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Peace Process

When Israel says 'No'

Ariel Rubinstein ties fascinating academic experiment to Mideastern realities
Ariel Rubinstein

You and someone you don't know have received $100. In order to pocket this sum you must reach an agreement on how to divide it. The other guy has the exclusive privilege to propose how to split the money, and you can either accept or reject his proposal. If you say "yes," the dollars will be allocated as proposed. If you say "no," you will take leave of each other without receiving a penny. You will not have another chance to reach an agreement. What would you do if the other guy offers you $10 and wants to keep the remaining $90 for himself?

Three-way summit. Israel faced with ultimatums? Photo: AP

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If I were in such a situation, I would shout "no." What chutzpah! The other guy is exploiting his position, presenting me with an ultimatum and expects me to suffice with a tenth of the sum? I would not humiliate myself by accepting this small pittance, allowing him to go home feeling satisfied that he "screwed" me. There is only one fair allocation – half for him and (a bigger) half for me. If I needed the $10 for food, I would change my mind. But if not, justice is on my side – and when you have justice on your side, you don't surrender.

The rejection of ultimatums is deeply enrooted in Zionism. Our people have never surrendered our principles for a trifle. As a member of a people renowned for its sense of justice, especially toward other peoples, I would feel obliged to say "no" to the scoundrel. I would punish him and prevent him from receiving the $90 even though the punishment would also hurt me (a little). Until recently, I was sure that nearly all Israelis would act like me – with the most zealous ones adding a juicy curse as well. I assumed that in an international comparison we, the Israelis, would be the champions of the "no."

But then I had the opportunity to collect 7,000 responses from economics students throughout the world; the students addressed this question voluntarily and anonymously. These economics students will be the decision makers in the future. Thus, I believe they truly represent the face of their nations. I sorted them into Israelis, Americans, Canadians and Australians, Europeans and East Asians. And I was in for a surprise: Among the Asians, only 52% said "yes." Some 58% of the Canadians and Australians were enticed into accepting the "10%" offer, while 62% of the Americans and Europeans gave a nod of consent. And who stands at the top of the scale of "yea-sayers?" Some 71% of the 1,000 Israelis surveyed said "yes" to this obscene offer.

Many interpretations can be offered for these findings: "The Jewish people, who absorbed the blows of generations of exile, know how to value even $10." "We'll find another way to settle accounts with that rascal." "The greedy Israelis sell their principles cheaply." "Equality is not the strong side of Israeli society."

However, I am tempted to interpret the results differently. We Israelis like to blabber a lot. We continually make threats. But when the ultimatum arrives and they offer us a peace accord with a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders and without East Jerusalem, the large majority of us will say "yes" even if we think that the offer is extremely unjust. Of course, I have no basis for this interpretation. It stems entirely from my wishful thinking. What can I say? After 42 years of occupation, I do not harbor the slightest illusion that Israel will terminate it unilaterally or as the result of negotiation. I am only left with the hope that one day we will be presented with an ultimatum and we will say "yes."

In their desperation, people turn to fortune tellers. As someone from the academic world, I turn to surveys. It's more or less the same thing. So, even though I realize that my surveys are tainted with what I'd like to see, I try to believe in them. Now, as the ultimatums are hopefully at the gate, I have found some hope.