An Israeli Peace Initiative?

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Maimonides described messianic times as an era when Israel would simply be left alone in peace. In his Mishnei Torah, in the "Laws of Kings and Wars (12:4)" he writes: "The Sages and the prophets did not yearn for the messianic era in order to have dominion over the entire world, to rule over the gentiles, to be exalted by the nations, or to eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, they desired to be free to involve themselves in Torah and wisdom without any pressures or disturbances, so that they would merit the world to come."

Imagine a time when Israel – and the Jewish people as a whole – would not be subject to hatred, violence, terrorism, or war. Imagine a time when we could devote all our energies to our minds and spirits, to maintaining a righteous and prosperous society. Unfortunately, we still live in an unredeemed world, and the messianic dream seems further away than ever. But we must not give up on this goal.

At present, Israel is engaged in conflict with Hamas, various Palestinian terror groups, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and, of course, Iran. The Jewish state is also confronted with a growing number of countries that are choosing to recognize a Palestinian state without due concern for Israel's vital interests. Jews in the Diaspora are facing antisemitism in the media, on college campuses, and by pro-Palestinian mobs.

How can we dream of a time of peace when our current reality is very far from being peaceful? The answer is that we must not abandon our dream, regardless of all the negative elements in our world. We must envision – and work for – a new era of peace.

However, it appears hopelessly naïve to speak of peace at a time like this. The haters are not interested in peace, unashamedly calling for the annihilation of Israel and the murder of Jews. Islamic fundamentalism and Palestinian nationalism fan the hatred. Iran uses its power and money to foster violence against Israel. The animosity seems intractable.

Does it make sense to plan for the "day after" when that day seems so remote? On the other hand: Does it make sense not to plan for the "day after"?

Combating hatred

Our real enemy is hatred.

It is hatred that fuels Iran, Palestinian terrorists, and antisemites in general. It isn't likely that we'll be able to eradicate all hatred, but we can make inroads and turn the tide.

Dr. Leonard Mlodinow of Cal Tech, in his book Emotional, discusses "psychological contagion" through which attitudes are transmitted. He reports on research regarding "the spread of emotion from person to person or throughout an organization or even an entire society" (p. 184). A psychological climate emerges that draws people into the "contagion." Certain ideas and attitudes take on a snowball effect. The contagion cannot be staunched unless a powerful "counter-contagion" takes hold.

When crowds get fired up against Israel and against Jews, the hatred is "contagious." Haters are emboldened when others are drawn into their group. The more haters, the more people are driven to commit violent acts and speak malicious words.

Israel needs to undertake a serious peace offensive.

It has demonstrated its amazing military prowess and must continue to be as powerful as possible. At the same time, it can help create positive "psychological contagion" that will draw people to its vision for a peaceful future.

Israel has already made dramatic strides forward with the Abraham Accords. It would be significant if Israeli leaders would publicly meet with the leaders of the Arab countries included in the accords. The world needs to see that Israel and Arab nations respect and cooperate with each other.

People need to sense that a wider network of peaceful relations is possible.

THE WORLD also needs to hear from Israeli Arabs who are demonstrating allegiance to Israel and working with Israeli Jews to build a better society. Israeli Arabs are successful in so many ways. Their stories are very important.

Israel and Saudi Arabia have been considering a path toward mutual recognition. If this can be achieved, it will be a dramatic step on the path to a wider regional détente.

At present, the ayatollahs have firm control in Iran, but it is possible that, at some point, the opposition will rise and topple the regime. If Iran can be freed of Islamic fundamentalist rule, there can be an opening for civil relations with Israel. We must make it clear – loudly and often – that we have no interest in war with Iran.

As Israel promotes a serious peace initiative, it will need to relate to the Palestinian people. The status quo of ongoing terrorism and war is certainly not in the interest of Israel, and not in the interest of the Palestinians. It does seem almost impossible at this time to find a responsible Palestinian leadership that will negotiate reasonably with Israel; there have been so many failed attempts in the past. But our long-term vision must transcend the current realities and plan strategically for a long-term détente with the Palestinians.

A serious peace initiative is in Israel’s interest. It will help turn back the anti-Israel and antisemitic psychological contagion and replace it with a growing respect and support for Israel and the Jewish people.

Maimonides taught that our goal for messianic times is simply to be left in peace, to be free of hatred and wars. We need to keep this goal in mind – and work to bring this vision into reality.