



PERSPECTIVES

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14 Years Since the Destruction of Gush Katif

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Over the past fourteen years, to the memory of the destruction of the Temple on Tisha b'Av has been added the memory of the uprooting of the communities of Gush Katif and northern Samaria. As prominent Israelis, including former PM Ehud Barak and the group Commanders for Israel's Security, are seeking further dismantling of West Bank communities on a vastly larger scale, it is incumbent on us to remember the horror of destruction.

I am known to the public as the "commander of the disengagement forces." If this were something to be proud of, it would be worth mentioning that I was not alone – I had three other division commanders as well as police commanders with me, all of whom did estimable work.

The exaggerated focus on me and my role may stem from the fact that I came to the mission with a unique personal story. My sympathy for, and association with, the settlement enterprise was well known, and I never concealed my professional dissent from the move from anyone, including the Chief of Staff. The focus on me also stems from the unique way in which I viewed the task and, accordingly, prepared the forces. I faithfully fulfilled my duty to the state, but obeying an order – certainly at the level of division commander – is never an instrumental obedience.

The meaning of the mission

It was clear to me for the outset that we were taking part in an event fraught with symbolism and with implications for both the future and the values of the state of Israel. The Zionist enterprise, which was based from the start on the momentum of building and cultivation, cannot easily bear a large-scale uprooting. In an initial presentation of the operational concept to the Head of Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Dan Harel, I began with a slide that indicated a

direction: "All the actions of the security forces have to convey a message that puts the evacuation in a Zionist light." Harel turned pale. To my delight, the Southern District commander of the Israel Police, Uri Bar-Lev, who took part in the discussion, gave me full support with the statement: "Listen to Gershon, he's the only one in the right direction."

In 1982, in the framework of the peace treaty with Egypt, there had already been a mass uprooting of Jewish communities in northern Sinai, including the town of Yamit. Yet difficult as that was, the context was different: the evacuation of Sinai was implemented amid the high hopes stirred by the peace treaty, and it was in fact members of the Labor Party who expressed staunch opposition to the uprooting that the treaty required. In a 1980 gathering on the issue, about two years before the uprooting, prominent Labor politician Israel Galili said:

A person's labor and production are of value. The person who is rooted in his land is also by nature deeply identified with the space in which his life occurs.... The abandonment and evacuation of communities entails an uprooting that is uniquely cruel.... The rule is that we are supposed to engage in settlement at all times and to move to new communities so that we do not abandon them.

Galili acknowledged the Knesset's authority to abandon the land in question, but concluded: "There is a danger in this facile kind of thinking that hastens to turn settlement into a utilitarian value, into bargaining chips that are easy to play with."

PM Yitzhak Rabin, too, may have regarded the destruction of Gush Katif as an unjustified about-face in the Zionist enterprise. In his last address to the Knesset a month before his assassination, he portrayed Gush Katif as a positive communal example, saying, "it would be great if there were to be settlement blocs like Gush Katif in Judea and Samaria."

The foremost question with which I vied was how to imbue the physical task we had to carry out with a set of conceptual tensions that from the point of view of the operating forces was totally abstract. Given the government-stirred public animosity toward the evacuees and its effort to use the disengagement as a springboard for deciding the dispute over the future of West Bank Jewish communities, I believed it was vital to give the uprooting a Zionist coloration.

Thus, for example, former Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg, in an article in *Haaretz*, anticipated that the act of uprooting would mark a turning point in the Zionist enterprise: "End of the equation of settlement = Zionism." Journalist Avirama Golan wrote in the same newspaper (under the headline "The End of

the Time of Redemption”) that “the national-religious party’s disillusionment from the state gives the silent majority an opportunity to redefine what it means to live in this country.... The state is not the onset of anyone’s redemption. It is a kind of ‘house committee,’ an agreed-upon organizational entity.”

The Left hoped to see the “Zionist river” turn back upon itself. In our approach to the task, however, I tried to bring about a different tide. Whether we wanted it to or not, the uprooting was certain to smash the Zionist river into a destructive barrier. But through an effort to mitigate the collision, coordinated with the evacuees’ leadership, the river could circumvent the barrier and continue in its traditional path.

To accomplish this I needed to find a balance between, on the one hand, the obligation to carry out the mission, and on the other, deep respect for the evacuees and for the values of settlement, so their fortitude would not only not be compromised but would even be bolstered. Inspired by the distinction between the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem, I instilled in our task a distinction between the “lower Gush Katif” and the “higher Gush Katif”: between the physical neighborhoods which, under orders, we had to uproot and demolish, and the spiritual and ideological Gush Katif – a pioneering-Zionist symbol and dream – which we sought to preserve and strengthen.

We gave this outlook practical expression in our work. For example, when the time came to evacuate the synagogues of Neve Dekalim, we found hundreds of teenage boys ensconced in one of them and hundreds of teenage girls in the other. For the former I chose a brigade of noncommissioned officers who were older career soldiers, while keeping the more skilled Yasam (Israel Police Special Patrol Unit) in reserve. The veteran NCOs, who knew what a prayer and a synagogue were, undertook the task in the appropriate spirit. For the evacuation of the girls, a special all-female battalion was set up overnight. Given the uniqueness of the event, and convinced by Rabbi Aviner, I allowed a journalist to document what happened inside the synagogue; it was later presented in the moving film *Song of the Girls* and preserved for future generations.

No to another uprooting

On the face of it, from a military standpoint the Gush Katif evacuation was a success. The operation took less time than was allotted for it. Despite intense fears about possible loss of life, there were no casualties. This result has given those hoping for another uprooting in the West Bank a purported formula that can be replicated.

From a strategic standpoint, however, this thinking is fundamentally misconceived. Strategic events are by their very nature dependent on changing

circumstances and are therefore unique. To expect to replicate prior events while ignoring shifting circumstances is a certain recipe for failure. That was why PM Olmert failed in the much narrower evacuation of the West Bank Amona neighborhood in the winter of 2006: the operation was carried out in total disregard of the new context that had emerged in the months since the events of the previous summer.

Those who want to uproot dozens more communities in the West Bank, with the attendant expulsion of some 150,000 people from their homes, must bear in mind that the circumstances have changed in all respects. Likewise, those wishing to prevent another uprooting need to make a conceptual change: to free the concept of Jewish life in the West Bank from its sectorial religious-national labeling and transform it into a pioneering opportunity for millions of Israelis.

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