

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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Ep. 171: A Former Israeli Foreign Minister Discusses The War With Hamas And What It May, And May Not, Achieve

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INTRO (male voice): Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today, I'm excited to be with former Foreign Minister of Israel, Shlomo Ben-Ami. Minister Ben-Ami had a leading role in the 2000 Camp David peace talks that almost led to a historic peace. I'm excited to find out how he sees the future of Israel and the Middle East. Welcome Shlomo, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Shlomo Ben-Ami: You're welcome, Lynn. Thank you for this invitation.

LT: It is my pleasure, Shlomo, you have seen what's happened in Israel. You just mentioned the videos from the Hamas [attackers'] cameras. What was it like?

SB: Well, I didn't see it - because most people in Israel didn't see it. It's too horrific to watch. It was seemingly sent to people in the international media or decision makers in different countries, but the verbal descriptions are truly heartbreaking, the way that 1,400 people were assassinated they were tortured, their bodies were mutilated, young girls were raped and shot immediately after. These kind of things we get from the descriptions, the verbal descriptions... But descriptions, but I'm not sure that this is something that Israelis want to see.... Of course. One wonders about the purpose of all of it. I thought the purpose in terms of the objectives of Hamas was not war to launch a political process, the kind of things that ...[President of Egypt Anwar] Sadat did, just for the sake of comparison, he did the war in 1973 against Israel because he wanted to activate the peace process that was frozen. That is not the purpose. Hamas doesn't see itself as part of a political solution. They say this very clearly. In their covenant, it says that their objective is to obliterate the state of Israel, it's not one of having a political deal with Israel.

LT: How is this attack by Hamas different?

SB: It is different in its magnitude, it's different in its barbarism. Nothing before it was experienced before in the Arab Israeli conflict. It's more similar to what you saw in America with 911 only that here, proportionally, it was even bigger. So, in that sense, the shock was tremendous. And the shock should explain in a way, the reaction of the Israeli government. I think, however, that there are additional reasons that need to be considered when trying to

understand why Israel has launched this war. It's not just a reaction to the massacre, it goes beyond that. There is a strategic objective here. Iran has managed to encircle with militias, some of which has the firepower of armed nation states such as Hezbollah, with its 150,000 missiles, many of them of high precision. So, you have in the north Hezbollah, which is Iran. You have in the South, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which is Iran. You have in Syria, Shiite militias, this is Iran. You have in the West Bank, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and you have in Iraq, and you have in Yemen. So, Israel has been encircled... The sense here is, at least the military sense of the operation, goes beyond a response to Hama massacre, it is also an attempt to remove a vital link in the ring.

SB: I think that the war needs to be understood also in this perspective...

LT: What do you see as the biggest issues facing Israel today?

SB: The more immediate issues are for everybody to see, and that is release of the hostages, bringing an end to the war, devising a political end game, not just the destruction of Hamas, that might or might not be achieved, that's still not clear. And there are more long-term issues for the divide within Israeli society, between the more liberal Israel and orthodox communities, the messianic settlers in the occupied territories, and also the fuller integration of the Arab minority within Israel into the mainstream of the economy... I think that much progress can be seen, but we need to upgrade the deal that is on offer to Israel's Arab minorities. And, finally, to have a constitution. Politically, Israel needs to have a framework of rules - political, social, human rights issues - all of this needs to be enshrined in a binding constitution.

LT: When you talk about full rights for the minority Arabs that are in Israel, can you be more specific. What rights do they not have now, that they should have?

SB: Well, for example, since 1948 to this day, not even one new Arab village has been created, whereas the country is blooming with new Jewish settlements, new Jewish cities. So, provide lands for the expansion of Arab life within Israel... So, this is just one thing that I can mention. But again, practice is more equal than people tend to think, but it is important to enshrine things in a constitution and in law. We share a common destiny with the Arab minority,

SB: And this common destiny is an invitation for equal unconditional rights. Now it is true that they do not have the same obligations. They do not serve in the military because we do not want them to go into this internal crisis of being in a military that is at war, or in a state of conflict, with their people on the other side of the border, which is fine. But the French Revolution taught us that rights do not depend on obligations. Rights are a given. If a minority, or an individual, have some obligations that it does not respect then the legal system should take care. The judicial system should take care but obligations and rights are not connected vessels. They exist independently.

LT: How do you think that the attack by Hamas will change Israel? Could it unify the country?

SB: Wars normally unite people, peace divides them more because everybody wants peace but they think that it is a free lunch and you don't have to pay a price and therefore people tend to be

more divided in times of peace than in times of war. What we are seeing now is overwhelming mobilization of Israeli society not only by the recruitment of the reserves. About 350,000 people have been recruited, in addition to the regular army. And you see, many many people volunteering, in fact, filling the void that this ineffective, incompetent and corrupt government that we have here, has created. The response of civil society has been much more effective and practically overwhelming really - you can see it throughout the country. And the government hasn't yet responded really to the needs of those that were affected by the war.

LT: When terrorists attacked the United States on 9/11 and killed over 3,000 Americans, it led the US to attack Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008 when terrorists infiltrated India from Pakistan, and killed more than 160 people in Mumbai, including people at two luxury hotels, India did nothing. It never retaliated militarily against either Pakistan or the terrorist camps. On October 7th Hamas attacked Israel killing at least 1,400 Israelis and taking several hundred hostages. Could Israel have done nothing after the Hamas attack?

SB: I think that there is a difference here. Israel is probably the only country in the world whose very physical existence is under threat. The countries in our neighborhood have a problem of regime survival. That's what matters to them, not state or nation survival. Israel has a problem - I must admit I never took very seriously this discourse about Israel being under an existential threat. Now I do. It changed my mind, what happened on October 7th, and the possibility that a great part of the country could be neutralized by a surprise attack like we saw in the South. Now you see refugees in Gaza moving away from urban centers to the south of the Gaza Strip but Israel also has its own internally displaced civilians. Here in this house, we live in Central Israel, we had until a few days ago, my sister, her two daughters, granddaughters and grandsons, living here because she was evacuated from northern Israel. She lives just adjacent to the border, in a place called Kiryat Shmona.

SB: So, people were evacuated from along the borders of Gaza, they were evacuated from the north. So, the sense that if for example Hezbollah joins the conflict, this would be a cataclysmic reality because these people have capabilities that are far beyond what Hamas has. So, I do take seriously now and many people like me, those on the center, or the left of center, or left, take seriously the possibility that such a cataclysm can happen. And in that way, it moved the Israelis more to the center and perhaps even to the right, though not necessarily the kind of Netanyahu right, but yes standing behind the army, standing behind the need to defend ourselves, standing behind the need to convey a message to the militias that surround Israel, that we will respond as effectively as we can. Because, yes, there is a feeling that the question of physical survival is a real one.

LT: What do you think that Israel can accomplish with its invasion of Gaza?

SB: I am not sure that it can accomplish militarily the objective that we hear about of eliminating Hamas. Maybe they will be able to diminish its military capabilities. Hamas is a natural growth of Arab societies. It's an idea, it's a reality, and it'll reappear somewhere else. If you win in Gaza, they exist also in the West Bank. So militarily we might not achieve the objective. What worries me is that this government has launched this war without having a political objective.

LT: Hamas, of course, attacked civilians in Israel. Hamas did not attack the Israeli military. Can Israel attack just Hamas in Gaza, without attacking civilians, without harming civilians? Is that possible?

SB: I think this frankly this is impossible. I think that these are the kind of wars that we have these days. The Israeli military has experience in the grand elegant maneuvers in the desert of tank brigades, this sort of stuff.

SB: This is how we changed the course of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. But now this is a battlefield that is totally different. Today, those kinds of elegant wars and glorious victories do not exist anymore. Nobody wins this kind of war simply because, in the asymmetric wars of today, the battlefield is urban centers. The weaker side, or the supposedly weaker side, always has a tactical advantage because it is surrounded or displayed amidst the civilian population. The Americans saw it in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are not winnable wars... You can never win these kind of wars.

LT: Shlomo, as Israel's Foreign Minister, you had a leading role at the Camp David peace talks, which many believe is the closest that Israel and the Palestinians have ever come to a lasting peace. What would need to happen now for there to be peace?

SB: What we have now is a war that can possibly bring about a change of government in Israel, a change of government that will create inevitably a peace process again, that I truly hope would lead to some kind of a solution. Although right now we have two sorts of endgames. The more immediate political endgame is what will happen in Gaza. Much depends on what will happen in Gaza, whether the Palestinian Authority, the PA, can extend its rule to include the Gaza Strip. If this happens, there would have to be a political price paid by Israel to the Palestinian Authority in the form of a political process, within a wider horizon of a political solution. These are the things that are the ideal things that can happen in order to relaunch the chances of a peaceful solution.

LT: Before I ask for the three takeaways that you would like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention? What should I have asked you that I did not?

SB: I would like to mention that this crisis of confidence that we have with the progressive left, goes far beyond this particular conflict. And that is the sense that Jewish communities throughout the west suddenly feel the shadow of Kristallnacht¹ looming over their communities with mass demonstrations, pro-Palestinian demonstrations, calling the Jews back to the gas. These are slogans that were heard. So, this is a crisis that I see as one of the saddest consequences of the current war. So, this is one thing, that I thought I should perhaps underline.

LT: Shlomo, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

SB: One, is the urgency for a political solution. This can't go on any more like this - cycles of

¹ **Kristallnacht** or the **Night of Broken Glass** was an attack against Jews by the Nazis in Germany on the night of November 9, 1938. The euphemistic name *Kristallnacht* (literally 'Crystal Night') comes from the shards of broken glass that littered the streets after the windows of Jewish-owned stores, buildings, and synagogues were smashed.

war, the threat of an extension of the war to other parties. This will endanger not only Israel, but also its allies. It will draw its allies into a broader conflict that nobody wants. So, number one, the urgency for a political solution. The second is keep the Jews of the diaspora out of this conflict. You have a conflict with Israel. You have a conflict with Zionism. You are welcome. We'll debate it, we will discuss it with you, but keep the Jews out of this conflict. This is a conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It's not a conflict between Jewish communities abroad. They need to be secure. They have chosen not to live in Israel. They are citizens of America. They're like any other Americans. They've stood at the forefront of many of the most advanced and progressive causes in America, and there is no reason why they should be targeted by this hate campaign that we see in different places in America and Europe. So, this is the second thing that I would add. What could be the third? Well, I would say that the Abraham Peace accords, the peace accords between Israel and different Arab states, needs to be maintained, needs to be salvaged from the current conflict and hopefully extended, but with one condition. It should be used as a regional framework for a possible solution of the Palestinian problem. The Palestinians see the Abraham Peace Accords as something that ignores their plight, because it is a peace that is being made between Israel and its Arab neighbors without a condition of solving the Palestinian problems. So, if we have this framework right now, we need to extend it, consolidate it, but use it at the same time as a platform for a solution of the Palestinian problem.

LT: Thank you, Shlomo.

SB: You're welcome, Lynn.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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