

"Frozen At the Wheel"

Someone said that during this period, many American Jews "are frozen at the wheel." That's a striking image for "failure of nerve," and there has been a lot of that going around.

What is "nerve?" It's the ability to make the decision to do what seems necessary. It's the ability to make that decision in the face of calculated risks. It's the ability to make that decision even if it might turn out to be wrong. "Nerve" is different than "foolhardiness," which is a matter of taking unnecessary or uncalculated risks.

It took "nerve" for Israel to give up the Sinai in exchange for a pledge of peace from a lukewarm Egyptian government whose longevity is not assured. It was a risk which Israel took in order to make a break in the wall of hostility around her. The *status quo* would have meant an unending cycle of wars for Israel's generations.

But the Egyptian break was not enough; by itself, it would not last forever. Some co-existence has to be found with at least Jordan, Saudi Arabia and, indeed, the Palestinian Arabs. But all three of those have been held hostage by the PLO, whose existence is based on preventing peace with Israel. *That* has been the main significance of the PLO, not its terrorist activity against Israelis, intolerable as that terrorism has been. The PLO was the main deterrent to peace in the Middle East by dint of its power to prevent the Saudis, the Jordanians and the Palestinian Arabs from making peace with Israel, even if they wanted to. And the PLO was gaining strength in Lebanon on both the military and political fronts.

So Israel moved to crush the PLO; to free Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Arabs from the blackmail domination of the PLO. Like the relinquishing of the Sinai, this Lebanese action took "nerve." It was an action for regional peace which carried great risks. It could fail. But without *some* action, time and the tide were working against a peaceful future for Israel and the Middle East

Now, some Jews think that Israel made an erroneous calculation -- and that this action will fail to bring Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Arabs closer to peace. Jews who think that way are not necessarily suffering from a failure of nerve; they may simply have an honest difference of opinion -- although they do have the obligation to suggest a credible alternative.

And some people may just think that the Begin government had a more sinister goal in mind. That is also an honest difference of opinion -- although it is always more fruitful to look at the *effect* of a politician's action rather than to guess at his motivation, which may turn out to be irrelevant.

However, most of the American Jews who are "frozen at the wheel" are not so paralyzed for either of those reasons. They just don't want Israel to take *any* serious risks that might alienate the American government or American public. Now, *that* is failure of nerve. There is some evidence that most American Jews do not disagree *substantively* with Israeli actions in Lebanon, but they tend to believe that *other* Americans and American Jews are likely to become more disapproving.

Jews are not the only ones that can suffer from failure of nerve, an often fatal disease. The U.S. government would be suffering from a failure of nerve if it didn't continue to support Israel's basic goals in Lebanon -- the same as America's goals -- for fear of alienating some Arab moguls. History tells us: we will surely lose ourselves and our highest values if we do not put ourselves at risk for them whenever necessary. Any society or group which suffers too long from failure of nerve will become extinct.