

Letter No. 24

This past month hasn't brought better news. It did include Rosh Hashanah, the festival of the New Year, and the opening of the UN General Assembly in New York. But to show how bad things are, when Netanyahu stood up to speak before the delegates, many of them walked out.

It appears that Israel's standing in the world has never been lower. Israelis are beginning to feel this on a personal level. They are no longer welcome in certain parts of the world, and sometimes have faced verbal assaults, if not worse. Israeli sports teams are beginning to be removed from competitions and there are academic and artistic boycotts. Part of the international anger stems from the government's plan to retake Gaza City. The chief officers of the Army have expressed their disagreement with this move, but the Army must follow their orders from the government.

A growing number of Israelis—by now, probably a majority—want a deal to be made that would include the return of all the hostages and an end to this war, which is becoming increasingly more unpopular. Several times during the past month, it has appeared that such a deal may be on the horizon. But in each case, at least one of the sides has backed down, with each side blaming the other for the obstacles.

Israel continues to be attacked by the Houthis in Yemen. Usually, the rockets are intercepted by the Iron Dome. But on one or two occasions, they have caused damage to property, including at the Eilat airport, and, recently, eight people were wounded in that city. Israel has retaliated, killing one of the Houthis' key commanders. However, things were quiet over the Rosh Hashanah holiday and we are grateful for that.

On September 8th, there was, for the first time in a while, a major terror shooting in Jerusalem. During the mid-morning, two terrorists got on a bus at the Ramot Junction and started shooting, leaving six dead and 21 injured. Perhaps as a form of retaliation, the next day the Israeli Air Force attacked a meeting at Hamas headquarters in Doha, the capital of Qatar. At the time, there was much criticism of this move, both because it was a violation of international law and because Qatar has hosted negotiations between Israel and Hamas. In retrospect, the operation is deemed to have been a failure.

The anti-government newspaper “HaAretz” called the attack on Doha “a death sentence for the hostages,” although the ones who were alive at that time are still living, albeit under terrible conditions. There are perhaps 20 still left in captivity as well as many dead bodies that have not been returned for burial. The war in Gaza continues, taking a horrific toll of Gazan lives, as well as some Israeli soldiers. Although many Israelis are still relatively apathetic to the plight of the Gazans, a growing percentage are deeply concerned about what this war has done and is continuing to do to the moral fiber of the country.

There appears to be in the air in Israel what some media are calling “the smell” of upcoming elections. One of the parties to watch is the ruling party, Likud, where several people have indicated they are planning to run as alternatives to Netanyahu. One of them is Yossi Cohen, former head of the Mossad. The Prime Minister still has his loyal base of supporters, but there are other groups within the party who would like him to step down. He is, after all, Israel’s longest-serving PM. He is becoming even more hardline than before, criticizing the “leniency of the police” with regard to anti-government demonstrators and accusing the demonstrators of “behaving like Fascists.”

This column is being written about four days before the most sacred day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a day of reckoning for individuals and communities and the whole nation. Netanyahu recently told Israelis that we should become “super-Sparta.” Most Israelis reject that image for our country.

Finally, the second anniversary of the massacre on October 7th is coming up soon. According to the Hebrew date when it occurred, Simhat Torah, it would fall this year on October 14th. Probably there will be somber commemorations on both dates. If, through some American pressure (or a miracle,) we could achieve by then the possibility of an end to the fighting and the return of the hostages, Israelis and Jews around the world, together with our friends and allies, might be able to celebrate again.