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Time for a freeze

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The insistence of the Israeli government on expanding residential construction in West Bank settlements is not only superfluous and a product of internal political considerations, it is also harmful to Israel's security and national interests. There is a strong and decisive president in the White House who is determined to promote a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and has placed this goal very high on his agenda.

It's true that many of his predecessors tried to follow this path, even investing tremendous effort in it, and failed; in effect the United States has been involved in attempts to solve the Israeli-Arab conflict for 40 years, in vain. But the fact that all efforts to date have been futile does not mean this will be the case this time. Rabbis on the extreme right believe that if they curse President Barack Obama, compare him to Pharaoh and sing "Vehi She'amda" ["The promise God made to our forefathers" - a passage from the Passover Haggadah referring to those who tried to destroy the Jews and failed], the nightmare will go away. Israelis are entitled to expect a more serious and responsible approach from their government.

Obama is not Israel's enemy, but he and many in his administration lack the profound spiritual identification with Israel that characterized many of his predecessors, including Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. If the U.S. initiative really does take shape, Israel will face difficult tests on issues that are vital to its future and its security, such as the Palestinian right of return, Jerusalem, the recognition of Israel as the historical homeland of the Jewish people, the demilitarization of the future Palestinian state and border demarcation.

With its pointless insistence on continuing residential construction in all the settlements, the government itself is undermining Israel's ability to stand fast on the really important issues, and is causing even our staunchest friends to be angry at us. The clichéd excuse that the inhabitants of the settlements should be allowed a "normal life" does not convince anyone. In hundreds of communities all over the country - kibbutzim, moshavim and small towns - there is no new residential construction, and the inhabitants live totally normal lives.

In September 1978 at Camp David, prime minister Menachem Begin agreed to a total freeze on all construction in the settlements for a period of three months, in order to give a chance to the negotiations to establish autonomy in Judea and Samaria. Begin's loyalty to the Land of Israel, his sense of Jewish patriotism and his endurance were equal to those of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. His consent to a freeze on construction in Judea and Samaria came at a time when there were barely 2,000 Jews living there. Today there are more than 250,000 Jews there, about 200,000 of them in the settlement blocs.

No damage will be caused to Israel if the government declares its willingness for a temporary freeze on all residential construction in the settlements for half a year, until the end of 2009, a freeze that will not apply to Jerusalem. Such a step would transfer the burden of proof to the other side. During this period the Palestinians' willingness to make serious progress toward an agreement and the Arab states' willingness to adopt genuine moves toward normalization with Israel will be put to the test.

Israel can, when necessary, stand against even the entire world when it comes to a vital interest such as Jerusalem, which enjoys a national consensus and the total and determined support of the Jewish people. Expanding the settlements is far from being such an issue. The government cannot stand against the entire world for long without the support of American Jewry, and when the Israeli people itself is divided. The government must demonstrate national responsibility, and the sooner the better.

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