

A Gift from Europe

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ON MY 70TH BIRTHDAY, I received a gift from Yitzhak Rabin: he signed the document recognizing the existence of the Palestinian people, after many decades of denial. He also recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as its representative. I had demanded this, almost alone, for many years.

Three days later, the Oslo agreement was signed on the White House lawn.

This week I received another gift of similar magnitude, obviously in anticipation of my 90th birthday, which is due in less than two months.

No less an institution than the European Union has declared what practically amounts to a total boycott of the settlements, 15 years after Gush Shalom, the peace organization to which I belong, had issued a call for such a boycott.

The European decision says that no Israeli institution or corporation which has any direct or indirect connection with Israeli settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem or the Golan Heights will receive any contract, grant, prize or suchlike from the EU or any member state. To assure compliance, every contract between Israelis and the EU will contain a paragraph stating that the settlements are not part of Israel.

A friend of mine sent me a message consisting of one word: Mabrouk (Congratulations, in Arabic).

If all this sounds a bit megalomaniac, please make allowances. I am just happy.

WHEN WE decided to organize our boycott in 1998, we had several interconnected aims in mind.

A boycott is an eminently democratic instrument, a form of non-violent resistance.

Every single individual can decide for himself or herself whether to join the boycott or not.

Also, every individual can decide whether to boycott all the enterprises on the recommended list, or exclude some. Some of our supporters refused to boycott the Golan settlements, which they considered different from the others, some refused to boycott the East Jerusalemites. A famous artist declared that he was quite unable to live without the excellent Golan wines.

Many enterprises in the settlements did not go there for ideological reasons—capitalists are not generally known for their ideological fervor—but because the Israeli government gave them (stolen) land for free, as well as all kinds of grants, exemption from taxes and other incentives. It made economic sense for a corporation to sell their very high-priced site in Tel Aviv and get free land in Ariel. A boycott may counterbalance these gains.

Contrary to getting out into the streets and joining a demonstration, not buying something in the supermarket is a private affair. In a demonstration, one may get tear-gassed, water-cannoned or clubbed. One exposes oneself and may be put

on a list somewhere or even dismissed from a government job.

Everybody can boycott. One doesn't need to join an organization, sign a petition, identify oneself. Yet one has the satisfaction of doing something useful, in accordance with one's convictions.

But our main purpose was conceptual. For decades, successive Israeli governments have striven to eradicate the Green Line from the map and the minds of the people. The main aim of the boycott was to reinstitute the real borders of Israel in the public mind.

We distributed many thousands of copies of the list of settlement enterprises, all on request.

The Israeli government paid us the unique compliment of enacting a special law that penalizes all calls for a boycott of the settlers' products. Every person who feels harmed by such a call can demand unlimited compensation, without having to prove any actual damage. This could amount to millions of dollars.

We asked the Supreme Court to strike down this law, but the court has been dragging its feet for several years already, obviously afraid of passing judgment.

YET WHILE we were doing this, the European Union did the opposite.

It practically helped to finance the settlements—the very settlements it declared illegal.

Actually, the new measures are not new at all. The agreement between the EU and Israel exempts Israeli products from European customs, as if Israel were a European country. Israel is already a participant in the European football league, the Eurovision Song Contest and other events and organizations. Israeli universities receive huge research grants from Europe and take part in European scientific projects.

All these agreements are in principle restricted to Israel proper and do not apply to the settlements. Yet for decades, the Brussels super-government had consciously closed both its eyes.

I know, because I myself traveled to Brussels years ago, to protest against this practice, explaining to commissioners, officials and parliamentarians that they are in practice encouraging the settlements and inducing companies to relocate there. I was given to understand that they sympathize with our stand but are powerless, because several European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, block all attempts in the Union to act against apparent Israeli interests.

It seems that this obstacle has now been overcome. So I am happy.

IN ISRAEL, the government received the news with consternation. Just a few days earlier, they could not have dreamed that this was possible.

In Israel, the European Union is an object of ridicule. Secure in the knowledge that we have absolute control of US policy, we could treat the EU with contempt, though it is our major trad-

ing partner. A large share of Israeli exports, including military equipment, goes there.

Government leaders are now sputtering with rage. Not one single politician has dared to speak in favor of the European decision. Right and Left are united in condemning it. Binyamin Netanyahu declared that only Israel would decide where its borders were, and this only in direct negotiations. Never mind that he has obstructed significant direct negotiations for years.

Naftali Bennett, the Minister of Economy, who also happens to be the chief representative of the settlers, rejected the decision out of hand. Only a few days before, this political genius (and self-declared “brother” of Ya’ir Lapid) had announced that there was absolutely no pressure on Israel.

Lapid himself voiced his opinion that the European step was a “miserable decision”.

Bennett now proposes to punish Europe by stopping all EU humanitarian projects in the West Bank.¹

But the most telling argument marshalled by Israeli leaders was that the European decision was undermining the valiant efforts of John Kerry to start negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

This is the height of chutzpah. For months now, Netanyahu and his government has been doing everything possible to prevent the hapless Kerry from achieving his goal. Now they use his fruitless efforts as a fig leaf for the settlements.

The Labor Party’s Shelly Yachimovich, the official “*Leader of the Opposition*”, contented herself with repeating the call for negotiations. No hint of criticizing the settlers, for whom she has publicly declared her sympathy.

AS USUAL in such situations, Israeli public opinion started a search for those to blame. But there is no one around.

Israel has no Foreign Minister, only a deputy, who happens to be one of the most extreme right-wingers in the Knesset. The last minister, Avigdor Lieberman, is facing trial for corruption, and the job is being kept open for him. Netanyahu obviously believes that no judge would dare to convict the fearful Lieberman, after the Attorney General has already shrunk back from indicting him on the most severe charges.

With no minister (officially, the Prime Minister is filling the vacuum) and a demoralized foreign service, there could be no

prior warning.

Some people claim that the European decision was actually a pro-Israeli gesture, since it forestalls a general boycott of Israel, which is advocated by a growing number of personalities and NGOs around the world. A boycott of the settlements is the minimum.

In this respect too, the Europeans have also adopted a stance that my friends and I have advocated for years.

Contrary to several Israeli leftists, I believe that a general boycott of Israel is counter-productive. While our boycott is designed to isolate the settlers and drive a wedge between them and the bulk of the Israeli population, a general boycott (called BDS) would drive almost all Israelis into the arms of the settlers, under the venerable Jewish slogan “*The whole world is against us!*” It would strengthen the argument that the real aim is not to change Israeli policy but to wipe out Israel altogether.

True, there are some good reasons for a general boycott, including the historic example of the boycott of Apartheid South Africa. But the Israeli situation is quite different.

THE TERM “boycott” was coined in 1888 in a situation not dissimilar from ours now. It was about foreign domination, land and settlers.

In Ireland, then under British occupation, there was a famine. Charles Boycott, the agent of an absentee English landlord, evicted local tenants who were unable to pay the rent. An Irish nationalist leader called on his countrymen not to attack Boycott physically but to shun him. All his neighbors stopped all dealings with him, working for him or speaking with him. Boycott became the word for ostracizing.

The EU boycott of the settlements and their supporters will have a major economic impact. No one knows yet how much. But the moral effect is even more significant.

Even if massive Israeli-American pressure thwarts or at least postpones the European action, the moral blow is already devastating.

It tells us: The settlements are illegal. They are immoral. They inflict a huge injustice on the Palestinian people. They prevent peace. They endanger the very future of Israel.

Thank you, Europe!

¹Recalling the joke about the Polish nobleman whose Jew had been beaten up by another nobleman and who threatened: “*If you don’t stop beating my Jew, I shall beat your Jew!*”