

## **The Truths of Geneva**

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For all its theatrics, its celebrity cast and high-concept special effects, the “launch” this week in Switzerland of the so-called Geneva Understandings did not usher in a new era in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The document’s authors and architects did not have the power to do anything of the sort. Private citizens all, they could hug and sing and display a document they had written together, but they could not make peace between the two warring nations. Only governments can do that.

For that same reason, the Geneva initiative does not represent anything like the threat to Israel’s safety that its opponents suggest in their more overheated flights of rhetoric. The Geneva authors did not give anything away, because they had nothing to give away. All they did — all they could do — was to bring together groups of citizens from the two embattled communities and discuss ways the sides might settle their differences, if their leaders so chose. By relying on respected, mainstream public figures from both sides to do the phrasing and map-making — including several of Israel’s most trusted ex-generals and intelligence chiefs — they showed that a peace agreement could be reached that would satisfy the essential needs of both sides, if the leaders so chose. But they did not produce the peace agreement. Only governments can negotiate peace.

All the incendiary rubbish aside, there was nothing fraudulent going on at Geneva. The negotiators were not purporting to speak for the Israeli government any more than Tovah Feldshuh purports to be Golda Meir in her nightly appearances on Broadway. It’s all play-acting, meant to draw an audience and, perhaps, make a point.

And yet, this play’s message must carry a real sting, judging by the desperation of its opponents to find something, anything, wrong with it. Consider their arguments: First, the document should be ignored because it is meaningless and toothless. Second, it should be fought because it endangers Israel by somehow handing over valuable assets. Third, the Israeli authors let themselves be duped by Palestinian extremists who will never be satisfied even by the sweeping Geneva concessions. Fourth, the authors undercut the Sharon government’s negotiating position by raising Palestinian expectations, thus reducing the likelihood that they will somehow accept the far more limited concessions Sharon is contemplating as part of his own plan for extricating Israel from its deadly mess.

That, in the end, is the Geneva initiative’s real threat, and its only threat. It shows that there is a way out of Israel’s deadly mess. It shows that there is a broad formula that could resolve the century-old dispute on terms both sides could live with. It shows, in rough terms, what such a formula might look like. By forcing itself into the spotlight and exciting public debate, it shows that there is a critical mass on both sides that could, with some effort, accept such a deal. And it shows who is against reaching such a deal and would rather keep fighting.

Those are the truths of Geneva, and they are real ones. But they need not leave Israel isolated. Israel’s friends could and should embrace the initiative — not for its details but for its vision — and encourage Israel’s prime minister to do the same. He could, if he wanted, praise the initiative as a contribution to public discussion, details aside. He could point to the violent opposition of Palestinian hard-liners, who denounce the document for

its betrayal of their “right of return,” as evidence of the uphill climb still ahead. And he could vow to begin that climb, so Israelis can know that their leaders genuinely want to end their long nightmare.