

There Could Have Been Another Way

I BELIEVE THAT ALL OF US WHO ARE COMMITTED TO PEACE are in agreement that regardless of what went wrong at Camp David, things should not have been allowed to go wrong *afterwards*. Some have argued, from opposite sides of the national divide, that the subsequent eruption of violence was – to draw on a familiar dictum – nothing more than a continuation of negotiations by other means. They have said, moreover, that the devastation of the political landscape was an intended and therefore unavoidable product of the failure to achieve a desired outcome to the negotiations. Thus Israel accused the Palestinian side of having set aflame the so-called *intifada*, while Palestinians accused Israel of trying to impose by force what the Palestinians did not and could not accept at Camp David.

To believe this interpretation to be true, of course, is to assume that it is totally naïve to contend that things should not have been allowed to subsequently go wrong. It is to assume that things could not but have gone wrong afterwards, since one side or the other, or even both, actually intended them to go this way, given their inability to achieve their respective objectives at Camp David.

However, given the way the political landscape has unfolded since the outbreak of violence in October 2000, it is hard not to believe that both sides simply miscalculated tragically, even assuming ill will on one side or the other. For now, Israel seems well on its way to imposing a more restricted solution, and the Palestinians seem well on their way to being subjected to something less than what was achievable at Camp David. This outcome cannot be a formula for a stable and lasting peace, and in any case could not have been the desired objective of either party at the time.

It is therefore more rational to assume that the devastation could have

been avoided, whether on the assumption of the absence of ill will or, conversely, even on the basis of its existence, if the map had been read correctly and the potential miscalculations foreseen. Perhaps the miscalculations could even have been prevented in advance of Camp David itself.

Foreseeing the difficulty of bridging the gap on final status issues, some voices were heard at the time, my own among them, calling for a two-part agreement in preparation for Camp David: one on the issues over which there were no unbridgeable differences, and another on the list of the remaining issues. The Palestinian side could thus have declared its statehood in the image of its desired vision, while the Israeli side would simultaneously have recognized that state in a way that conformed to its own vision. There could also have been an agreement by the two sides to pursue negotiations in due course in order to bring the two visions closer to each other.

At the time, a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood was perceived as a belligerent stand, which it might well have been under a certain interpretation. But it may well have also been a means of escaping from what seemed, according to stated declarations at the time, an inevitable cul-de-sac. At Camp David, a workable agreement could have thus been reached which would have built upon previous peace efforts and laid solid foundations for a continuation of those efforts. We could have thus avoided years of human suffering.

In a sense, this idea of a provisional state and the Road Map are not very different in content, though they will be very different in terms of the overall political structure of the planned process. However, the creation of such a state under *present* circumstances could have the counterproductive effect of causing skepticism and mistrust among the Palestinian population, instead of being a positive psychological catalyst in the buildup of popular support for the peace process. That would very much be a function of having Ariel Sharon as the negotiating partner, rather than Ehud Barak, and of the Palestinian state being established within the confines of the enlarged prison walls on which the writing of the final borders is very clearly inscribed.

Anyway, that things went wrong both in Camp David and afterward is clear, and there are many reasons, hypothetical and real, why one can hold both sides responsible. However, viewed dispassionately, and in retrospect, one cannot help but recognize that while Camp David did not yield results on final status issues, it broke the ice on those issues and shook the foundations of long-held taboos. It is true that Palestinian expectations on Jerusalem, for example, were higher than what was offered by Barak, but given Israeli perspectives, Barak made an unexpected leap. One cannot help wondering whether, had the Palestinians made a similarly unexpected leap,

say on the refugee issue, or on settlements or borders, it might not have been fruitful.

One cannot, in other words, help wondering whether a lack of initiative on the Palestinian side, more a function of negotiation culture in such situations than of hardened positions, contributed to the recoil and eventual frustration of the Israeli interlocutor. For I believe that it was abundantly clear that the Israeli interlocutor at Camp David wanted to close a deal. The Americans also wanted to close a deal. Only the Palestinians were skeptical from the outset, and therefore perhaps not tuned to the same mode.

But Palestinian skepticism, it must be stated, had its justified roots in the constantly churning wheels of settlement expansion, a process always running parallel to, but in the opposite direction from, any serious negotiation process. We know in any case, from the accounts of bilateral meetings held after Camp David, that the gaps were being narrowed and that whatever their remaining size, it would have been far better to construct a mechanism for managing these gaps than to allow a total breakdown, resulting in the human pain and suffering that followed.

Of course, it is always easier to be wise after the event, yet there are some observations I would like to make concerning that event. The first observation has to do with its nature. We know that different, often conflicting descriptions of the event compete for uniqueness or preferential status. However, given the many bilateral contact/negotiation lines that were all simultaneously or consecutively in play during that event, and the near absence of collective sessions, especially those in which the key interlocutors participated, one suspects that the subsequent conflicting descriptions of what really went on reflect different aspects of the reality of the event, rather than opposing versions of that reality.

We are all aware of how difficult it is to have two viewpoints converge in describing what we assume to be the same reality. So one can only imagine how much more difficult that process is when it comes to describing a multiplicity of contact lines operating simultaneously. In that sense, one can claim to know with far more confidence what occurred at Taba in January 2001, for example, than at Camp David.

My second observation has to do with third parties and the required nature of negotiations in this particular conflict. Very briefly, my sense is that each side has to "take the bull by the horns," and face its dilemma directly with a view to solving it, rather than depend on the ingenious efforts of third parties, however positively disposed they are to helping us. Frankly, Israel is not in need of a mediator to speak on behalf of Palestinian concerns, nor are the Palestinians in need of a mediator to speak on behalf of Israeli concerns. A resolution reached directly by the protagonists stands far more chance of lasting than one reached through third-party mediation.

These observations reinforce my own current belief in public engagement in the peace process, an element that was totally missing at Camp David. If the Oslo ship rocked us gently through the waters, closer and closer to the shoreline, Camp David shook the ship and awakened everyone in it to the reality of the rugged landscape of that shoreline. What we now need is the courage to disembark and reach that shore. This voyage does not concern only the captains of the ship; it concerns us all, ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, who seek a normal life of security and dignity. This is why the people must be brought into the process and why it should not be left only to erudite technicians and political leaders, however ingenious they may be.

This is also why I have proposed, jointly with Ami Ayalon, that the people be engaged in supporting the only workable principles for a resolution of this conflict, principles which – while allowing for further technical negotiations between the two sides – provide the way to address squarely all final status issues. It is the two peoples' destiny that is on the line, and this is their opportunity, perhaps the last one, to shape a workable, lasting two-state solution. If the people voice their preference, it is hard for leaders not to comply. Conversely, left only to leaders and third parties, the two peoples might never see the freedom and security they both so sorely need.