

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

It isn't every day a journalist writes an open letter to the prime minister. But today is no ordinary day. Nor is this an ordinary hour. This is the hour when the clock is about to strike midnight. A rare confluence of circumstances has created a situation in which on Israel's 62nd Independence Day, the state of the Jews is facing a challenge the likes of which it has not known since May 14, 1948. The year between this Independence Day and the next will be a crucial one. Shortly after you became prime minister, exactly one year ago, I entered your office for a few minutes. Uncharacteristically, you rose to greet me and gave me a hug. Also uncharacteristically, I hugged you back. I told you that as a citizen, a Jew and an Israeli, I wished you success. I told you I thought I knew how heavy the burden laid on your shoulders was. You replied that I don't know. That even though I think I know, I don't. That there has never been a time like this one since Israel's resurrection.

Based on previous conversations, I knew what you were talking about: the nuclear challenge, the missile challenge, the delegitimization challenge. The hair-raising conjunction of an existential threat from the east, a strategic threat from the north and a threat of abandonment from the west. The danger of a war unlike any we have had before. The danger of Israel's allies not standing at its side as they did in the past. And the sense of isolation. The sense of siege. The sense that once again, we must meet our fate alone.

You are a hated individual, Mr. Prime Minister. The president of the United States hates you. The secretary of state hates you. Some Arab leaders hate you. Public opinion in the West hates you. The leader of the opposition hates you. My colleagues hate you, my friends hate you, my social milieu hates you. But in the 14 years I have known you, I have never shared this hatred. Time after time, I have come out against this hatred. I thought that despite your shortcomings and flaws, you were not unworthy. I thought that despite the vast differences in our world-views, there was virtue in you. I believed that in the end, when the moment of truth came, you would have the vision necessary to create the correct synthesis between the right's truth and the left's truth. Between the world of your father, from which you came, and the world of the reality in which you must maneuver. Between the feeling that Israel is a fortress, and the understanding that this generation's mission is to bring Israel out into the wider world.

On June 14, 2009, you proved that you indeed have this synthesis in you. You spoke approximately 2,000 words in Bar-Ilan University's auditorium. But of those 2,000, only seven or eight were of historic significance: a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside a Jewish Israel. It was obvious you had a hard time speaking those words. They were pulled from your mouth in agony. But on that evening at Bar-Ilan, the statesman in you overcame the politician. The sober Herzlian overcame the anachronistic nationalist. About an hour after the speech ended, when I spoke with you on the phone, it was possible to hear relief in your voice. You knew that at long last, you had done the right thing. You knew that very belatedly, you had overcome yourself. You knew that henceforth, you were a Zionist, centrist leader who seeks a secure peace. Who aimed to divide the land in order to fortify the state. Who believed that in order to strengthen Israel and ensure its future, we must rectify the colossal historic mistake we made in the West Bank.

Mr. Prime Minister, something very bad has happened since that evening. Perhaps the blame lies with U.S. President Barack Obama: His ceaseless, unbalanced and unfair pressure on you caused you to freeze in place. Perhaps the blame lies with the international community: Its outrageous attitude toward Israel caused you to feel besieged. Perhaps the blame lies with opposition leader Tzipi Livni: Her cynical behavior shackled you with iron chains to Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Interior Minister Eli Yishai, who are hobbling you. Yet even if others are to blame, the responsibility is yours. You are the one sitting at that wooden desk in that wood-paneled room where our fate is decided. Therefore, you are the one responsible for the fact that a year after your election, Israel is still mired in the toxic swamp of the occupation into which it sank 43 years ago. You are responsible for the fact that we are sinking even deeper into the mud.

Granted, you suspended construction in the settlements. Granted, you made every effort to persuade Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to enter negotiations. At a time when the Palestinians did not lift a finger, you made one concession after another. But the political game you played was lost from the outset. What is now clear to everyone was clear from the start: There is no Palestinian partner for true peace. There isn't even a reliable Palestinian partner for partitioning the land. Yet the fact that the Palestinians are not acting like a mature nation does not give us the right to act like them. Since we are the ones sinking in the mud, we are the ones who must do something. It is Israel that must break through the noose tightening around its neck.

Mr. Prime Minister, here are the basic facts: The grace period granted the Jewish state by Auschwitz and Treblinka is ending. The generation that knew the Holocaust has left the stage. The generation that remembers the Holocaust is disappearing. What shapes the world's perception of Israel today is not the crematoria, but the checkpoints. Not the trains, but the settlements. As a result, even when we are right, they do not listen to us. Even when we are persecuted, they pay us no heed. The wind is blowing against us. The zeitgeist of the 21st century threatens to put an end to Zionism. No one knows better than you that even superpowers cannot resist the spirit of the times. And certainly not small, fragile states like Israel.

Therefore, the question now is not who brought us to this pass - the right or the left. The question is not who brought the greater disaster down upon us - the right or the left. The question is what should be done to bring about an immediate change in Israel's position in the world. What should be done so that the storm of history does not topple the Zionist project. The possibilities are known: Offer the Syrians the Golan Heights in exchange for ending its alliance with Iran. Offer Abbas a state in provisional borders. Initiate a second limited disengagement. Transfer territory into the hands of Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, to enable him to build a sane Palestinian state. Reach an agreement with the international community on an outline for partitioning the land into two nation-states.

Each of these five options entails high risks. Each of these options will exact a high political price. You are liable to be booted out of office. But if you do not adopt at least one of these five proposals, there is no point to your tenure in office. Your government will be remembered as the government under which Israel became a leper state, poised on the brink of destruction. The cards you received when you came into office were the worst possible: Iran on the brink of nuclear weapons, Hezbollah at unprecedented strength, Israel shunned by the world, an unfriendly administration in Washington and a dysfunctional government in Jerusalem. Indeed, earth scorched to ash. But you did not get to where you are in order to bewail your bitter fate. Even with the bad hand of cards you were dealt, you must win. On the scorched earth you inherited, you must make hope blossom. This is what there is. And you have to make the best of it. You have to grow into the greatness you promised.

The challenge of 2010 is a monumental challenge. On one level, it resembles Chaim Weizmann's challenge in securing the Balfour declaration: As in 1917, today, too, Zionism must mobilize widespread, solid international support for the Jewish state's right to exist. On another level, it resembles David Ben-Gurion's challenge at the inception of the state: As in 1947, today, too, the leadership must prepare the nation for almost inconceivably difficult scenarios. On a third level, it resembles the Dimona challenge faced by Ben-Gurion, Levi Eshkol and Shimon Peres: As in 1966-1967, the national leadership must give Israel's existence a strong, unshakable envelope of protection. But in order to meet this multidimensional challenge, Israel needs a courageous alliance with the Western powers. In order to withstand what is to come, Israel must once again become an inalienable part of the West. And the West is not prepared to accept Israel as an occupying state. Therefore, in order to save our home, is necessary to act at once to end the occupation. It is essential to effect an immediate and sharp change in diplomatic direction.

Mr. Prime Minister, the relationship between us has never been personal. We are not friends. You have never been in my home; I have never been in yours for any purpose except professional. We never stole horses together. We never planned a maneuver together. You have always known you would not receive immunity from me. I have always known you would never bribe me with journalistic scoops. But I did give you a chance. Time after time after time, I gave you a chance. I saw the patriot in you. I saw the abilities you had. I also saw the human being that you try to hide. But time has run out, Benjamin Netanyahu. The time is now. Therefore, I decided to take the unusual step of writing you this unusual letter. I myself am of no importance, of course. But I do believe that what I wrote is what many Israelis would like to tell you on this 62nd Independence Day. Do not betray them. Do not betray yourself. You are the man of this historic hour. Be a man.