

Red State Jews
By Thane Rosenbaum
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This is a soul-searching moment for the Jewish left. Actually, for many Jewish liberals, navigating the gloomy politics of the Middle East is like walking with two left feet.

I would know. For six years I was the literary editor of *Tikkun* magazine, a leading voice for progressive Jewish politics that never avoided subjecting Israel to moral scrutiny. I also teach human rights at a Jesuit university, imparting the lessons of reciprocal grievances and the moral necessity to regard all people with dignity and mutual respect. And I am deeply sensitive to Palestinian pain, and mortified when innocent civilians are used as human shields and then cynically martyred as casualties of war.

Yet, since 9/11 and the second intifada, where suicide bombings and beheadings have become the calling cards of Arab diplomacy, and with Hamas and Hezbollah emerging as elected entities that, paradoxically, reject the first principles of liberal democracy, I feel a great deal of moral anguish. Perhaps I have been naive all along.

And I am not alone. Many Jews are in my position -- the children and grandchildren of labor leaders, socialists, pacifists, humanitarians, antiwar protestors -- instinctively leaning left, rejecting war, unwilling to demonize, and insisting that violence only breeds more violence. Most of all we share the profound belief that killing, humiliation and the infliction of unnecessary pain are not Jewish attributes.

However, the world as we know it today -- post-Holocaust, post-9/11, post-sanity -- is not cooperating. Given the realities of the new Middle East, perhaps it is time for a reality check. For this reason, many Jewish liberals are surrendering to the mindset that there are no solutions other than to allow Israel to defend itself -- with whatever means necessary. Unfortunately, the inevitability of Israel coincides with the inevitability of anti-Semitism.

This is what more politically conservative Jews and hardcore Zionists maintained from the outset. And it was this nightmare that the Jewish left always refused to imagine. So we lay awake at night, afraid to sleep. Surely the Arabs were tired, too. Surely they would want to improve their societies and educate their children rather than strap bombs on to them.

If the Palestinians didn't want that for themselves, if building a nation was not their priority, then peace in exchange for territories was nothing but a pipe dream. It was all wish-fulfillment, morally and practically necessary, yet ultimately motivated by a weary Israeli society -- the harsh reality of Arab animus, the spiritual toll that the occupation had taken on a Jewish state battered by negative world opinion.

Despite the deep cynicism, however, Israel knew that it must try. It would have to set aside nearly 60 years of hard-won experience, starting from the very first days of its independence, and believe that the Arab world had softened, would become more welcoming neighbors, and would stop chanting: "Not in our backyard -- the Middle East is for Arabs only."

It is true that Israel has entered into peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan that have brought some measure of historic stability to the region. But with Israel having withdrawn from Lebanon and Gaza, and with Israeli public opinion virtually united in favor of near-total withdrawal from the West Bank, why are rockets being launched at Israel now, why are their soldiers being kidnapped if the aspirations of the Palestinian people, and the intentions of Hamas and Hezbollah, stand for something other than the total destruction of Israel? And if Palestinians and the Lebanese are electing terrorists and giving them the portfolio of statesmen, then what message is being sent to moderate voices, what incentives are there to negotiate, and how can any of this sobering news be recast in a more favorable light?

The Jewish left is now in shambles. Peace Now advocates have lost their momentum, and, in some sense, their moral clarity. Opinion polls in Israel are showing near unanimous support for stronger incursions into Lebanon. And until kidnapped soldiers are returned and acts of terror curtailed, any further conversations about the future of the West Bank have been set aside.

Not unlike the deep divisions between the values of red- and blue-state America, world Jewry is being forced to reconsider all of its underlying assumptions about peace in the Middle East. The recent disastrous events in Lebanon and Gaza have inadvertently created a newly united Jewish consciousness -- bringing right and left together into one deeply cynical red state.

Mr. Rosenbaum, a novelist and professor at Fordham Law School, is author, most recently, of "The Myth of Moral Justice" (HarperCollins, 2004).