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Lawrence Raful

Touro Law Center, lraful@tourolaw.edu

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Can There Be Peace in the Holy Land?

By Lawrence Raful, Professor of Law

Last December, I visited Israel for a week with 500 American Jews. The editors of *Creighton University Magazine* asked me to reflect on the trip. As you read this, remember that I am not an expert in the history of the Middle East conflict, nor am I a professor of theology, economics, political science, international affairs or sociology. I'm just a typical American of the Jewish faith who is befuddled by the morass in the Holy Land, and I wanted to see things for myself. And what I learned about life for Israelis and Palestinians deeply troubled me.

My observations from one week in Israel are culled from presentations of officials and army generals, as well as from street discussions with Israelis and Palestinians.

Almost everyone I heard said the long-term outlook is optimistic, but in the short term it's pessimistic. What a Jewish thing to say! I could almost hear my dear Aunt Anna, or even Tevye the Milkman, say the same thing. We heard this many times, that this will be like the Cold War with the Russians, lasting 20 or 30 or 40 years until a new generation becomes leaders and people are simply tired of fighting. It's a war of attrition — who will give in first? Israelis suffer death and terror and economic slowdown; Palestinians suffer joblessness, despair and hunger. There is no good way out of the cycle, and it's clear to all that some factions of the PLO see violence as part of the peace process. One speaker called it "instability as a strategy." And you know what? Everyone I talked to said, "Well, I don't have an answer."

The media suggests, "If the occupation ends, peace will come." But it is not that simple — it is so much more complex. Eighteen months ago, the majority of Israelis were willing to trade land for peace. At the close of the Clinton presidency, after the Camp David discussions fell apart and the phantom intifada, with its purely terroristic goal, started, the majority of Israelis changed their position. There won't be war, but there won't be peace either. There is no military solution to this problem of terrorists; and there is no government agenda right now except for one: protect citizens and punish terrorists. It's

clear that the majority of Israelis dislike Ariel Sharon, but for now, they support his policies. Now Israelis have "a confusing reality." And the sad thing is that much of the business of Israel has slowed or stopped.

Soldiers and government leaders were brutally honest with us. They admitted Israeli mistakes. Israel, speakers said, has simply failed to notice the misery and despair that was created by the economy over the past eight years in the West Bank. Israeli behavior has not been perfect. One speaker said, "Occupation corrupts the Israeli morality, it corrupts our Jewish values. And so does war." A high ranking Army soldier said, "My major responsibility these days is to make sure that my soldiers do not act like animals." I was astonished to hear such heart-rending admissions, but I knew that you'd never hear that in a briefing in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan or Syria. Yet these words, this public "al chet" (the Jewish version of *mea culpa*) strangely lifted my soul, knowing that these soldiers, these politicians, these Israelis, these Jews, still cared deeply about the Jewish soul of the State of Israel.

What interested me, as a law professor, was that once you go to Israel, you realize that all the debates in the United States about Mideast history and rules are worthless. I can give you page after page of legal reasons, and I can argue with you for

hours, about why Israel can do this or that. But the truth is that there is no black and white in the Mideast, only shades of gray. In the end, the British Mandate in 1922 and U.N. resolutions 181 and 242 and the Geneva Conference of 1949 won't help achieve peace. The structure of international law is in place — and there are simply realities:

1. Israel exists as a freestanding sovereign nation.
2. There are three million Palestinians living in the West Bank in miserable conditions.
3. Israel needs peace, and it needs workers — Palestinians need jobs, stability and infrastructure.

The only way that life will improve for Israelis and Palestinians is for them to work together — on security, on the economy, on water rights, on housing, on religious sites, on development of land, and on and on and on. No amount of arguing about what U.N. resolution 242 meant changes any of those realities.

On our last night in Jerusalem, I walked with some despair through the Old City. But I was reminded of Psalm 137: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither." And I knew that the City of David, the City of Jesus, the City of Mohammed will one day see peace. I pray to God it is in my lifetime. Amen. ©

