Talk is Good; What’s Next?

As I write this, Secretary Kerry has just announced from Amman that Israeli-Palestinian peace talks will resume next week, just down the street from me, in Washington, D.C. Of course I’m happy about it; talking is almost always better than not talking. But what does it mean? That’s what I’m paid (well, not paid here) to write about.

In the last couple of months there have been vocal denunciations from the American Jewish peace camp of “peace skeptics,” those who scoffed at Kerry’s indefatigable trips to the Middle East and asked what he thought he was doing. Giving aid and comfort to the enemies of peace, we were accused of. Sure I was one of the scoffers; in fact I don’t know anyone who didn’t scoff, privately at least. I will be very happy to eat crow if and when the time comes, but it hasn’t come yet.

I applauded (and continue to applaud) Kerry’s energy. But the likely peace talk “principles,” not yet formulated, do not provide a lot of reason to believe that much can be signed, sealed and delivered. Reports are that either party will be free to disagree with any of those principles in any case. In other words, Israel won what it said it wanted, peace talks without preconditions. Abbas, obviously with reluctance, in the end gave Kerry (fronting, I suspect, for Bibi in this) what he wanted. That’s not necessarily a bad thing; but it means the big (very big) issues will be waiting on the table when the negotiators convene next week down the street.

At the talks, eventually, Bibi will have to put up or shut up. Will he accept a Palestinian state in almost all of the West Bank with East Jerusalem as its capital – and can he put together a government that would implement that? In my view that is the ultimate question; all the rest, as Hillel said, is commentary. If he does that, the Palestinians will have to accept an effective (though not necessarily theoretical) renunciation of the Right of Return, otherwise there can’t be a deal. I have little doubt Abbas will be pressured by virtually all of his allies, American, European and Arab, to give that up, and he will have to do it. The greater doubt is the Israeli willingness to bite the bullet. No matter how many formulations are presented, that’s what Israel will have to do. And no one knows if this, or any government, can or will do it.

I’ve felt for years that the crucial player will end up being President Obama, though I doubt it’s a role he’s happy with, especially now. In my
view, Bibi Netanyahu is ultimately an opportunist (the more positive word is pragmatist). If he’s pushed to the wall, he might do it, and then (irony of ironies) end his career as a hero of the left, like Ariel Sharon. It’s indeed hard to imagine, but not inconceivable. But he’ll have to be pushed, prodded, and essentially forced to do the right thing because all of his upbringing, education, instincts, and political experience scream to him not to do it. Moreover, most of his current party and governmental colleagues will regard him as a traitor, not to mention his late father’s ghost. Perhaps worse, those applauding him will be those he has despised all his life.

Can anyone imagine Barack Obama, three and a half years before the end of his administration and facing a Republican party willing to do anything to bring him down, putting Bibi in a political and diplomatic hammerlock in order to seal the deal? I can’t, though I wish I could. It’s not as though the Democratic party is exactly united on this issue, either. And ultimately, this is one issue out of many on his plate.

Perhaps I’m being melodramatic; I’ll be very happy if that’s the case. But the scenario above is stripped of its inessentials, like all the “issues,” including Jerusalem, borders, security, settlements, etc. They are all wrapped up in there. I doubt there is much room for maneuver by either party. But, in my view, it is Bibi that has to bite the bullet and Obama will have to make it worth his while, with a combination of carrots and sticks, to do it. And I really have no idea how this will play out. I have my crow seasonings out, but I’m far from sure that I’ll have to use them.