

# COMMENT & FEATURES

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## West Bank volatility

When Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas called a press conference last Saturday in Ramallah, Palestinian journalists and activists were convinced that their leader would finally be announcing extreme measures designed to combat the difficult economic situation.

Protests against the high cost of living had broken out in a number of cities on the West Bank. And most of the anger on the Palestinian street was being directed at PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, the US-trained economist and former International Monetary Fund official who is the architect of Palestinian economic policy.

But instead of announcing concrete steps to improve the Palestinian economy – which like other economies around the world has been adversely affected by, among other factors, the sharp rise in fuel costs and basic foodstuffs – a flippant and cynical Abbas lashed out at Israel and the US for plotting against the PA.

The Palestinians, Abbas said, were not free, “because we are being surrounded from all directions.” He attacked Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman for launching a campaign against him (Liberman most recently called Abbas a “liar, a coward and a wimp”). Abbas also criticized the US for opposing the Palestinian bid for statehood in the UN.

He even blamed the PA's stagnating economy on Hamas, noting that half of the PA's budget goes to the Gaza Strip.

Just two days later, while demonstrations continued to rage on the West Bank and PA police were being attacked, Abbas left for an official visit – to India.

Palestinians are frustrated. They get the feeling – rightly – that Abbas is not taking the recent demonstrations seriously. The Palestinian public is not stupid. Not everything can be blamed on “the occupation.” And if Abbas truly believes that Israel and the US are undermining Palestinian interests, how can he justify remaining the head of the PA, a political body that supports in principle a US-brokered peace agreement with Israel?

Further undermining his fragile position is the fact that there have been no Palestinian elections since 2006. Abbas's mandate to rule ran out years ago.

With a Palestinian leadership that refuses to accept responsibility and instead shifts the blame to others, it is no wonder that Abbas's popularity is weakening. Demonstrations that were originally directly primarily at Fayyad have now begun targeting Abbas as well.

With no moderate political options available, the weakening of the Fatah-ruled PA will inevitably result in the rise of Hamas in the West Bank.

Recent claims by senior PA officials that Hamas is exploiting protests against the high cost of living to increase its influence in the West Bank should be taken seriously. Adnan Damiri, spokesman for the PA security forces, claimed he had information about Hamas's efforts to destabilize the situation in the West Bank.

UNDOUBTEDLY IT is Abbas's inept leadership that is to blame for the PA's falling popularity. And only the Palestinian people are to be blamed for failing to support a more moderate, sane political leadership than either Fatah or Hamas has to offer.

At the same time, Israel is obligated to use what little sway it has over internal Palestinian affairs to help prevent Hamas, a proxy of the apocalyptic mullahs of Iran who are bent on destroying the Jewish state, from making inroads in the West Bank.

That's why the government's decision last week to advance NIS 250 million in tax payments to the PA can be justified under the circumstances. And this is true even if we know that the PA pays tens of millions of shekels to terrorists sitting in jails and to the families of suicide bombers.

Perhaps one day the Palestinian people will have the wisdom and courage to support a more moderate political leadership that will be capable of bringing true peace to the region. But until that day comes, Israel must do its best to prevent a dangerous regression on the West Bank.

• By SHIMSHON HAKOHEN  
NADEL

Rosh Hashana brings with it a strange mix of emotions. The day is almost schizophrenic. Even the melodies of the *chazzan* (cantor) cascade up and down, like an emotional rollercoaster. The piercing sound of the shofar paralyzes. We evoke the fear of the day and exclaim: “and from the fright of the judgment my soul trembles,” “Angels will hasten, a trembling and terror will seize them... behold it is the Day of Judgment.”

And then we wish each other a *gut yontef*, and go home to dip apples in honey and eat a festive meal!

How should we feel on Rosh Hashana? Is it a day of fear and trembling? A day of judgement? Or is it a festival?

The answer is all of the above. And this dialectic is expressed in the halachic literature. After discussing the recitation of the Hallel on festivals, the Talmud concludes that it is inappropriate to recite Hallel on Rosh Hashana:

“The ministering angels asked the Holy One, Bleszsed Be He, ‘Master of the World, why does Israel not sing praise before you on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?’

*The joy of Rosh Hashana nullifies ‘aveilut’, the customs of mourning, just like any festival would*

“He said to them, ‘Is it possible that the King sits on his Throne of Judgement and Israel should sing?’” (Arachin 10b; Rosh Hashana 32b).

We are filled with uncertainty and doubt concerning our fate. How can we sing Hallel? How can we even eat?

In fact, Rabbeinu Asher, at the end of his commentary to Chapter four of Tractate Rosh Hashana, discusses the custom of fasting on Rosh Hashana. He ultimately concludes that Rosh Hashana is a festival and fasting is inappropriate. (See also Mordechai to Tractate Rosh Hashana, Chapter 1;

Tur Orach Chayim 597 and Beit Yosef, ad loc.; Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 597:1 and Mishnah Brurah, ad loc.)

Many authorities point to a passage in Nechemiah, which seems to capture the appropriate attitude toward Rosh Hashana. The story goes as follows: On the first of the seventh month (Rosh Hashana), Ezra reads the Torah publicly for those who ascended from Babylon. They are shaken when they realize just how foreign the words of the Torah are and how far they have strayed from it. They begin to cry and mourn. Ezra, Nechemiah and the Levites tell the people:

“‘Today is a holy day to Hashem your God; do not mourn and do not weep.’ For all of the people were weeping as they heard the words of the Torah. He said to them, ‘Go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, for today is sacred to our God. Do not be sad; the joy of Hashem is your strength!’” (Nechemiah 8:9-10).

It would seem from this passage that Rosh Hashana should be celebrated, like all festivals, with festive meals. It even suggests that in doing so, we provide God with joy.

In the Torah, Rosh Hashana is included together with all of the other festivals, and just like them it is considered a “holy convocation” (Vayikra, Chapter 23). It is even called a festival (Psalm 81:4; Rosh Hashana 18a; Succah 55a; Arachin 10b; Sotah 41a). In fact, some Geonim record the custom of incorporating the festival liturgy into the Rosh Hashana Amida prayer (See Rabbeinu Asher, loc cit).

In addition, the joy of Rosh Hashana nullifies *aveilut*, the customs of mourning, just like any festival would (See Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 399:6).

But the potential for hubris is tempered. While many authorities instruct us to “eat, drink and rejoice,” we are warned not to go overboard, as indulging too much doesn't befit the seriousness of the day. (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 597:1, citing the Agudah). And while we wear our nice clothes, some suggest we should not wear our finest silk or embroi-



POMEGRANETES HANGING in a tree, a traditional symbol of the holiday. (Seth J. Frantzman)

dered clothing, settling instead for simple white garments (Turei Zahav to Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 581).

The Psalmist captures the emotions of Rosh Hashana when he instructs us to “rejoice with trembling” (Psalm 2:11). How is that accomplished? When one stands before Hashem there is tremendous fear, but also tremendous joy. We relate to Hashem both as our King (*malkeinu*) and as our Father (*avinu*).

Rosh Hashana is a day filled with uncertainty and doubt; fear and trembling. But it is also a festival. And in celebrating it as a festival, we express our confidence; our trust in God. A beautiful passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi expresses this confidence:

“Who is like this Nation? The practice of the world is when one knows that he is awaiting judgment – he wears black, wraps himself in black, grows his beard – for he does not know what the verdict will be. But

Israel is not like that. They wear white, wrap themselves in white, trim their beards, eat, drink and rejoice – for they know that the Holy One Blessed Be He will be merciful and forgive them” (Rosh Hashana 1:3).

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach told the following story:

One day, a man was riding the subway on his way home from work. Looking around the subway car, his eyes met those of a woman and he was instantly smitten. He knew that she was his *bashert*, the woman destined to be his bride. This was fate.

But just as he summoned up the courage to approach her, the train stopped at 34th Street, Herald Square. Before he could reach her, she exited and the doors closed on him. He got off at the next stop and ran up the stairs, knocking over anyone in his way. He pushed through the crowd and opened the door of a cab. Ignoring the couple waiting to enter the cab, he yelled at the driver, “take me to 34th Street, now!”

As he entered the taxi, a police officer who had witnessed the commotion apprehended the man and began to question him. He tried to explain what was happening, but the cop wouldn't let him go. The man tried to run off but soon found himself in the back of the squad car – arrested for creating a public disturbance and resisting arrest. He spent that night in jail kicking himself and wondering if he would ever see the woman from the subway.

The next morning, he had to appear before the judge. He was devastated. When his name was called, he looked up at the judge. Smiling back at him from behind the bench was the woman from the train.

Indeed, Rosh Hashana is the Day of Judgement – but we know the judge!

*The writer lives in Jerusalem, where he teaches Torah inspired by the Land and its People. His forthcoming book is Return Again: The Argument for Aliyah.*

## Disabled Israelis must share equally in the country's defense

• By AVRAHAM RABBY

At a September 2 ceremony honoring the invaluable role played by reservist units in the IDF, President Shimon Peres called upon all citizens to assume their share of the responsibility for the country's defense. “All of us,” he said, “have an obligation to take part in building the nation, and all of us have an obligation to take part in defending it.”

How I wish President Peres really meant what he said! The one group that is always excluded from this “all must serve” mantra is Israelis with disabilities.

The IDF considers people with disabilities automatically eligible for exemption from mandatory service, even if they are found to be *kshirim*, or fit for duty. By absolving the disabled of the obligation to share in the country's defense, the IDF reinforces their marginalization as well as the notion that people with disabilities are necessarily helpless, non-contributing burdens

on society, who deserve our compassion and kid-glove treatment rather than be compelled to serve.

I reject the IDF's dogmatic equation of disability with inability. The London 2012 Paralympic Games now daily on our television screens should convince us beyond any reasonable doubt that people with disabilities are every bit as capable of performing non-combat duties in the military as any non-disabled recruit. Inbal Pezaro, who has so far won two paralympic medals (an achievement far surpassing that of any of our Olympic athletes), was herself reportedly exempted from mandatory military service. What could possibly have been the rationale for such a decision?

The IDF does offer to people with disabilities, who are found to be *kshirim* and who, to their credit, insist on serving, as did Inbal Pezaro, the option of voluntary enlistment, and assigns them to meaningful jobs, even sensitive jobs requiring the handling of classified information. However, vol-

untary enlistment, too, is far from satisfactory. It is a patronizing alternative which implicitly labels recruits with disabilities as different, second class, and only there thanks to the IDF's charitable impulses. Given the dangers facing Israel, military service should not be a matter of personal preference for anyone, disabled or non-disabled.

I urge the Defense Ministry to revise its policy with respect to people with disabilities so as to include the following procedure: a) mandatory call-up of people with disabilities at induction centers accessible to them, b) assessment of the full range of capabilities of each disabled candidate, including the willingness to make the accommodations necessary to maximize the candidate's performance and c) mandatory assignment of every person with a disability found to be *kashir* to a suitable non-combat military unit.

The criteria for judging the soundness of any public policy regarding

people with disabilities should surely be the extent to which it dispels the stigma attached to disability, promotes equality of opportunity for the disabled, advances their full integration into the labor market and wider society, and encourages people with disabilities themselves not only to claim their equal rights but also to share equally in the responsibilities of citizenship. Compulsory military service will go a long way toward achieving all those goals.

I myself was automatically exempted from military service because of my blindness, and was not even offered the option to volunteer. As a result, I was excluded from what is a vital experience for every young Israeli, and a fundamental component of Israeli culture. Let us stop harming the future prospects of young Israelis with disabilities in this way, and cease turning them into outsiders in their own land.

*The author is a blind person. A former diplomat, he retired from the US Foreign Service in 2007 and now resides in Tel Aviv.*

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