the facts on the ground and showed empathy and pragmatism.

We next visited a man who had a personal story to tell. **Yossi Apter** lives in Shilo, where the story of Samuel took place and where the Jewish tabernacle rested for nearly 400 years. While in the IDF, Yossi’s son sacrificed his life to save 70 comrades. Yossi showed us a picture of his son; the pain, years later, was still palpable, but his resolve was inspiring.

We headed for the Knesset to speak with three leading members of the parliament with vastly different views. MK (Minister of the Knesset) **Ahmed Tibi** is the leading Israeli-Arab politician in Israel. He has met with leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah and is considered by some to be seditious and a traitor to the Israel, to which he has sworn allegiance. He even was an advisor to Arafat during the Second Intifada. Tibi’s contempt for us was clear. He said, “Nothing less than 100% of ‘67 .borders is acceptable” “Last one arrive, first one to leave (Jews).”

Otniel Schneller, MK of Kadima (Livni’s party), believes that he has a special perspective as he lives in a settlement but is willing to evacuate settlements. He was a founder of Kadima and was active in the governments of Olmert and Rabin. “The main issue is the demography, keep (Israel) as a Jewish state... ..End of process must be two statesno return of refugees, Jerusalem not subject to negotiation. Barak’s mistake was a one step process....Arik (Sharon) had a road map, step by step ...3 stages....Olmert’s Annapolis concept to discuss everything, a failure..... Step by step will create new atmosphere,...First step-(give PA) 63% of land (West Bank which) has 98% of Palestinian population...Second stage-leave 87% of West Bank.” To me, the step- by-step confidence-building approach advocated by Kadima and Schneller is eerily similar to the Oslo process which returned the corrupt Palestinian leadership from Tunisia to Gaza and the West Bank and set the stage for the bloody Second Intifada.

Then we met with MK **Benny Begin**, the son of former Prime Minister Menechem Begin. Benny is considered honest to a fault and is even is trusted by those who totally disagree with his positions. He is not in the current government because he won’t compromise for political expediency. An unassuming man, he had much to say and was compelling. “The dispute is 3000 years old - not since 1967.....Historical argument is valid and our right to our land...Jewish prayers are not only to Tel Aviv but to Jerusalem and the cradle of our history..... 1967 line is based on nothing but last place army stood....Israel has better title to the West Bank because of its historical connections. Settlements are simply exercising our right...Judea and Samaria were offered twice and rejected (by the Palestinians) ...If settlements were the obstacle to peace, then why is there no peace in Gaza?... PLO state sovereignty is not viable; PLO will never be peace-seeking....No demilitarized state is possible for more than a few years (this is important as it is part of Netanyahu plan)... There is no solution in the foreseeable future....PLO stands for the annihilation of Israel and Israel can't satisfy the hunger...two proofs are the two rejections.”

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We ended the day with dinner with another icon of the Peace movement, **Naomi Chazan**, President of the New Israel Fund, and former MK Meretz (left). She was passionate but less optimistic than in the heyday of the peace process. “The PA may disbandUnilateral withdrawal is prescription for chaos and anarchy and a Third Intifada....Status quo is bad....70% of Israelis and 63% of Palestinians want a two-state solution....Spoilers (extremists on both sides) are very dangerous Settlers can stay” under a PA state (policy reversal)....Palestinians and Israelis want a normal life....The alternative is terrible.... Her most compelling argument is that the “occupation” is a challenge to Jewish values.

The Wider Picture: Legality, Diplomacy, media Strategic Options

Bright and early we met with **Dr Robbie Sabel**, Hebrew University Law Professor who is a former Legal Advisor to the Israel ministry of Foreign Affairs. He first asked us, “Is international law relevant to settlements? Yes. Do you have law on your side? Both sides use it... We are not negotiating in a vacuum.... We have lost the battle on settlements. No international legal support....We lost settlements unjustifiably and there is no possible reversal... International Tribunal (The Hague) [has said] Israel has no right of defense on wall (security barrier), because enemy (PA) is not a sovereign state.... [Based on 1949 borders]....Legal status of territories- a new state inherits old boundaries even if it was colonial boundaries,. Lebanon and Israel have a UN-marked border....There is NO international boundary between Israel and the West Bank...International law after WWI [says you can’t] acquire but only “administer” territory... In 1967, Israel decided NOT annex the West Bank and “not to treat [it] as Israeli territory, but military control except for Jerusalem and Latrun (strategic location along Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road)...**Territory is occupied only if it of a sovereign state and West Bank is not of a sovereign state**....[Israel has] all the obligations of 4th Geneva convention but is not acknowledging it as obligations...West Bank (Arab)residents (ability to appeal) to Israeli supreme court was unprecedented...**Is Israel allowed to settle Judea and Samaria?** “The Fourth Geneva convention says **no transferring** of your population but Israel says it is **just allowing** its citizens and **some are just returning** to their homes and we have never recognized that it is a territory of a foreign state. ...” It was sobering to hear that despite the true legal status of the territories as ‘disputed’ not ‘occupied’, and Israel’s strong legal claim, no one in the international community even acknowledges that Israel’s withdrawal is painful and that Israel has meritorious legal claims.

Daniel Seaman, Director of the Israel Government Press Office, spoke of the difficulty of dealing with the international media which has an entrenched, pre-conceived narrative of the Israeli occupier and the Palestinian David. He said “Advocacy journalism is taking over...Israeli criticism of itself legitimized international criticism of Israel...The international media [are] embedded with Palestinians and have humanized their narrative... Palestinian journalists [are] found to be in coordination with PA....” “People like Naomi Chazan project their values on the other side...We do not demand anything of the Palestinians....We do not explain our right to self-defense....Israel is like the abused spouse.”

We next moved to Tel Aviv to gain a military perspective from **Colonel Shaul Arieli** of the Council for Peace and Security. His organization successfully sued the Israeli government to alter the security fence. He said, “Rabin in ‘73 said “No” to Samaria... Israel’s offer of 6.5% of land gets 81% of settlers (within Israel) but 50,000 national religious will be evacuated...Council of Peace and Security [recommends] take 5% of the territory (81% of settlers).”

Major General Giora Eiland is a leading military strategist. He usually does not speak to groups so our ability to pick apart his plan was unprecedented. (Imagine spending an hour and a half with Colin Powell dissecting the Gulf War strategy before the invasion!) Eiland’s job was the equivalent of the National Security Chief for Prime Ministers Sharon and Olmert. He said “One people occupy another people [is] not politically correct in the 21st century... Outside parties are vested in ending the conflict. There is benefit beyond the regional players... a two state solution is supported by everyone”... The final outcome will be “the Clinton parameters or very close...” The Israeli view- “two big obstacles - settlements and security...120,000 settlers need to be evacuated in almost any plan, the direct cost \$30 billion; no one will give Israel this amount of money.” On security, “No one has confidence that Palestinians will keep their word...There are no real security arrangements that can be made because it is rockets, anti tank missiles, and anti-aircraft weapons. No way to monitor.” Israel’s security risks are huge...**Palestinians’ desire to end Israel is greater than the desire for a state...**”

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Opposition Politics and the Northern Shromron (Samaria-West Bank)

The next morning, we met **Yariv Oppenheimer**, Director General of Peace Now. He said “Motivation is “I am a Zionist”, therefore, [he supports] a two state solution...Peace Now is not anti Israeli or pro Palestinian...We get grouped with other groups who for example bring a Palestinian flag to protests...We are a pro-Israel movement...Peace Now is mainly anti-settlement...Israel should freeze everything... it is occupied land... Most settlements are obstacle for peace... Need to understand that Palestinians think they had to pay the price of the Holocaust.. Why can a Russian(new immigrant) go to Tel Aviv but not the descendant of a Palestinian from pre-1948 Israel?” The most troubling part of the interview was when Oppenheimer was asked about Peace Now’s accepting money from foreign governments. First he tried to say that it was not foreign governments but NGO’s but, when challenged, he came up with a truly bogus response. He said that Peace Now was non-political and that accepting money from a foreign government was no different than when a cultural institution accepts a donation from a foreign government. To my mind, he lost all credibility with these responses

Next we visited the offices of the flagship Israeli newspaper of the left, Ha’aretz, to meet **Akiva Eldar**. Eldar has been a severe critic of Israel and of the settlements for many years. He was born in Israel to families that were the only survivors of the Holocaust., He has worked for Teddy Kollek and, recently, for J Street. While he was Washington Bureau Chief for Ha’aretz, he would go everywhere in the U.S. to advocate for left wing positions in Israel but US Jews didn’t want to hear him. “If I have to live in a nation not of a Jewish majority, I will move... I am agnostic but Jewish. I don’t want to live under Arabs.” He was worried about “What our young boys are doing to the Palestinians” and what “occupation does to the occupier”... The most troubling part of the interview was when I asked him about advocacy journalism (where newspapers editorialize the news section to project or advocate their agenda). He had no qualms telling me that if I want the whole story, I can find it in another newspaper. I was shocked. My worst fears of editorialized news were confirmed.

We next traveled to Maale Shromron in the West Bank (Samaria) to meet with the current Chairman of the Council of Communities in Judea and Samaria, **Danny Dayan**. Truly another 180° turn from Tel Aviv and Ha’aretz. The only similarity between Eldar and Dayan is that they are both secular. We found Dayan pleasant but unenthusiastic. Perhaps we caught him on a bad day, but we found him lacking in the communication skills needed for defending an endeavor (settlements) that has worldwide condemnation. When he told us that he was asked to meet with J Street, I knew this would be a bad idea. In his words he said “Why am I here? Our presence is vital... Obama is the 8th consecutive president to fail...all presidents think a Palestinian state is the answer. Gaza is a Palestinian state with billions in aid and all for terror...therefore, a Palestinian state in the West Bank will not bring stability, it is naïve and stupid....a Gazan living in my home will not bring peace...(Judea and Samaria are the) Zionist soul of the country, the cradle of its civilization...Tel Aviv cannot sustain a Jewish Zionist country...Hebron gives the power to Tel Aviv to be Zionist...Zionists offered partition many times to Palestinians and they always rejected...Palestinians never gave a counteroffer to any partition plan...it is a tragedy to Palestinians but it is their fault...history proved that they do not want co-existence...Palestinians accept only deals that they can use for aggression, e.g.-Oslo. Every time you change the status quo it gets worse.”

We then traveled to one of the oldest communities in Samaria, Kedumim to meet with **Raphaella Segal**, the assistant to the Mayor. Unlike Dayan, she was warm and full of passion. Her genuine love of Israel and her defense of the settler movement could only command respect, even if you disagreed with her position. We met her two days before she was to leave for the US to defend the settler movement at UCLA. Although in substance she was similar to Dayan, in communication skills she is light years ahead. She told us that Kedumim refused to have a security barrier placed around the community and she showed us a sophisticated video surveillance system to monitor for terrorist infiltration. We watched on video using night vision technology how a terrorist infiltration was thwarted. Very impressive

Palestinian Authority and Journalists

The next morning we met with Jerusalem Post Diplomatic correspondent **Herb Keinon** in his home in Maale Adumin. He said he represented the majority of settlers who came to Judea and Samaria because of economic reasons, i.e.-cheaper housing and more space. “Strategic security concerns change often in Israel....Settlements are expendable if security concerns are addressed...the relationship with US is more important than the settlements... The trauma of the Second Intifada is still with Israel and the children...”

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Sufian abu Szaiedeh, an elected Fatah official of the regional council and considered among the most moderate Palestinians, spoke to us on Friday morning in Jerusalem. He was involved in negotiations for Palestinian prisoner release, He currently lives in Ramallah. He said “To be moderate is not easy...he is paying a price....we have extremists but also moderates...[at the] end of [the] day, we have to share the cake whether in 5 years or 50 years....majority of PLO accepted international approach of sharing the lands....99% settlements are not legitimate...We are pragmatic...Palestinians understand that they have to accept land swap.... Can't get to step one without '67 borders as basis...General Eiland plan is a non-starter....There is no problem between Jordanians and Palestinians. Nobody is thinking about a Jordan and Palestinian confederation... Hamas is more popular in West Bank than in Gaza.” He says people in Gaza saw the real face of a religious political party (Hamas). [There is a] big difference between what they (Hamas) say and what they do.....West Bank people haven't had to live under Hamas so can buy the propaganda machine of Hamas....Hamas failed in every aspect to the Gazans. Palestinians fear Iran.. There is no Hamas without Iran....Hamas and Iran alliance is only temporary because Shia vs. Sunni divide [will return]. Hamas is Sunni and Iran is Shia)... You need to put yourself into the mind of the Palestinian.refugee camps. We don't destroy the camps because it is a politically strategy.”

We next met with **Khaled Abu Toameh**, the Arab affairs correspondent for the Jerusalem Post. He is the son of an Israeli Arab and a West Bank Palestinian. When I interviewed him a few months ago he said that unless Israel addressed the inequality of Israeli Arabs, the next Intifada would be within Israel by Israeli Arabs. He said that the Americans were the most responsible party for the failure of the peace process. America keeps giving money to the corrupt Palestinian Authority without any accountability and this perpetuates the PA which is distrusted by the whole population. Khaled wrote the lead story of the previous day's Jerusalem Post, which reported that the head of the PA's anti-corruption unit had left the PA with incriminating documents of Palestinian corruption. He first offered them to the Associated Press, Reuters, BBC and other major news outlets, but was rebuffed. The reason: it did not fit the mainstream narrative of the Palestinian victim and the Israeli aggressor. Perhaps this exemplifies why Israel cannot trust the international community as either a fair arbiter or security guarantor in any peace plan.

If you would like more information about this trip or future trips to Israel please email me at ermandel@mandelvision.com. I hope you are now better informed of the complexities of the situation.

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