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What Obama Should Say to Israelis

By Leonard Fein

There's a growing clamor for President Obama to visit Israel (and, presumably, once in Jerusalem, Ramallah as well). But there's a bit of a problem in imagining such a visit: What would the president say?

He would likely deliver a very elegant speech; that's one of his great skills. But beyond reassuring the Israelis of America's "unshakable" commitment to Israel's security and chastising them for their inflexibility on settlements, what is there for him to say? Pretty words, even moving words, no doubt. But useful words, words as a prelude to... to what?

On the issue of settlements, the Obama administration has tried different approaches, including reason, public chilliness and bribery. None of these worked, and now the administration has undermined its own seriousness by voting at the U.N. Security Council against its own policies.

And on the much larger issue of peace, a dead battery. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu is currently rumored to be preparing a new peace initiative, perhaps even some restrictions on new settlement construction, there is every reason to suppose these actions will be

no more than a ploy, formulated to ensure Palestinian rejection, hence to enable Israel to continue its baseless plea that it has no partner for peace.

The White House seems convinced that Israel's leadership is in fact intransigent. That does not make them "anti-Israel;" that makes them, at last, realistic — hence stymied.

How does one encourage American efforts to revive a meaningful peace process? One way is by now traditional: Convince the administration that it is in America's interest to make peace happen. But the truth is that the administration already knows that. The fierce urgency of now has bumped directly into the dour and destructive obstinacy of Netanyahu, Lieberman et al. Bumped into, and rendered hors de combat.

But the fierce urgency of now is not simply one of Martin Luther King's more memorable phrases; The urgency of now could not be more clear or more real; midnight does approach.

Even though Palestine has so far been left to the side by the heroic masses of the current Arab uprisings, the profound, inspiring and unsettling changes under way in the Arab world may yet give lethal expression to the widespread Arab animus toward Israel, a hatred that will not dissipate until there is a viable Palestinian state — which is to say, until there is justice for Palestinians.

And beyond such necessarily contingent predictions, there remains the obdurate fact of Israel's frenetic efforts to render Jerusalem indivisible, thereby effectively wrecking any prospect of a serious two-state solution. Regarding Jerusalem, the clock is ticking. Two or three years from now, we will be reminded of the full context of King's words, delivered in a Riverside Church speech on Vietnam: "We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today.

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.... Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, ‘Too late.’”

There is, so far as I can tell, only one other potential game-changer, itself perhaps only a hair more likely than a renewal of Obama administration efforts. Were there a sustained and massive call by Israelis themselves for a resumption of negotiation, for a final and binding resolution to the conflict, not only would the White House and the State Department pay grateful attention; even the doyens of the American Jewish community might finally speak a truth most of them recognize but are too tied up in knots to speak clearly. (The colossal failure of Jewish leadership in the face of the dangers we face is not less serious than it was during the 1930s. It is less their rich donors who inhibit our communal leaders, more their insistence on infantilizing the people they presume to lead. They fear we cannot be trusted with the truth.)

What makes it unlikely that the long-awaited mobilization within Israel will at last happen, that such demonstrations as the ongoing weekly protest at Sheikh Jarrah will attract not 300 people or even 3,000 people but 30,000 people, is that Israel’s population consists of a series of enclaves, and the potential for an aroused citizenry depends critically on the notoriously insulated Tel Aviv region.

Once you subtract from Israel’s Jewish population (5.7 million) the Haredim, who stand resolutely outside the political debate, and the religious nationalists, who are adamant hawks, and the bulk of the Russians who have arrived since 1989, who are in the main far to the right, you’re left with roughly 3 million Jews. Of these, a decisive majority live in the greater Tel Aviv area. (Another fifth of Israelis are Palestinians, whose voice on the issue of peace would not be taken seriously.) Of those 3 million Jews, more than half live in the Greater Tel Aviv region. Alas, on the issue of peace, they are today’s Jews of silence. They are not likely to take a page from the

Cairo or Tunis books, nor even from Israel's own history books; their gaze is toward the Mediterranean, not eastward to the Jordan.

So not only too late, but also too few? That cannot be, cannot be allowed to be.

Here's a thought: Let President Obama address the generation he so successfully inspired as a candidate, delving in depth into the role young people have played and can play as agents of change. That is how our war in Vietnam was ended; that is how Tunisia and Egypt were liberated. Let his speech be broadcast live at colleges and universities all over the world — including all the colleges and universities in Israel and in the West Bank. The message? No, not that “you, too, must take to the streets.” Instead: “The future of freedom, dignity, life itself depends on you.” Because, in truth, it does.