

LEFT FACE, BACKWARD MARCH

While Barack Obama was announcing his vision of Middle East peace in Washington, Israeli peace activists were holding forth in Tel Aviv, where Mishpacha squeezed in a few words — and questions — edgewise with Yossi Beilin, the grand architect of the Oslo process, along with dissenting voices who say neither Oslo nor Obama will bring peace.



Avi Friedman

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Yossi Beilin is nothing if not indefatigable. Sitting on stage with veteran Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat and former French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner at the Eretz Yisrael Museum in Tel Aviv, Beilin is clearly in his element speaking about a Palestinian state and the diplomatic storm that is likely to hit Israel when the PLO asks the United Nations to admit the nascent state in September.

It’s an old, familiar script for Beilin and his colleagues — and one that President Obama verbalized, more or less, during his May 19 speech at the State Department. Israel is threatened by demographics, the country is losing support and legitimacy around the world, the status quo cannot be maintained indefinitely. The Palestinians are ready for peace, if only they had a partner to deal with on the Israeli side of the table.

“There is a different Palestinian leadership today,” contends Beilin. “They are committed to resolving the conflict with Israel without violence.”

Born one month after Israel achieved its independence, Beilin is no longer the youthful deputy foreign minister who initiated secret talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization in the early 1990s, meetings that were illegal at the time under Israeli law. Back from years in the political wilderness, he has spent the better part of a decade promoting the Geneva Initiative, a nongovernmental “peace treaty” that calls for the consummation of the Oslo process, including a Palestinian state in most of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza; land swaps so Israel can retain the settlement blocs where a majority of West Bank Israelis live; shared sovereignty in Jerusalem; financial compensation and a

limited right of “return” to Israel for children and grandchildren of Palestinian refugees.

Love is in the air between Beilin and his European sponsors as they discuss recent events in the Middle East and warn about Israel’s increasing isolation if Jerusalem refuses to budge on key Palestinian demands.

But the tone changes when Saeb Erekat steps to the microphone. Erekat, who sat at negotiating tables with Beilin from Oslo to Camp David throughout the 1990s and still serves on the Fatah Central Committee, appears tense as he thanks the conference organizers for the “honor” of addressing the conference and wastes little time before attacking Kouchner, Prime Minister Netanyahu, the international community, and Israeli society in general. In sharp contrast to the Geneva Initiative’s “I am a partner” PR campaign, Erekat states simply and strongly that the Palestinians “have no partner for peace in Israel today.”

“I have had it,” says Erekat, jabbing an angry finger in the air. “I am sick and tired of Israelis either fearing me or being ashamed of what they did to me, or ignoring me. Negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis are over. Netanyahu threw the key to peace into the Dead Sea.”

A Walled Country

Beilin cites polls that purport to show 65% of Israelis and Palestinians support his Geneva Initiative and while he says he believes Prime Minister Netanyahu also wants peace, if he doesn’t want to sign on to the two-state solution, he should devise an alternative plan. Not surprisingly, Beilin’s optimism and Erekat’s remarks sparked sharp criticism from opposition politicians who object to the oft-stated left-wing refrain that “there is no alternative” to returning to the 1967 borders and giving in to virtually every Palestinian demand.

“Every Israeli initiative since 1993 has been



PHOTO: MATI MILSTEIN

disastrous,” said Dr. Emmanuel Navon, a lecturer in international relations at Tel Aviv University and a candidate in the Likud party primaries that will be held sometime before the scheduled 2013 election. Navon contends that Beilin’s hubris is part of a wider phenomenon of left-wing fealty to a process that has led to unprecedented terrorism in Israel for the past seventeen years.

“The Oslo process led to the second intifada. The IDF withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza led to the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, to say nothing of the rockets that continue to target Sderot, Ashkelon, Beer Sheva, and Ashdod. I can appreciate the overwhelming desire to live in peace — I have children, too, — but how about a little humility to recognize the objective fact that the two-state “solution” has left thousands of Israelis dead and wounded?” said Navon.

Failing to recognize that reality is irresponsible, he says, encourages the Palestinians to maintain their policy of rejection, knowing that Israel will be blamed as the obstacle to peace.

Dr. Navon’s “alternative” is the status quo, which he says is entirely sustainable, with a few concrete changes on the ground. “There are plenty of conflicts around the world that must be managed because they aren’t going to be solved. Turkey and Greece don’t agree about anything in Cyprus, so they built a wall in the middle of the island and life goes on. That’s just the way it is,” he said.

Even Beilin himself has trouble clearly articulating his vision of what might happen the “day after.”

“You can never be 100% sure of what will happen the day after,” he says. “Objectively, there won’t be room for either side to make more demands of the other side. Does that mean that no Palestinian will say PA leaders sold them down river? Of course not. Many Israelis will say the same thing, that they will never recognize

Palestinian sovereignty over any part of Eretz Yisrael. We expect leaders on both sides to quell these movements.”

Foreign Influence

Perhaps most significant for Israel as a democratic country is the fact that groups like the Geneva Initiative are led by individuals who have been rejected by the Israeli public repeatedly since 2001. Beilin’s Meretz party, once the flagship of the Israeli peace movement, now has just three Knesset seats and may be wiped off the political map in the next election. Israel’s largest, clearly identifiable left-wing party, Labor, has been wracked with dissension, leaving the party with just eight seats and similar doubts about its future. Shrinking representation in the Knesset has left peace activists to resort to nongovernmental ventures to promote their agenda, raising questions about foreign attempts to influence Israel’s domestic political map. “The Geneva Initiative is essentially a foreign body promoting itself as an Israeli initiative,” said Gerald Steinberg, head of NGO Monitor and a professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University. “It is very, very problematic for foreign governments to be flooding Israel with money to manipulate Israeli democracy. That is fundamentally undemocratic and reeks strongly of colonialism.”

Concerns about democracy are legitimate and real, says Emmanuel Navon, but at the end of the day Israel must be concerned with protecting itself and its interests. He says that Palestinians may promote lies in the Western media, but ultimately, the conflict revolves around Israel’s very existence, not about Israel’s presence in Judea and Samaria.

“The idea that withdrawing from land will bring peace is absurd. The Arabs themselves say the conflict is about 1948, not about 1967. So why do we deceive ourselves?” ●



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