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## ***The Brothers Fein: Big Dreams and Baby Steps***

**By Leonard Fein**

In my family, we specialize. Ever since graduate school, the specialty of my older brother, Rashi, has been the economics of health care. He was an early and fervent advocate of single-payer national health insurance, and his expert knowledge and thoughtful approaches were widely sought and widely hailed. From time to rare time over the years, he could glimpse, in the far distance, success, sometimes whole, more often partial, almost always fleeting.

I took a very different route. I've followed multiple dreams. Still, there's been a constant, and the constant has been peace between Israel and its neighbors. From time to rare time over the years, I could glimpse, in the far distance, success, sometimes whole, more often partial, almost always fleeting.

In short, we are both failures; that which we set out to accomplish when we were much younger and to which so much of our energy has been devoted has come to very nearly naught.

Then again, "very nearly" is not nothing. While we are still far from the kind of comprehensive change in our health care system that has been the goal of American presidents since Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 (and later of FDR, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton and now Barack Obama), there have been memorable victories along the way — most notably, Medicare and Medicaid, both signed into law by President Johnson in 1965.

And, as messy and potentially violent as the Middle East remains, Israel does have peace treaties with both Egypt and Jordan. As far as both agreements remain from having ushered in the kind of warm peace that is still only a yearning, they — the treaty with Egypt, in particular — have been genuine game-changers.

Do these steps forward make my brother and me fans of incrementalism? My brother can speak for himself (and he does, [including on this very page in this week's Forward](#)). As for me, I have decidedly mixed feelings. What about all the daydreams of a mass mobilization that might bring the walls of Middle Eastern animosity tumbling down? What about all the songs and poems about how just a year from now we will bask in the sunshine of a new day, a new world? Yet: There is for now no way, whether home-grown or externally imposed, that all the change that's required can be swallowed in one gulp.

So, incrementalism.

But have we not been there, has that not failed again and again? How many times have we relied on one version or another of “confidence-building measures” only to find that such measures collapse into niggling arguments and squabbles, the kind that erode what little confidence there may be and end up making matters worse rather than better? Road maps and timetables have moved from fanfare to failure every time.

If the whole is too big to manage and the parts are too petty to inspire, what's left?

Jews and Palestinians alike come to the conflict exhausted. However skeptical they are that the conflict can be resolved, they yearn for its resolution. Some are maximalists, seeking resolution on their exclusivist terms only. But most — the polls tell us over and over — would be content (and some would be ecstatic) with two states, one Jewish, the other Palestinian, both viable, living side by side in peace and dignity. So the question becomes how one can encourage exhausted people, disappointed people, people grown cynical, people who neither know nor trust each other, to undertake the difficult journey toward peace.

A tale:

*Here is a 10-story building. Your task is to run up the stairs as fast as you can. Take care on the landings: They are rickety, prone to collapse. At the top, you'll find a wonderful prize.*

*Excuse me, haven't you left something out?*

*What, exactly?*

*What is the “wonderful prize” that warrants the effort?*

*Oh, that. I assumed you knew; the prize is peace.*

*Peace? That's it? Could you maybe be a little more specific — like, Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements, the rest of the issues?*

*No, I cannot be more specific, that's for the parties to negotiate.*

*Sorry, unless I know up front where we are heading, I cannot muster the energy to make the trip.*

Meaning that you have to do big picture and component parts simultaneously. You have to offer a fairly detailed exposition of the final status in order to get the process started. People who claim that everyone already knows the contours of the final-status agreement — think Clinton parameters, think Taba, think Geneva — are mistaken. The current Israeli government has already laid down a number of conditions that in important respects shift the contours. Nor is it by any means clear that the Palestinian Authority would be content with the contours that “everyone already knows.”

From time to time, we read that the Obama administration is considering the utility of putting forward its own sketch of a final-status agreement. That's a last-ditch proposition, since it gives all the absolutists and all the rejectionists an easy target for their arrows. But it also gives the moderates, the yea-sayers, a goal. It will not satisfy everyone, meet every demand, but wisely constructed, it may encourage those who seek peace.

Accordingly, parts and whole simultaneously. And urgently: Absent any progress, the rejectionists grow more resolute and brazen by the day.