

# On humility, repentance and Middle East politics

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US President Barack Obama in Cabinet Room of White House, August 30, 2013 Photo: REUTERS

The Ten Days of Repentance – between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – is a time of reflection, particularly on human frailty. In this period, all of us, from potentates to telemarketers, are judged and, more importantly, judge ourselves, examining our deeds and confessing our mistakes. Accomplishments and recognition, real and imagined, are pushed to the background, while we are forced to realize our limitations as individuals, communities and nations.

In my profession, the need for an honest accounting is particularly acute. As an Israeli political commentator (my business card and university position refer to “political science,” whatever that may mean), the events of the past year have proven how little we actually know. Academics, journalists, diplomats, NGO activists, politicians who predict and preach – usually from afar and particularly to Israel – are proven clueless day after day.

Only a few days ago, our community of pundits and talking heads were busy predicting a British-American-French military response to Syria’s horrific use of chemical weapons. The would-be prophets claimed to know the locations of the targets, the timing of the attacks, and prepared the words to put into the mouths of the leaders in explaining the action.

Nobody was ready for the British Parliament’s vote rejecting the proposed military strike, or for President Obama’s last-minute turn to Congress for formal authorization. Among the pundits and prognosticators, I do not recall any contrition. But if we are honest with ourselves, my fellow political pundits and preachers would humbly admit our mistakes and how little we actually know.

For years, “experts” have also repeated the mantra that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the main source of Middle Eastern instability and world-wide terror, and that creating a Palestinian state, ending the “occupation,” “sharing” Jerusalem and setting mass-terrorists free was the solution. A number of Israeli analysts eagerly grasped this “hope” for an easy solution, quoting their foreign counterparts, and vice versa, as proof. And since the Palestinians were too weak to contribute anything, including ending incitement and violence, the key to peace was entirely in Israel’s hands.

Similarly, the quick transformation of the Arab Spring into inhuman slaughter also highlights the need for a healthy dose of humility. Only two years ago, influential op-ed writers in New York were excitedly predicting a new era as the totalitarian regimes and petty dictatorships were replaced by democracy and freedom. They found “experts” and “anonymous officials” to give their personal prejudices the aura of insider information.

Thus, they assured readers, in Libya and Syria, dictators would soon be replaced by tolerant non-violent liberals just like (or somewhat like) the ones in Europe and North America. In Egypt, the evil military regime had been ousted, and democracy had triumphed, while the Muslim Brotherhood members and jihadists seeking to impose their own form of despotism were erased.

The powerful leaders of human rights groups, including many Jews, could also use a strong dose of humility. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, B’tselem and dozens of similar groups have obsessively promoted false and immoral “war crimes” accusations against Israel. And many journalists confused glossy reports and authoritative tones with substance, and violated their professional obligations by failing to look beyond the façade. At the same time, the real war crimes, mass killings and daily human rights violations in the Arab world were excused. They got everything wrong, but keep churning out the papers.

If and when the society of pundits, experts and the NGO officials begin to humbly acknowledge failures and limitations, the next step is to distance ourselves from the temptation to return to sin. In Jewish tradition, the contrite gambler does full repentance by throwing away his dice and selling (or eating) her racing pigeons. In the case of the Middle East experts, perhaps a disclaimer, suitable for all media would be in order: “Read at your own risk. Much of what I say and write is speculative and may or may not be correct. I have been wrong before and I will probably be wrong again.”