

THE GREAT ISRAELI DEBATE

We asked Menachem Begin last week whether he would really be open to negotiation on the subject of Judea and Samaria.

This was part of a two-way discussion in Israel between a small group of American Jews and a variety of Israelis, including Begin, Peres, Hammer, Navon, Eitan, Shamir, Foreign Ministry people, Peace Now people, Israeli newspaper editors, foreign correspondents and others.

The idea was both to let the Israelis know about the currents of opinion among American Jews, and to find out what was on *their* minds. The discussions were arranged by the Israelis and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

We opened the discussion with Prime Minister Begin on the subject of Judea and Samaria because that is at the forefront of Israeli consciousness. There were discussions about Lebanon, to be reported later, but even those related heavily to the future of the Palestinian Arabs.

"Israel is on the brink of the most important national debate in its history," we were repeatedly told. That debate, over the future of Judea/Samaria, we heard, was about nothing less than the future nature of the Jewish state. There was some concern about the debate getting out of proportion. "It could severely split the Israeli society," Shamir said.

What would be the nature of that split? After all, there is a broad consensus in Israel on the "Four Nays" pronounced by the Labor Party. The first Nay: there should *not* be a complete withdrawal from the "West Bank." Almost all Israelis agree that such a total withdrawal would be suicidal. Remember that if all the "West Bank" were evacuated, Israel would be about eight miles wide at one crucial point. That is why the term "West Bank" is so misleading. One might as well talk about the area from the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River as the "West Bank" of the United States.

The second "Nay" on which there is broad Israeli consensus: an "independent Palestinian state" should *not* be established in Judea and Samaria. Such a sovereign state, without any organic attachments to either Israel or Jordan, would be neither economically nor politically viable. It could become just a relocated southern Lebanon, forever a hazard to peace.

The third consensual "Nay": Israel should *not* deal with the PLO, dedicated as it is to war and dislocation. The fourth "Nay": Jerusalem should not be divided. Almost all Israelis (and almost all American Jews) are agreed on these Four Nays. So where is the split? It exists on two levels.

Israelis are heavily divided on the proposition that Judea and Samaria, as holy land, should be totally incorporated into Israel for non-negotiable historical and religious reasons. The Begin coalition is generally associated with that proposition. The Labor coalition is generally associated with a position that, as long as the Four Nays are observed, parts of Judea and Samaria can be traded in return for Israeli security.

Hammer of the National Religious Party is creating a small sensation by apparently moving towards the Labor position. He told us last week: "It is not enough to consider the holiness of the land. We have to consider the holiness of the life and the people of Israel."

But the issue is joined on a more practical and strategic level. The Opposition says that the government should take the initiative by declaring its willingness to negotiate some land for security. Begin insists that *any* declared position on the future of the territory would be premature. Such positions should be brought to the negotiating table only after a period of autonomy, as projected by Camp David. "Who knows," Shamir said to us, "what new relationships and ideas will develop during an autonomy period?"

Earl Raab

"Thei Great Israeli Debate"

page 3

In answer to our question, Begin said that after the autonomy, "Everything is negotiable. We will go to the negotiating table without pre-conditions."

Insofar as the argument is about strategy, it is partly a matter of judging whether the "hard" or "soft" approach will work best for the negotiations. Many of Begin's followers insist that there is a cultural factor in Middle East politics which most Americans don't recognize. Too-early compromise will only signal weakness and make negotiations for peace more difficult. Opponents say that the status quo can only deteriorate to Israel's disadvantage, and that some "flexible" signals must be given to get things going.

Critics say that the Begin government, because of an ideological longing for Judea and Samaria, or a too-hard strategy -- or both -- will move towards *de facto* annexation. The Begin people insist that they are not proceeding along rigid ideological lines, but along the only strategic lines which they think are realistic.

As Hanon Bar-On of Begin's Foreign Ministry told us: "This government recognizes the Palestinian national consciousness. It is a fact. This government also recognizes that certain Palestinian rights exist. But the interim autonomy of Camp Davis is the only game in town, the only approach which recognizes both political rights for the Palestinians and the needs of Israeli security."

Those are the dimensions of the great national debate which is gripping Israel. Begin, Navon and Peres all told us last week that American Jews should also study and debate these issues. And especially since American government policy is going to be involved, we had better do just that.