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TRAGIC POSTURE OF A DEFEATED NATION

TO sue for peace is a term used traditionally in a specific set of circumstances. A nation on the verge of defeat in war, deciding to save what it can, appeals to the enemy to stop the fighting. If the foe agrees, it will lay down conditions of surrender.

With these satisfied, negotiations for peace can follow. Over such negotiations, whether brief or prolonged, there will hang, implicitly or explicitly, the victor's threat: "If you don't agree, we shall renew the war." In Israel's negotiations with the Arabs, the roles have been reversed. The reversal accurately reflects an internal debate in Israel.

What do we hear over the years? "If the Arabs aren't given what they demand, there will be war." "Giving them all they demand would be suicidal, so let us offer them partial concessions." "Territory for peace." "Full peace for full withdrawal." Hence the offers of "territorial compromise" - like, specifically, the Allon Plan, which the Arabs naturally declined. An innocent bystander wouldn't believe his ears. "You Israelis were the victors, you were attacked and won.

Why are you pleading, begging for peace? How come the defeated aggressors are setting the terms, and you are twisting and turning for ways to appease them?" That is manifestly the greatest of Israel's tragedies. Its leaders have adopted what, by the yardstick of history, psychology and life, is the posture of a defeated people. Israel is the one prepared - nay, rushing - to pay a price, and negotiations revolve round the single axis: how much of the unchanging terms being dictated by the Arabs the Israelis are prepared to concede.

In his 1964 book "A World Restored," Doctor Henry Kissinger pointed to an enlightening historical phenomenon: "Those ages which in retrospect seem most peaceful were least in search of peace. Those whose quest for it seems unending appear least able to achieve tranquility. Whenever peace - conceived as the avoidance of war - has been the primary objective of a power or a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of the most ruthless member of the international community." Never has there been more chilling proof of the truth of this proposition than the cringing stance of successive Israeli governments.

Their people, remember, has been threatened constantly and publicly with utter annihilation. It has been twice attacked by the overbearing expansionist Arab coalition intent on that evil purpose. It is precisely because of that threat and those aggressions that tiny Israel has been driven to build one of the strongest armies in the world and an air force which is perhaps the best in the world.

It possesses, moreover, a technology potential which is among the highest in the world. Because of that threat, generations of Israelis have given years of their young lives to military service. In consequence, Israel has as strong a power for deterrence, for the prevention of war, as can be conceived.

Vividly, on Yom Kippur last week, we recalled the war of 1973. We remembered how, following demonstrably culpable negligence in the security leadership and an incredibly blundering diplomacy, Israel suffered near-lethal setbacks at the hands of the Syrian and Egyptian aggressors; how then the army recovered and, under a daring

leadership, rose to its capacity, and turned the tables - until its units stood poised near the very gates of Cairo and Damascus. Then, with complete victory within their reach, and with it the prospect of what could be a generous peace, the Israeli political leaders, at the urgings of American secretary of state Kissinger, began a retreat.

Kissinger succeeded in his objective of improving American relations with Egypt and Syria. The government of Israel succeeded in transforming a hard-earned victory into an ignominious defeat with far-reaching and profound consequences. (To this day, Egypt annually celebrates its great victory over Israel.)

THE retreat in Sinai, thus begun, continued in the years thereafter - step by step - until five years later, prime minister Menachem Begin initiated and executed the surrender of the whole of Sinai to Egypt. In return, Israel received a peace treaty which, in practice, Egypt treats as little more than an armistice. In case the Arab states decide to go to war, it is worth, as everybody knows, less than the paper it is written on.

The same spirit dominates the setting of the present "peace process." The picture is one of ebullient Arabs - both inside and outside the negotiation room - stating the uncomplicated demands of the victor; Israel's negotiators boasting of palpable acts of destruction of Jewish effort and Jewish hopes in the heart of their homeland - and producing "new ideas" to demonstrate at least further steps of compliance; and Arab dismissal of all concessions which do not immediately further their purpose. The next act in this performance opens next week. The future of Judea, Samaria and Gaza has, it is true, been the subject of debate in Israel since 1967.

What was never in question was the inviolability of the Golan. That inviolability is ensured by the force of the military deterrent. Hafez Assad, notorious as a tyrant and despot, rivaling Saddam Hussein in cruelty and no less desirous of "burning" Israel (which he has tried twice in the past), is not, however, insane.

Battling Israel by various proxies in Lebanon, he will not move against an Israeli army which has Damascus in its sights. Everybody knows this. Yitzhak Rabin knows it.

Why, then, is he prepared to undermine Israeli security? How can he envisage reviving a threat whose elimination has cost Israel so many young lives? What can be the reason? There seems only one rational explanation. It is to be found in Washington. The Americans have flirted shamelessly with Assad for many years.

The gifts they have given him since the Gulf war (including the abandonment of the Christians in Lebanon) have been outrageous. That they have made promises to Assad over Israel is beyond doubt; and the signs are that they have promised to "deliver" Israel on the Golan. The message would have been passed on to Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

In the spirit of mindless subservience which has characterized Rabin's government, he will have given Washington an undertaking for at least partial withdrawal (including the transfer of some of the Jews - of which he speaks casually). Indeed, the only mandate Rabin has for surrender on the Golan, if he has a mandate, is an American one. His claim that he has a mandate from the people of Israel is untrue.

And he knows it. He knows how broad the spectrum of opposition among the people is. One must hope that the many groups that appear to be organizing to express that opposition will hasten to establish an articulate and united front.

This could be the opportunity, moreover, for demonstrating that the people of Israel refuse to behave like a defeated nation any longer.