

Status quo OK?

Unless something dramatic happens between when we write this and when you read this, the future of Israel's government remains uncertain. To avert a third election in a year, the most viable option for a stable government would appear to be a "national unity" or "centrist coalition" involving both major parties, Likud and Blue and White.

This was the subject of face-to-face discussions between leaders and President Reuven Rivlin, but no agreement was reached. So Binyamin Netanyahu, the incumbent prime minister, has a few weeks to try to cobble something together. If he fails, Rivlin will probably call on Blue and White leader Benny Gantz to give it a go. Some bets are that, if it comes to that, there will be enough Knesset members desperate enough to avoid a return to the polls that some accommodation will be made. Perhaps the likeliest possibility is a Likud-Blue and White unity government without Netanyahu. (This scenario would become likelier if Netanyahu officially faces criminal charges in the next few days.)

Any broad coalition of this sort would lead to a degree of progress on some fronts – if far-right and religious parties are excluded, some policies and legislation that appeal to the secular majority are likely to advance – while progress on some other fronts would likely stall.

One example is the peace process – although there is, basically, no progress to stall at this point. There is great divergence in Israel over what the next steps should be vis-à-vis the Palestinians. In a broad-based coalition government, that uncertainty would define government policy, probably leading to inaction.

During the recent election, Netanyahu went further than previous leaders, promising to annex chunks of the West Bank to Israel. Gantz and the centre-left in Israel have been confounded by the reality that, while they seek a two-state solution and recognize a one-state situation as demographically unsustainable, until Israel sees a benefit to ending the occupation and can be certain that an independent Palestine in the West Bank will not be a launch pad for terror, independence will not come and the occupation will not end. Without that, no peace, no Palestine.

As a result, we will likely see more of the status quo, until some force acts to alter it. While Netanyahu's provocative promise to annex areas would have altered the status quo for the worse, a precipitous end to the occupation that left a vacuum to be filled by those wishing to do Israel harm would likewise be a change for the worse. The tense status quo Israelis and Palestinians have now is definitely not great, especially for Palestinians, but it is better than outright war.

An old tale has the rabbi of a medieval Jewish community visiting the duke who has threatened to throw the Jews from his realm. The rabbi returns to his community and tells his people, "I convinced the duke to let us stay – if I can teach his dog to talk within five years." The Jewish community is dumbfounded. "What a promise? It's impossible!" The rabbi says, "Relax. I've got five years. The dog could die. The duke could die. I could die. Meanwhile, I bought us five years."

The occupation, the statelessness of the Palestinian people, the recurring missile attacks from Gaza and the violence against civilians are not things we should understate or dismiss. But neither should we believe that any change is necessarily an improvement. The status quo is better than war and it is better than the dissolution of the Jewish state. The status quo is not ideal, but it may be better than currently available alternatives. ■

Tending the banana fields in war

VICTOR NEUMAN

In this eight-part series, the author recounts his life in Israel around the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The events and people described are real but, for reasons of privacy, the names are fictitious.

Part 3: Dating, Israeli Style

After our kibbutz commander, Gidon, had given everybody their marching orders, Tamar and I went back to her flat and started hanging black plastic on all the windows. It was late afternoon. Darkness was on its way and it was going to be our first night of wartime blackout. I didn't bother hanging plastic in the shack I was originally assigned. Days before the war, Tamar and I had begun living together at her place. I got the girl of my dreams and a room upgrade all at the same time.

As a kibbutz volunteer from abroad, I was on the lowest rung of the accommodation ladder. All such volunteers were given a room of their own but it was in a *sreef* (shack), which was no more than an old wooden cabin left over from the first days of the kibbutz. These were the slap-dash shacks occupied by the kibbutz founders, intended for shelter only until the kibbutz was able to get on its feet. Once crops were sold and the money was flowing, housing was built out of concrete and tile. Who got into the new units was purely a matter of seniority. You could hold the highest position in the hierarchy (kibbutz secretary) but you'd still live in a shack until it was your turn to upgrade.

Our kibbutz had around 250 members and all the members had newer homes that were on the small side, but clean, solid and agreeable. None of them had a tub. Too much of a waste of water and space. Instead, there were narrow-stall kerosene showers for those who preferred not to use the communal hot showers down the path. Tamar had one of these. You would start a kerosene fire at the base of the water tank and go away for 20 minutes while your water heated. Then you'd come back, turn off the kerosene and enjoy your three minutes of hot water. If you wanted to push it, you could leave the kerosene burner on while you showered and squeeze a couple of more minutes out of the hot water supply. There was a down side to that, however. Though the burner was screened from the shower water, things could go wrong. During one of my showers, water got into my kerosene burner. It overflowed and I had the disconcerting experience of washing my upper end while flaming drops of kerosene landed around my feet.

The evening we were hanging the black plastic, Lev, the banana boss, came by to tell me he was being called up to the war and I would have to do everything I could to maintain irrigation on my own. The rains hadn't come yet and the bananas wouldn't recover if an irrigation cycle was skipped. He was going to try to get an exemption from the army on the grounds that the all-important banana crop stood in danger of being devastated in his absence, but he was not sure if it would come through. It wasn't a cop-out. It was true. Lev was a banana guru and he was single-handedly responsible for the establishment of the kibbutz's most important cash crop. Without him, there was nobody to be the banana whisperer and make the damn things thrive the way he did. I could do irrigation on my own but, for the rest, I always looked to Lev for direction.

Irrigation was done around the clock. With several fields to supply and only enough pressure for one field at a time, I would have to be changing taps, cleaning filters and dumping fertilizer at various times of day and night. I would have to catnap between sessions and try to be awake enough to stay on top of the schedule. I told Lev I could do it and he went away satisfied. Tamar looked at me as if I was crazy to agree but she was an Israeli, she understood.

Then Lev came back and told me I could use the Willis and I was much happier. The jeep would get me to the fields a lot faster than the tractor. More time to rest. More time to sleep.

But not that night. The war was edging closer to our ordinary lives and, all night long, vehicles of all kinds were coming and going. There was the noise of a truck pulling up, the sound of boots pounding past our window, loud voices giving orders, the truck driving away, then silence. The same sequence repeated over and over again.

By morning, the kibbutz wasn't the same place. All our trucks and buses were gone and so were all the young men and some of the young women. Why not all the young women? Because, while

the Israeli army gave weapons training to both sexes, there were still some traditional attitudes toward women in war. The women all knew how to handle weapons but, somehow, when push came to shove, they never ended up on the front lines or in tanks or in planes. In war – at that point in time – their duties were confined to nursing, communications and secretarial work. Most of the young women reservists, like Tamar, remained on the kibbutz, along with the older folks. With them was a ragtag bunch of hapless tourist-volunteers wishing they had picked another time to experience life on a kibbutz. And then there was me: a volunteer worker who had become a candidate

for kibbutz membership. And now we were running the show.

Gidon dropped by to talk to me.

"Are you going to the fields after dark?" he asked.

"Yes, I have to change the taps."

"Two things then. First thing. You have to sign out when you leave and sign in when you come back. Second thing. You have no weapons training, so you have to take Tamar with you as your guard. Are we understanding?"

"We are."

Conversations with Gidon were never anything but straight to the point and businesslike. He never had much of a sense of humour at the best of times and he now had the safety of 250 people in his hands. He felt the weight of it deeply and I wasn't about to make his job any harder.

The next night, Tamar and I signed ourselves out and headed for the fields. I drove. She sat next to me with her Uzi resting on her lap. When I got to the irrigation pipes, I got out and, in the glare of the jeep's headlights, I cleaned the filters, dumped sacks of fertilizer into the tanks, reset the flow timers and hopped back into the vehicle. All the while, Tamar kept her weapon at the ready and scanned the shadows of the banana trees for trouble.

There was a beautiful full moon out. A lover's moon, just for the three of us. A guy, a gal and her Uzi. This was dating, Israeli style.

(Next Time: Training Day) ■



Tamar on a visit to Canada.

Victor Neuman was born in the former Soviet Union, where his family sought refuge after fleeing Poland during the Second World War. The family immigrated to Canada in 1948 and Neuman grew up in the Greater Vancouver area. He attended the University of British Columbia and obtained a BA and MA with majors in English literature and creative writing. Between 1968 and 1974, he made two trips to Israel, one of which landed him on a kibbutz at the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Upon his return to Canada, he studied Survey Technology at BCIT and went on to a career of designing highways for the Province of British Columbia. When he retired, he reconnected with his roots in creative writing and began writing scripts for Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir concerts and articles for the Jewish Independent. Neuman and his wife, Tammy, live in southeast Vancouver and enjoy the company of friends, their extensive extended family and their four sons.