

## PEACE IN ISRAEL IN OUR TIME



I HAVE just come back from a parliamentary visit to Gaza and the West Bank. We were the first MPs to go to the area since Israel closed the borders of the Occupied Territories in March. It was a sad and moving experience, full of uncomfortable images of arbitrary shootings by the Israeli security forces, of curfews, of houses with their frontages destroyed by troops using anti-tank missiles. And all this done in the name of a Labour government seeking a negotiated peace with the Palestinians.

Although all of this strengthens the hand of the fundamentalists and rejectionists, the peace process still struggles on. But my overall conviction was that the key obstacle would not be found in the terrible conditions of Gaza and the refugee camps but in the citadel which is Jerusalem.

have, or will, go to them. All around are the signs of permanent occupation.

Israel says: "Accept our phase one proposals and we can talk about Jerusalem in phase two." The Palestinians say: "We recognise that we cannot talk about the return of Jerusalem to its 1967 borders in phase one but let us agree that that is what phase two is going to achieve and we will talk about 'how' at a later date."

Many of the Arab leaders outside would like a settlement with Israel which did not depend on Jerusalem nor establish an independent Palestinian state. There are few prizes given out for secular democracy in the Middle East But if Arab leaders struck such a deal, their people would never forgive them and the fundamentalists would have a field day.

It is the rejectionists and fundamentalists who most want the peace talks to fail.

The thoughtful and progressive voices know that a return to 1967 cannot be behind old barricades; that Arab and Israeli must learn to live side-by-side in a city which is open and international; building blocks in each other's sense of security. It could encompass being the home to two parliaments but not the home to one and a foreign land to the other.

BUT someone has to be brave enough to agree on the intention if not the timetable. Someone has to heed the wisdom of Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian spokeswoman, when she says; "If you delegitimise the PLO you legitimise the position of extremists". Someone has to say to the Americans, the British or the EC that peace will only be found on the level playing field of UN resolutions which acknowledge the inadmissibility of acquiring land by force.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to Israel is not whether it can (and should) recognise the PLO, not whether it can stop moving settlers into the new estates in east Jerusalem, but whether it can embrace a positive vision of living with the Palestinians rather than without them. For all the daunting signs, the

prospect of peace is still not out of reach. "The peace process is not hopeless," Hanan Ashrawi said firmly as we left, "but we do have to bring the Israeli to a deeper understanding of us as a people and the things which matter most to us on our terms not theirs. And time is not on anyone's side."

Is this what was meant by "The Peace that passeth understanding"?

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