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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 14, 2018

New York Times

Kushner: Punishing Palestinians Won't Hurt Chance for Peace

Three days after the Trump administration evicted the Palestine Liberation Organization from its offices in Washington, Jared Kushner defended the latest in a string of punitive actions against the Palestinians and insisted that none of them had diminished the chances of a peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians. Speaking on Thursday, 25 years to the day after the Oslo peace accords were signed on the White House lawn not far from his West Wing office, Mr. Kushner said President Trump had actually improved the chances for peace by stripping away the “false realities” that surround Middle East peacemaking. “We’re dealing with things as we see them and not being scared out of doing the right thing. I think, as a result, you have a much higher chance of actually achieving a real peace.” See also, [“Kushner says punitive measures against Palestinians will help peace chances” \(TOI\)](#)

Reuters

U.S. Expects Israeli Criticism of Coming Mideast Plan: Envoy

The Trump administration is prepared for Israeli criticism of elements of its coming Middle East peace plan, the U.S. envoy to the region said, even as Washington faces growing Palestinian accusations that it will be heavily tilted in favor of Israel. In an interview with Reuters, Jason Greenblatt, a chief architect of the long-awaited peace initiative, said U.S. negotiators had entered the “pre-launch phase” of the plan, despite a boycott by Palestinian leaders. But he declined to specify a time frame, except to say it would not be announced at the U.N. General Assembly gathering in New York later this month, or offer any details of a proposal that has drawn deep skepticism even before its unveiling. See also, [“Greenblatt: 'We're prepared for Israeli criticism of peace plan' \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel Denies Reports Saudis Purchased Iron Dome Systems

Israeli security officials strongly denied on Thursday a report saying Saudi Arabia purchased Iron Dome missile defense systems from Israel. No details were given on the number of batteries allegedly purchased or the cost of the purchase, estimated at tens of millions of dollars. According to the report, the transaction will take place in December and the batteries will be deployed on Saudi Arabia's southern border with Yemen. Al-Khaleej Online criticized the thaw in Saudi-Israeli relations and claimed Riyadh also seeks military cooperation. Israel, the report said, initially opposed selling Iron Dome systems to Arab states, yet changed its stance after U.S. pressure.

Jerusalem Post

WH Denies Report it Offered Abbas \$5 Bil. to Enter Peace Talks

The White House denied a report published in Israeli media on Thursday claiming that US President Donald Trump offered Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas \$5 billion in economic and infrastructure aid if he agrees to enter peace talks with Israel. The report, in Globes, claims that Trump diplomats also gave Abbas' aides a “detailed timetable” for the start of negotiations. “This is false,” a National Security Council official said in response to the story. Senior aides to the president say they will release the plan “when the timing is right,” See also, [“Exclusive: Trump tempts Palestinians back to talks with \\$5b carrot” \(Globes\)](#)

IDF Shuttters ‘Good Neighbor’ Syrian Aid Program

The Israel Defense Forces on Thursday announced that it had officially shuttered its “Operation Good Neighbor” program, ending over five years of humanitarian assistance that the Jewish state has given Syrian nationals near the border. “The large and long-running humanitarian effort has come to an end with the return of the Syrian regime to southern Syria,” the army said in a statement. The military began allowing injured Syrians into Israel for medical care in early 2013, first treating them in field hospitals and later inside Israeli hospitals. A small number of Israeli non-governmental groups were also allowed to pass humanitarian aid across the border. This assistance expanded considerably in 2016 with the creation of “Operation Good Neighbor,” which saw far more material assistance being transported into Syria, as well as the creation of a clinic on the border and allowing Syrians into Israeli hospitals.

Ynet News

Israel to Swap Police Chief amid Netanyahu Probes

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan announced on Thursday that he will replace Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh at the end of his term, which is set to expire this year. The change comes in the midst of police investigations into corruption by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Erdan announced possible replacements for Alsheikh as national police chief, citing "differences of opinion" with Alsheikh as a reason for not extending his term an additional year. It wasn't clear how, if at all, Alsheikh's departure might affect investigations of Netanyahu. Alsheikh has overseen probes into suspected wrongdoing by the prime minister during his three-year term, which could have been extended by a year by Erdan. *See also, [“Next Police Chief won't save Netanyahu Either” \(Ha'aretz\)](#)*

Ha'aretz

Dermer Was 'Warned That PM's Spokesperson Posed Risk to Women'

Israel's ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, was warned in 2016 by journalist Bret Stephens about allegedly inappropriate behaviour towards 14 women by David Keyes, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's spokesperson. Stephens told the New York Times on Thursday about his warning to Dermer. The Israeli embassy in Washington had no immediate comment on the subject as of Friday morning. The NYT report stated that Stephens warned Dermer about Keyes' alleged misconduct toward women in November 2016, almost two years ago. Keyes was already working for Netanyahu at the time, and he left his position only this week, following the publication of allegations made against him by at least 14 women. *See also, [“Netanyahu Aide Steps Aside After Sexual Assault Allegations” \(NYT\)](#)*

i24 News

Tel Aviv Beats Out Jerusalem to Host 2019 Eurovision

After months of speculation, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) announced Thursday that the 2019 Eurovision song competition would be held in Israel's financial and commercial capital Tel Aviv, which beat out bids by politically-charged Jerusalem and the Red Sea resort town of Eilat. “The 64th Eurovision Song Contest will be taking place at the Expo Tel Aviv (International Convention Center) in Israel on Tuesday 14, Thursday 16 and Saturday 18 May 2019,” Eurovision announced in a statement on its official website. “We welcome the Eurovision to Israel. It will take place in Tel Aviv, it will be wonderful. Tel Aviv is an international city, a vibrant city, and the entire world will witness this and Israel,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday evening.

The Day Israeli-Palestinian Peace Seemed Within Reach

By Martin Indyk, former U.S. special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian peace

- In the annals of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it was a historic turning point. At least that's the way it seemed at the time. On this day, 25 years ago, the Oslo Accords—a framework for an interim agreement between Israelis and Palestinians—were signed on the South Lawn of the White House. President Bill Clinton, the host of the ceremony, was unable to sleep the night before. He told his peace team, of which I was a member, that he had read from his Bible instead, from the book of Joshua with its detailing of the battle of Jericho. The next morning, Clinton donned a blue silk tie with a pattern of gold trumpets. For him, the trumpets symbolized the clarion call that precipitated the walls of Jericho crumbling, just like he hoped the walls of Israeli-Palestinian conflict would come tumbling down as a result of the agreement between the modern-day equivalents of the Hebrews and Canaanites.
- The hundreds of dignitaries on the South Lawn on that sun-drenched fall morning were there to witness the historic handshake between PLO leader Yasir Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. As Clinton's Middle East adviser on the National Security Council, I had organized the signing ceremony. Still, few of us knew what was in the Accords. They had been negotiated behind the backs of Clinton and his peace team. Mahmoud Abbas, then Arafat's deputy, claimed that even the Palestinian leader hadn't read them. But like Clinton, those who bore witness cared less about the details than the symbolism. The handshake was meant to signify the moment when Israeli and Palestinian leaders decided to begin the process of ending their bloody conflict and resolving their differences at the negotiating table.
- In a carefully choreographed scene, Clinton stood behind the two leaders with his arms outstretched as they shook hands, signaling the United States's embrace of their agreement and his personal commitment to helping them fulfill the politically risky undertaking.
- Twenty-five years later, the conflict continues, marked by bloody outbursts of terrorism and violence, rocket fire and retaliations. Thousands of Palestinians and Israelis have died, many more have been injured. Since then, one American president after another has tried to end it. The Oslo process was supposed to have provided the blueprint, with its requirement for a series of confidence-building interim steps that would help Israeli and Palestinian leaders absorb the political costs of the difficult compromises needed finally to achieve peace. The Oslo Accords did not spell out those compromises; they did not provide for a Palestinian state, nor for a solution for Jerusalem, which both sides seek as their capital, nor for the Palestinian refugees who claim a "right of return." They only provided that the final-status issues were to be negotiated and concluded within five years of the signing.
- Final-status negotiations actually began in spring 2000, in the Clinton administration's last year, more than seven years after the handshake on the South Lawn. The delay was the result of Prime Minister Netanyahu's dilatory tactics. He had won a narrow victory by running against Oslo and then took up more than two years negotiating agreements for redeployment from parts of Hebron and 13 percent of the West Bank. He was succeeded by Ehud Barak, who preferred to negotiate with Syria first.

- By that time, both the sweet and bitter fruits of Oslo had been harvested. Much of the cost of occupation was lifted from Israel's back as the Palestinian Authority assumed responsibility for governing some 90 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and the international community footed the bill. The Accords provided political cover for King Hussein of Jordan to conclude his peace treaty with Israel, and for several Gulf and North African Arab states to begin normalizing relations with the Jewish state. Syria's President Hafez al-Assad concluded that he too was free to negotiate peace with Israel once Arafat had signed the Oslo deal. And Egypt's peace with Israel was strengthened by President Hosni Mubarak's active engagement in the effort to implement Oslo.
- But when it came to relations between Israelis and Palestinians, trust had been severely eroded in the meantime. The Oslo Accords were silent on what should happen with Israeli settlements in the 60 percent of the West Bank Israel still controlled pending a final agreement. Accordingly, with final-status negotiations approaching, the settler hardliners pushed aggressively to expand the settlements by legal and illegal means in an effort to forestall any further withdrawal. At the same time, the Palestinian leadership had neither the will nor the capability to prevent terrorist attacks against Israelis perpetrated by Hamas and other splinter groups opposed to the Oslo Accords. Both sides felt betrayed. Instead of building confidence, these dynamics contributed significantly to each side's questioning of the other's intentions. In October 2000, mounting Palestinian frustration generated the intifada, or violent uprising, which in turn engendered Israel's angry response.
- Oslo as an interim, confidence-building process died on the battlefield of the five-year long intifada. But it gave birth to a new Oslo process: the effort to create a two-state solution in which an independent Palestinian state would live side-by-side but separated from the Jewish state (a concept that is nowhere mentioned in the Oslo Accords). This time, the United States was midwife rather than witness. From Camp David II to the Clinton Parameters, from the Bush Roadmap to the Annapolis Process, from Obama's '67 Lines to the Kerry Principles, successive administrations tried to fashion a rational solution to an irresolvable problem.
- The final-status negotiations that Secretary of State Kerry managed to forge by sheer force of will in 2013 revealed unbridgeable gaps on all the issues. For example, Netanyahu insisted on an IDF presence on the Jordan River and in the West Bank for at least three decades; Abbas rejected ever recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. The Israeli government claimed all of Jerusalem as its undivided capital; the Palestinians insisted that East Jerusalem had to be their capital. Netanyahu rejected admission of any Palestinian refugees to Israel; Abbas insisted that at least some be allowed to return. Less obvious, but no less real, was the decline in America's ability to influence the outcome. With the interim approach discredited and the two-state goal unattainable, the "Oslo Process" died in 2014.
- Then along came President Trump, determined to turn a dead process into "the Deal of the Century." His plan has yet to be revealed but its purpose appears clear—to legitimize the status quo and call it peace. Trump has already attempted to arbitrate every one of the final status issues in Israel's favor: no capital in East Jerusalem for the Palestinians; no "right of return" for Palestinian refugees; no evacuation of outlying settlements; no '67 lines; no end of occupation; and no Palestinian state. And for good measure, no aid for the ungrateful Palestinians. Little wonder Trump has now shuttered the PLO legation in Washington. Since he has so effectively driven the Palestinians away from the negotiating table, who needs it?

- Over 25 years, in shifting roles from witness to midwife to arbiter, the United States has sadly failed to help Israelis and Palestinians make peace, leaving them mired for the time being in what has essentially become a frozen conflict.
- But the quest for that Holy Grail of Middle East peace never seems to end. It just reinvents itself. Perhaps when Mahmoud Abbas, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Donald Trump leave the scene, it will be time to try again. Perhaps then someone will dig up the video of that magical day in September 1993, when peace seemed within reach, and when an American president promised Israelis and Palestinians “the quiet miracle of a normal life.”

SUMMARY: Then along came President Trump, determined to turn a dead process into “the Deal of the Century.” His plan has yet to be revealed but its purpose appears clear—to legitimize the status quo and call it peace. Trump has already attempted to arbitrate every one of the final status issues in Israel’s favor: no capital in East Jerusalem for the Palestinians; no “right of return” for Palestinian refugees; no evacuation of outlying settlements; no ‘67 lines; no end of occupation; and no Palestinian state. And for good measure, no aid for the ungrateful Palestinians. Little wonder Trump has now shuttered the PLO legation in Washington. Since he has so effectively driven the Palestinians away from the negotiating table, who needs it?

A Sense of Decency- Rosh Hashanah Sermon

By Elliot J. Cosgrove, chief rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue

- **Some people believe that ours is an unprecedented era – a dystopian society, the likes of which we have never seen, worthy of a Philip Roth alternate-history novel. Others point to past precedent, the McCarthy era, the Japanese internment camps of WWII, the combustible events of 1968, the Sedition Act of 1918; our nation’s history does not lack for the Longs, Lindberghs, Wallaces, and Coughlins and the movements they represented. Some claim that our moment is an aberration that will soon pass, while others contend that the last seventy years was the aberration and our moment signals a return to the norm. Regardless of your historic sensibility, whether you believe history repeats or merely rhymes, the challenges of our age are self-evident: the toxic discourse, the media feeding frenzy, the peddling of fear and hate-mongering, the populist strain of nationalism, the attacks on our institutions of democracy, the blurring of lines between dissent and disloyalty, between truth and untruth. As we usher in this new year and take the pulse of our country, we know that the diagnosis is poor, that our fears far outweigh our hopes.**
- **My concerns, to be clear, are not directed at just any one individual. McCarthyism did not begin with McCarthy, and our present challenges neither began with any one election nor for that matter will they end at the conclusion of any given political cycle. There are hyperboles and hatreds, here and abroad, emanating from all sides of the political spectrum. I read the news and am reminded of Ghandi’s response when asked what he thought of Western Civilization. “I think,” he replied, “it would be a good idea.” But more to the point, in a democratic society, be it here, in Europe, Israel, or anywhere, to assign blame solely to any one person is to abdicate our responsibilities as citizens – the voters, enablers, and bystanders who make possible elected leadership.**
- **To live in a democracy means that we concede that the fault is not in the stars but in ourselves; our leaders are symptoms, not causes. As Harry Truman once said, “We get the government we deserve, and we deserve the government we get.” We are all contributories – our actions and inactions calling us to account today. Today my concerns are not directed at any one person, nor for that matter at any one policy. My concern is more fundamental, as an American, as a Jew, as a human being, and most of all, as a father of four, saddened and distraught at raising children in an age of which it can be asked “Have you no sense of decency?” Ours is a vulgar age, with a public square lacking in moral leadership. On our watch there has been a degradation of discourse, in the value of truth, and in the belief in the infinite worth of every human being. We suffer from a paucity of decency, of acts of kindness, and most of all, of holding fast to the fundamental importance of being a mensch.**
- **There are two – at least two – remarkable things about giving a sermon about the importance of decency. First, that we live in a time when to remind people to be a mensch may be understood to be a partisan political act. Second is the very fact that such a sermon needs to be given at all! “Rabbi,” I imagine someone here thinking, “for this you went to rabbinical school? . . . To tell us to be kind? Today is Rosh Hashanah; there are people here in this room but once a year. Tell them to support Israel, teach them to light Shabbat candles, encourage them to give to Jewish**

causes. With such a small window, is this really how you want to allocate your leadership capital? To being decent?”

- My answer, having stipulated that you should all support Israel, light Shabbat candles, and give to Jewish causes, is yes, absolutely. There is no more important message for you to hear this year. “What is it that the Lord requires of you?” asks the prophet Micah, if not “to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before the Lord?” This is the calling of the day – to make manifest the goodness of humanity, to cause decency – ours and that of others – to emerge.
- If for no other reason, on this Rosh Hashanah, we need to be reminded to be decent and kind because it is a message that is not being championed with the frequency and volume that it demands. We are living through a perfect storm of forces, giving rise, to adopt Harvey Milk’s turn of phrase, to a conspiracy of silence, where the very people who should be calling for decency have ceased to do so. It is not just those individuals who, for reasons of self-interest or political survival, have, despite possessing the political or financial capital to make a difference, chosen to remain on the sidelines. Let someone else do it, they say, the markets are up, it is an election year, better to play it safe. But religious leadership, too, for a variety of reasons, has been rendered mute. The Catholic Church, we know, has their own tsuris of late, diminishing their ability to elevate our nation’s moral discourse. On the other side is the deafening silence or even outright support from so many in the Evangelical community who have made a utilitarian and ultimately Faustian bargain in abdicating their moral pulpit in order to secure judicial appointments or other packages of political benefits. Of these leaders, we are left to wonder, as one ancient (sort of) Jew rhetorically asked: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the world and lose his soul?”
- And lest we Jews make the mistake of misplaced schadenfreude or smug self-congratulations, we too have our own fair share of moral reckoning to do. No different than the Church, we have sins of commission and omission for which we must answer. Jewish leadership has proven just as capable of carrying out all the abuses of our #MeToo era and worse. But it goes further. Far too many in the Jewish community, like the Evangelicals themselves, have provided moral cover and absolution to those individuals, no matter their indecencies and ethical lapses, as long as they remain committed to the security of Israel. Finally, and perhaps most perniciously, is the emergent and increasingly audible riff that Jews must make a choice between observance and ethics or, if you like, survival and moral decency. That it is somehow untoward for a Jew to champion deeds of kindness, to seek to mend the world and work to improve our common humanity. It is an Orwellian hijacking of Judaism, nothing short of a McCarthyism within our ranks, that if you are committed to decency and humanity as a whole, then your commitment to the Jewish future must be suspect. Such thinking is dangerous, and, no different than for our Evangelical friends, risks the possibility of our one day waking up to a Judaism and Jewish people that are no longer worth defending.
- Being decent is not necessarily easy. It takes strength and courage. It is not just about being nice. It means doing things that make you and your interests vulnerable. Decency is Senator John McCain in that 2008 town hall meeting grabbing the microphone away from that woman making racist remarks. Decency is Senator Abraham Ribicoff going off-script in order to stand up to the Mayor Daly machine at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Decency is the unprecedented move of Teddy Roosevelt inviting Booker T. Washington for dinner at the White House no matter the political cost. It is Israel’s President Rivlin announcing that if as president

he must sign the recently passed nation-state law – the one demoting Arabic as an official language – then in protest, he would do so in Arabic. Decency is not only the refusal to gossip about another, but the act of telling the gossiper that you want no part in what they are doing and that it is wrong. It could be as simple as a kind word or a gracious and undeserved act of forgiveness. It could also be telling someone you love a truth that he or she needs to hear – not, God forbid, to cause them hurt, but because better they hear it from you – someone who loves them – than from someone who doesn't. Acts of decency will not necessarily make you popular; they can be impossible calls of judgement that force us to dig deep. Lest we forget, the abiding image of these holidays is Abraham, who was asked to sacrifice that which was dearest to him in order to serve the calling of the hour. As Martin Luther King taught: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Is it enough? If each of us in this room commits to acts of kindness, small and large, mundane and extraordinary, anonymous and public, will it turn the tide? I don't know, and I can make no promises. But given the state of play in our world today, it is as good a place to start as any. It was Rabbi Salanter who once wrote: "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world . . . Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself . . . But I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country, and we could all indeed have changed the world."

- Friends, years from now our children and grandchildren and our history books will ask what we did in this decisive hour. We have arrived at synagogue today to dig deep, knowing that we are living through history. We seek to be reminded not of who we are, but of who it is we aspire to be, our best self, and we commit to being that person. We commit to taking that commitment into our families, into our city and into our world. Today, tomorrow, and the next day, in private and public, to close the gap between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be – and in so doing, to make this indecent world of ours a little more decent.

SUMMARY: If for no other reason, on this Rosh Hashanah, we need to be reminded to be decent and kind because it is a message that is not being championed with the frequency and volume that it demands. We are living through a perfect storm of forces, giving rise, to adopt Harvey Milk's turn of phrase, to a conspiracy of silence, where the very people who should be calling for decency have ceased to do so. It is not just those individuals who, for reasons of self-interest or political survival, have, despite possessing the political or financial capital to make a difference, chosen to remain on the sidelines. Let someone else do it, they say, the markets are up, it is an election year, better to play it safe. But religious leadership, too, for a variety of reasons, has been rendered mute.