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An Unsightly Challenge to Israeli Sovereignty

By Leonard Fein

Generally speaking, once a week is plenty. But now and then the pace of things quickens, and I find myself wishing this newspaper were published three times a week, there being more than enough happening to warrant not one but three columns. This is one such week. What follows, therefore, is three scrunched up columns.

Column 1: At first blush, it's a head-scratcher. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri and Dore Gold, former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations and currently president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, speaking from the same talking points?

Here's Zuhri on November 24: "The time is not right for talks with Israel." And here's Gold a day earlier, observing that there's no point to negotiations "between Israel and the Palestinians at this time." They're talking about Annapolis, of course. Zuhri believes "the time is not right" because the Palestinians are divided; Gold believes "the time is not right" because "the diplomatic gaps between the parties on... critical issues [are] unbridgeable."

The language is the same, but the motives are quite different. Zuhri believes, or at least hopes, that conditions will in due course change: Hamas will displace Fatah on the West Bank, as it has in Gaza, and as Hamas terrorism becomes more sophisticated and more lethal, Israel will be driven to make concessions that it will not make today.

Gold apparently believes that in due course Hamas will collapse and the Palestinians will be pressured into making concessions that are unacceptable to them today; in the meanwhile, time out, no urgency. But: Only genuine reconciliation can finally end the conflict; a lasting peace cannot grow out of the ashes of defeat.

Maximalist demands and expectations are a snare and a delusion. The time is right to act appropriately.

Column 2: Speaking of Annapolis, Boston's Jewish Russian Telegraph, under the headline "Rice Rapes Israel," reports on the creation of a new umbrella organization called the Coordinating Council for Jerusalem. The council is an odd alliance, including as it does the Zionist Organization of America, American Friends of Likud, Americans for a Safe Israel — all three secular right-wing organizations — in addition to the Orthodox Union, National Council of Young Israel and, as I count them, at least 14 other Orthodox agencies and organizations, plus a handful of others.

Its stated position is that "Jerusalem is the capital of the Jewish people and the heritage of all Jews everywhere and... we oppose any negotiations which involve possible concessions of Jewish sovereignty or control over Jerusalem." It is committed "to an intact, secure, undivided Jerusalem under Jewish sovereignty."

Never mind that Jerusalem is already divided. Never mind that the Israeli government has welcomed negotiations that "involve possible concessions" on Jerusalem, because if Jerusalem were to be taken off the table there would be no negotiations at all; kiss any prospect of peace goodbye.

And never mind that many of these same organizations have historically been brutally critical of American Jews who have publicly opposed this Israeli policy or that. Now comes the Coordinating Council for Jerusalem and says that Jerusalem is not the sovereign responsibility of the State of Israel, since it belongs to the entire Jewish people.

Therefore... Therefore, what? Therefore, like the three "no's" of the Arab states in Khartoum in 1967 — no negotiations, no peace, no recognition — the Jewish people, so to speak, exercises a veto over Israel's government by announcing its own three no's: no recognition of Israel's exclusive sovereignty over Jerusalem, no negotiations and (left unsaid but clearly implied) no peace.

Column 3: On an entirely different matter, last week we witnessed a remarkable and rather disturbing coincidence, an irony on a global scale. On the one hand, we learned that

scientists have figured out how to make fetal stem cells out of healthy adult cells. If this is really so, then some time in the next 50 years or so we will likely see an end to debilitating disease.

The magic of fetal stem cells is that they can be used to regenerate damaged cells of any kind at all, and then introduced into the same body from which the healthy adult cells were harvested. No immune response, no rejection. Ultimately, life expectancy will soar. Who needs a fountain of youth when we have a geyser of illness-free old age? A new world — except that we've also been informed in no uncertain terms that climate change is well on its way, that in the next 50 years or so, perhaps sooner, we will experience potentially catastrophic changes well beyond the mere warming of average temperatures: vast new deserts, lethal flooding of coastal areas as the sea levels rise, the wholesale destruction of species. Real-time disaster.

So now that we are on the verge of a giant leap forward in life expectancy we are also on the verge of a giant collapse of the ecosystem.

The stem-cell breakthrough is the product of human genius, of imagination and persistence and collaboration, of a universal scientific imperative to pursue knowledge, understanding and even wisdom. The climate breakdown is the product of human indolence, of selfishness and even rapacity, of political fecklessness and the endless pursuit of things.

The tree of life, the tree of knowledge, but one bite too many of the apple. Who can any longer be certain there is no Satan, with an (appropriately) diabolical urge to have the last bitter laugh?

I think of Sondheim's "Send In the Clowns": "Just when I'd stopped opening doors, finally knowing the one that I wanted was yours, making my entrance again with my usual flair, sure of my lines — no one is there." Neither bang nor whimper, just Satan's smug laughter.