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The Scene in Israel

Renewed Conflict in Gaza

War is merely the violent extension of politics. The month of Ramadan is always a month of heightened religio-nationalist energies among the Palestinians. Elections in the Palestinian regions – the West Bank and Gaza – in which Hamas was slated to gain significantly, were called off by the Palestinian Authority for fear of those results. Hamas eagerly sought an opportunity to assert itself and claim leadership of the Palestinians. Israel's inability to form a government was viewed by Hamas as evidence of national weakness, providing the terrorist organization with what it believed to be a door of opportunity. A series of blunders related to Jerusalem and to the Temple Mount (site of the Muslim Al Aksa mosque) by the new Israeli Chief of Police added to the fire.

The rise of Israel's political extreme right wing, represented by Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, emboldened the two that take initiatives in Jerusalem at the expense of Palestinians residents of the area (Sheik Jarackh, variously spelled) served as the trigger: Hamas began showering rockets into Israel and shelling nearby Israeli townships and villages, threatening to continue until Israel ceased its efforts in Sheik Jarackh and with regard to the temple Mount.

No country can allow its citizens to be brazenly attacked. Israel responded with a well-planned program. Some 60 miles of underground attack tunnels, command posts, rocket launching sites and military depots belonging to Hamas and to the Islamic Jihad were destroyed. Hamas's cyber unit and its naval commando base were destroyed, its high command targeted and, in many cases, killed. Although there were instances when an Israeli attacked was called off because of the presence of civilians, there were instances in which this not possible – Hamas and the Islamic Jihad premeditatedly embedded themselves within the civilian population so as to later accuse Israel of targeting civilian areas.

Twice Hamas sought a cease-fire. Israel refused: it was determined to set the terror organizations military capabilities back as far as possible. Finally, after 11 days, Israel conceded. Throughout, Israel continued to supply Gaza with water, electricity, food and medical supplies, although the supply trucks were repeatedly attacked by Hamas.

I have published special bulletins on this. These have been sent to all MaozNews readers, and posted on various the social media I use. Should you have missed any of these, you can find them on my FaceBook, Twitter and LinkedIn accounts, as well as on the front page of my website.

The Political Scene

The war with Gaza had political ramifications in Israel, which had just undergone its fourth round of elections in two years, each leading to similar results, but for two exceptions: 1) Mr. Netanyahu's support steadily eroded. Some of the most prominent and ablest of his allies joining the opposition; 2) a significant number of those who share Netanyahu's views are opposed to his continued, corruptive reign. Netanyahu won 30 seats, by far more than any other party, but he was able to garner no more than 52 Knesset votes, shy of the 61 that would enable him to form a coalition government. The opposition, on the other hand, can easily achieve a Knesset majority if the various parties involved manage to frame a coalition agreement with which all can live.

The fourth round of elections was forced when Mr. Netanyahu reneged on a series of commitments (in writing, most of which were legislated) that he made to Mr. Benny Gantz, including the passing of a national budget and the appointment of a Minister of Justice. As a result, new elections were called. The bi-partite Caretaker Government is hamstrung, unable to make decisions while the country continues for the second consecutive year without a budget. Rather than allow a right-wing government that would implement his professed platform if he but handed leadership to any other candidate, Netanyahu insisted on holding onto the reins. He then mulled a Putin/Medvedev-like arrangement, with a crony serving as ostensible Prime Minister and real control remaining in Netanyahu's hands.

Israel remains divided. Political platforms took second place to the question whether or not Mr. Netanyahu would be allowed to form the next Government. Deserted by allies and standing trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust, Mr. Netanyahu has fought hard in an effort to gain control of the police, the judiciary, the media and any other body that is likely to affect the outcome of his trial. He is likely to be incarcerated.

The country is divided. On the one hand are Netanyahu's Likud, vacated of its' best talent and most respected politicians, the two religious Orthodox parties and the extremist Religious Zionist party, a prominent member of which is neo-fascist Ben Gvir, who hung in his living room a portrait of the mass murderer, Baruch Goldstein. Ben Gvir's mentor, Meir Kahana, was forbidden by Israel's Supreme Court to run for a Knesset seat because of his extreme nationalistic views. On the other hand is a gamut of parties from the right, left and center of the political map, broadly differing in their platforms but united in their opposition to Netanyahu's continued reign.

Following elections Mr. Netanyahu attempted a coup by underhanding and contrary to legal proceedings appoint a Minister of Justice from among his most devoted cronies. Responding to a

petition against the appointment, the Supreme Court announced that it will broadcast the resultant hearing live – an unprecedented step that delivered notice to Mr. Netanyahu that he would not be allowed to get away with what he did. He then abruptly u-turned and agreed to the appointment of his nemesis, Minister of Defense Benny Gantz, as Minister of Justice. The obvious attempt was so disconcerting that parties engaged in negotiation with Mr. Netanyahu immediately withdrew and are now negotiating a Government without him. Meanwhile, compelled by the Supreme Court, Netanyahu filled five other Ministerial posts that he kept vacant.

Failing to form a government, Mr. Netanyahu's mandate expired and, following consultation, the President gave the mandate to Mr. Yair Lapid, who has 14 days to present a government that could garner 61 votes of approval in the Knesset. Immediately, Mr. Netanyahu commenced efforts to dismantle one of the opposition parties. He sought out a Member of the Knesset (MK) from Naftali Bennet's Yamina party and offered him a secure slot in the Likud party's list for the next two Knessets plus a cabinet post in Mr. Netanyahu's government. The MK concerned not only rejected the offer, but disclosed it to the public, combined with a letter of reproof he wrote, addressed to Mr. Netanyahu. Two other MK's from Yamina were likewise approached. They rebuffed the offers.

No one is surprised. Mr. Netanyahu will stop at nothing to secure himself from the Court's likely evaluation of his conduct and that of his family. He is applying pressure from every possible direction, through every possible agent, on all Yamina party. To that end he approached them directly, or via envoys – rabbis, media people, fixers –inundating them with temptations and promises such as reserved slots on the Likud slate for two or three Knesset terms in advance, ministerial positions and more. Many of these are empty he will not be able to keep (for example, by law, a MK that transfers to another party cannot be on any party's list for the next term of the Knesset). Spouses of Yamina members became the subject of repeated phone calls, ranging from threats to piteous pleas. Netanyahu's machine is one of the most effective mechanisms in the public arena. Threats are made both clandestinely and openly. On social media, Bennett and his No. 2, Ayelet Shaked, were daily inundated with tens of thousands of posts. The scare campaign was churned out by many elements, open and anonymous.

Mr. Lapid heads the second largest party. In an effort to secure a government, he offered Mr. Bennet first place in a proposed rotating Prime Ministership, commenced laboring to bring the disparate opposition parties together in a coalition government that would be comprised of six parties representing political platforms all the way from the far right to the far left, and supported by at least one of the three Arab parties. If he succeeds, that would be a remarkable achievement. Should such a government be formed (see below) and live out its term, it would be a miracle. With the outbreak of hostilities, Bennet surprisingly declare himself in favor of a government with Netanyahu. Mr. Lapid has 11 more days to form a government. If he fails, the President must pass the mandate onto to Knesset. In the Knesset fails, Israel will have to undergo a fifth (!!) round of elections. Meanwhile, it has functioned without a stable government for 2.5 years and without a national budget for 18 months.

The Pandemic

At the time of writing (April 30) In a population of just over 9 million, 838,481 of the population were infected, 6,263 died (<https://epidemic-stats.com/coronavirus/israel>) and some 60% (5,404,497) have been vaccinated. Coupled with the number of those who have recovered from

the disease, the Country is close to herd immunity: on April 29 there were 48 diagnosed cases in the whole of the country.

In spite of hiccups on the way, Israel has handled the crises well. But, then, Israel is better equipped to do so than most countries: due to decades of conflict, the population and Israel's doctors medical institutions know to respond quickly and efficiently; there are but three medical organizations that cover the whole of the country, and Israel is not affected by the heightened regard for individual rights that characterizes many Western societies. The main difficulties arose among the Jewish Religious Orthodox and the Arab communities, and who, for different reasons, live in relatively more cramped conditions, have larger families and are disinclined to follow Government instructions.

With the pandemic now largely behind it, life in Israel is beginning to return to normal – whatever the new normal will be. The economy is humming, but tens of thousands must now seek employment, many small businesses have closed and significant loss of investment has been sustained. The gap between the extremely rich and the poor has widened and the middle class is further eroded.

The Murderous Stampede

Mount Meiron, situated in Galilee, is where Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai is believed to have been buried, having died on the Jewish holiday of Lag b'Omer (the 33rd day of the count of the Omer (Leviticus 23:15-17)). The event typically draws tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands, the vast majority of whom are ultra-Orthodox. Pilgrims sing, dance and feast around bonfires on Mount Meiron throughout night.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who lived in the second century, was a brilliant Talmudic scholar, who according to some accounts, was the author of the Zohar, Judaism's book of mysticism. He was a disciple of Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest Jewish scholars and sages of all times, noted for his support of Sion Bar Kochkba, the false Messiah who brought disaster of the nation by rebelling against Rome. The rebellion ended with hundreds of thousands being slain and the land largely denuded of Jewish residents. According to tradition, on the day of his death, Bar Yochai revealed to his disciples the secrets of the Kabbalah (Jewish-cum-gnostic mysticism), which is one reason Lag b'Omer became a day of celebration, the bonfires symbolizing the light, or wisdom, he supposedly shared with the world.

Rabbi Bar Yochai is said to have hidden with his son from the Romans in a cave for 13 years. The Romans wanted him dead because he criticized their rule. According to legend, the father and son were able to sustain themselves during that long period of hiding by eating from a carob tree that grew at the entrance to the cave.

Bar Yochai is a highly regarded figure in Jewish religious history. Some few hundred years ago, as Judaism continued to deteriorate, absorbing esoteric beliefs and practices, the grave became the object of religious devotion and annual pilgrimage. People came to believe that prayers at the grave, or addressed to Ben Yochai as mediator, would be especially effectual. A trickling of pilgrims became a swarm and the swarm become a flood, numbering tens of thousands, sometime more.

Israel's Ministry of Religious Services is responsible for the site but has long ignored that responsibility, handing the de facto running of the site to local Orthodox sects. Prior to this year's pilgrimage, the Fire and Rescue Authority and the police, both responsible for aspects of public safety, surveyed the site and left instructions as to what measures were to be adopted to ensure the safety of those attending the annual event. No more than 9,000 were to be allowed in the area in which the stampede occurred (originally constructed to ensure men did not come into contact with women during the celebrations), and 4 exits were to be made available. At least 20,000 were present and only 1 exit was provided. The route includes stairways and a downward-sloping metal ramp that apparently became slippery. Revelers leaving the site via the passageway lost their footing, causing domino effect in which thousands fell one on another. In the crush, 45 died, 150 were injured.

The Orthodox are almost exclusively urbanized, with little contact with life outside of the ghettos they have formed for themselves. They have little sense for the practicalities of life, including arrangements. Repeatedly, Orthodox youth drown, are lost in the desert or are otherwise exposed to unnecessary danger. They consistently tend to ignore safety measures. As a result, during the recent pandemic, hundreds died and thousands infected because they declined to adopt precautions. In addition, the government long absolved itself of practical oversight of the celebrations, with the inevitable consequences that followed.

The event on Mount Meiron is largely the product of neglect by the authorities and by those who gained control of the site, and of the Orthodox community's conduct. A Commission of Inquiry into the disaster is soon to commence its investigations.

Ministry News

I am now preparing the course I taught **on the doctrine of God** (in Hebrew) for the press while continuing other projects. In **the New Testament project**, we have completed the final draft of Matthew to Romans and are far advanced with First Corinthians while I review editorial comments of my rendering of the Greek on the remainder of the New Testament. I have completed reviewing II Corinthians and Galatians and Ephesians and am now working on Philippians. In the **Bible notes project** am just over halfway through the book of Psalms.

To give you a sense of the work involved in writing a book on hermeneutics, I am drawing closer to the end of renewed studies for the book – just 14 more books remain to be read. I must then collate the notes derived from my reading, digest them, modify whatever I discover that needs modifying in the case I seek to make, and then go back to writing. The hope I expressed to revert to writing before this issue of MaozNews was a vain hope.

Family News

Maya has been posted as expected, on our northern border – an active border in light of the conflict with Iran in Syria and with Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon. **Noam** will be coming home for the summer and **Nadav**, who was happy to return to school, is now contemplating the summer.

Shlomit has been hired to teach again at the Christian school that her three children attend. **Keith's** health is under control, but not helped much by 10-14 hour workdays which he is forced to undertake in order to make ends meet. While he and Shlomit would rather stay near the family, he continues to seek a Pastorate and hopes he would find one such in the area. After home-

schooling **Shai** for a year, **Tamar** has decided to send him to a public school, where he will have the social interaction that is he so much needs. **Yotam** has been tested for advanced studies and now awaits the results. Didi lost the first tooth of many yet to come.

Most of the family, barring Keith and Shlomit and all of the children, have been vaccinated, with few and temporary side-effects. Toward the end of April, we undertook a road trip to Phoenix, where we have close friends and where I preach and lecture, as well as shared in some of the RBNet Missions Committee deliberations and in an Ordination Council of a brother called to the pastorate in a small town on the Arizona mountains. It was good to take a breather, and to spend it in the company of dear friends. I continued to work, but devoted less hours to work and more to Bracha and friends. We returned home on May 12th. On May 17th I underwent a prostatectomy and am now convalescing.

In the unbreakable bonds of Christ,

Baruch



Support for our ministry should be sent to **Reformed Baptist Network, 860 Peachcrest Ct. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505 USA**. Bank details for direct transfers are **Chase Bank, Plainfield Four Mile 3539 Plainfield Ave. NE Grand Rapids, MI 49525, Account Number: 236738891**. The routing number for domestic wire transfers is **021000021**. The **Swiftcode** for international transfers is **CHASUS33**. Kindly indicate: For Baruch Maoz' ministry

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