

Is the West Bank really worth it?

To quell rebellious Palestinians, Israel has now resorted to Old Testament punishments. The hands and bodies of Palestinians who cast stones are broken by club-wielding Israeli soldiers. Yet the riots still go on. Will Palestinian tongues that curse be torn out? Will Palestinian eyes that glare defiance be plucked out?

Israel, founded as a democratic haven for persecuted Jews, is looking, even to many of its friends, like a jackbooted oppressor. How would we respond if Russia began breaking the bones of Jewish protesters or openly discussing how the high Jewish birth rate was endangering the purity of the Russian nation?

Israel is not the USSR, and Soviet Jews are not throwing rocks. Still, it's often revealing to take a problem and switch the names of the parties involved. For example, this week Israel's prime minister said: "Our task is to . . . once again put the fear of death into the Arabs." Suppose South Africa's prime minister had said this or stated that severe beatings were official government policy, as Israel's defence minister did recently.

This week some courageous American Jews, like Rabbi Alexander Schindler and New York's Mayor Ed Koch, openly criticized Israel. Not for just hurting Israel's image, but, as Schindler said, for the beatings that were "madness" and "offensive to the Jewish spirit." In reply, Israel's president challenged these critics to offer an alternative to the club and iron fist.

There is one: Give up most or all of the occupied territories and agree to a Palestinian state. Doing so, however, means "mortal peril to Israel," or so Israel's North American supporters are incessantly told. Few of them have sought to go beyond emotion and really analyze this question.

Eric MARGOLIS in New York



The West Bank gives Israel very important strategic benefits. I have toured the area and seen the rampart of mountains and hills that furnish Israel strategic depth, strong defences and time to mobilize. More about this in a later column. Even so, Israel can survive and prosper without the West Bank, and without Gaza, provided that hard agreements are made to demilitarize the area and give Israel advanced listening posts. For Israel, the West Bank is a military convenience, not a matter of life and death.

More important, but rarely mentioned: Israel now draws 30% of its water from the West Bank. Since Israel's existing water supplies have been stretched to capacity, West Bank water is critically important. Israel has managed to seize virtually all of the headwaters of its main water sources that were formerly in Arab territory on the Golan Heights and the West Bank. The only remaining untapped water source is southern Lebanon's Awali River.

In the parched Mideast, water is everything, the one subject well worth fighting over. Any peace settlement between Israelis and Arabs will have to also solve this most basic and complex of problems. The dream of many Israelis, particularly those on the

right, is to see millions of Jews leave the USSR and settle on the occupied West Bank. For this, Israel needs land and water. Here is what many Israelis see as the decisive reason to cling to the occupied territories. And here is the answer to Israel's demographic nightmare of becoming a minority Jewish nation in an Arab majority. Major Jewish organizations would use their political clout to get the U.S. Congress to grant the Soviets a range of economic and political concessions that would motivate Moscow to release its Jewish citizens and let them move to Israel. That, at least, is what many optimists have in mind.

Which seems highly unlikely. The Soviets are not about to wreck their carefully cultivated relations in the Moslem world by allowing millions of Jews to move to Israel. Nor is the Soviet Union willing to release its Jews, who make up a high proportion of the nation's scientific brainpower.

What's more, most of the Soviet Jews who have managed to leave want to go to the U.S. or Canada, not to beleaguered Israel. And most North American Jews, who urge militancy over the West Bank, are clearly not prepared to move there themselves.

As Israel's Palestinians grow more restive, and as Israel is daily more assailed by bitter enemies without and within, fewer and fewer Jews will want to go to Israel. Of late, Israel has even suffered a loss of Jewish citizens, as long military service, plus mounting economic and social woes make life in Israel increasingly difficult. Holding on to the captured territories will aggravate these already grave problems.

In the end, the real question may not be if Israel can live without the occupied territories but how long it can live with them.