

Uri Avnery
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A Jeremiad

DEAR DOV YERMIYA,

I have received the distressing letter that you recently sent to a limited number of friends. You paint the Israeli reality in dark – but true – colors, and end by cutting your ties with it.

"Therefore I, a 95 year old Sabra (native born Israeli Jew), who has plowed its fields, planted trees, built a house and fathered sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, and also shed his blood in the battle for the founding of the State of Israel,

"Declare herewith that I renounce my belief in the Zionism which has failed, that I shall not be loyal to the Jewish fascist state and its mad visions, that I shall not sing anymore its nationalist anthem, that I shall stand at attention only on the days of mourning for those fallen on both sides in the wars, and that I look with a broken heart at an Israel that is committing suicide and at the three generations of offspring that I have bred and raised in it."

SINCE I first met you, Dov, some fifty years ago, I have always considered you the salt of the earth. You were born in a village, the son of a farmer, were a fighter in the 1948 war and later a Colonel in the army, a modest man, a moral person in every fiber.

In the first Lebanon War, you exposed the atrocities committed against the Palestinian refugees in the Tyre-Sidon area, and your courageous report shocked me no less than those of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. You did not hesitate to break the silence, as the "Breaking the Silence" youngsters are doing now, knowing full well that your peers in the officers' corps would excommunicate you.

You are a man of my heart, Dov. That is why your words distress me so much.

I think it important to share the statement of a man of your caliber with those in our camp who spend sleepless nights worrying about the situation of our state.

YOU START your letter by mentioning the founders of the Zionist movement.

"If Herzl could come to life again and see what those who claim to carry the flag of Zionism are doing, he would flee at once, miserable and shocked, back to his grave. So would Chaim Weizmann and most of the pioneers, the fathers and mothers of my generation. They were people of conscience and morality, who held to the axiom that human beings are decent and honest."

Most of your fierce accusations concern Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. "And thus, for 42 years, Israel turned what should have been Palestine into a giant detention camp, and is holding a whole people

captive under an oppressive and cruel regime, with the sole aim of taking away their country, come what may!!!

"The IDF eagerly suppresses their efforts at rebellion, with the active assistance of the settlement thugs, by the brutal means of a sophisticated Apartheid and a choking blockade, inhuman harassment of the sick and of women in labor, the destruction of their economy and the theft of their best land and water.

"Over all this there is waving the black flag of the frightening contempt for the life and blood of the Palestinians. Israel will never be forgiven for the terrible toll of blood spilt, and especially the blood of children, in hair-raising quantities."

But I believe that the abysmal despair echoed in your words has other roots, too. It is a feeling that troubles the heart of many of your and my generation, the feeling that "they have stolen our state", that there is no resemblance between the state which we dreamed of and fought for and the thing that has taken its place.

WHEN I think of our youth, yours and mine, one scene is never far from my mind: the 1947 Dalia festival.

Tens of thousands of young men and women were sitting on the slope of a hill in the natural amphitheater near Kibbutz Dalia on Mount Carmel. Ostensibly it was a festival of folk dancing, but in reality it was much more – a great celebration of the new Hebrew culture which we were then creating in the country, in which folk dancing played an important role. The dancing groups came mainly from the kibbutzim and the youth movements, and the dances were original Hebrew creations, interwoven with Russian, Polish, Yemenite and Hassidic ones. A group of Arabs danced the Debka in ecstasy, dancing and dancing and dancing on.

In the middle of the event, the loudspeakers announced that members of the UN Commission of Inquiry, which had been sent by the international organization to decide upon the future of the country, were joining us. When we saw them entering the amphitheater, the tens of thousands spontaneously rose to their feet and started to sing the "Hatikva", the national anthem, with a holy fervor that reverberated from the surrounding mountains.

We did not know then that within half a year the great Hebrew-Arab war would break out - our War of Independence and their Naqba. I believe that most of the 6000 young people who fell in the war on our side, as well as the thousands that were wounded – like you and me – were present at that moment in Dalia, seeing each other and singing together.

What state did we think of then? What state did we set out to create?

What has happened to the Hebrew society, the Hebrew culture, the Hebrew morality that we were so proud of then?

YES, WE did create a state. As the old song goes: "On the battlefield, a town is now standing". We have brought millions of people to this country. >>From a Hebrew community of 650 thousand we have grown into a population of 7.5 million. A fourth and fifth generation speaks Hebrew as their mother tongue. Our economy is large and solid, even in these times of crisis. In several fields we are in the first rank of human endeavor.

But is this the society, is this the state, which we saw in our mind's eye on the day it was set up? Is this the army that you and I swore allegiance to on the day it was founded?

Did we dream of this corrupt society, a society without compassion, where a handful of the very rich live off the fat of the land, with a large band of politicians and media people and other lackeys groveling in the dust at their feet?

Did we dream of a state that is an isolated and shunned ghetto in the region, lording it over an oppressed Palestinian ghetto-within-a-ghetto?

There were days when we could stand up anywhere in the world and proudly declare "I am an Israeli". No one can do that now. The name of Israel has become mud. Since the Gaza War, in which our army poured molten lead onto men, women and children, many Israelis avoid speaking Hebrew in the streets of foreign cities and the IDF has ordered the faces of some of its officers – those whose rank equals yours – be obscured in pictures published in the media.

WHY DID this happen? When did this happen?

My aim is not to start a discussion with you about the fundamentals of Zionism, both positive and negative. We might not agree. Nor shall I enter into the question of whether everything really started in 1967, with the intoxicating and corruptive victory, or whether the seeds of disaster were sown earlier. On one thing I agree with you entirely: that the fatal step was taken then, on the morrow of that war, when we had the choice between the shining gold of peace and the base metal of annexation, and stretched our hands out towards the latter.

My personal conscience is clean. I am proud that I was one of the few in the country, and the sole voice in the Knesset, who proposed even during the war to turn over the occupied territories to the Palestinian people, so as to enable them to set up their state. This unique opportunity was missed, as you point out in your letter, because of the greed of the founders of the settlement movement, the champions of a Greater Israel.

From there things rolled on, as in a Greek tragedy, to

where we are now, with an assorted crew of settlers, racists, nationalists, messianic zealots and ordinary fascists in charge of the state, turning the Knesset into a circus, undermining the Supreme Court, perverting the army, imposing obscurantist religious laws, handing the public treasury to unbridled tycoons, polluting the education system with a primitive nationalist indoctrination, persecuting poor asylum seekers, oppressing the national minority and planning military attacks that will wreak death and destruction on civilian populations.

This is the state that you detest. I have no quarrel with you about that.

This is the state that you despair of. About that I do have a dispute with you.

YOU BEAR the name of the prophet who is nearest to my heart, Yirmiyahu, the prophet of anger who called out: "Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole world ... every one doth curse me!" (Jer. 15:10)

But Jeremiah was not only an accuser, he was also a healer: "to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down – to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:10)

You, Dov, have invested in this state much too much to turn your back on it in a gesture of anger and despair. The most hackneyed and worn-out slogan in Israel is also true: "We don't have another state!"

Other states in the world have sunk to the depths of depravity and committed unspeakable crimes, far beyond our worst sins, and still brought themselves back to the family of nations and redeemed their souls.

We and all the members of our generation, who were among those who created this state, bear a heavy responsibility for it. A responsibility to our offspring, to those oppressed by this state, to the entire world. From this responsibility we cannot escape.

Even at your respectable age, and precisely because of it and because of what you represent, you must be a compass for the young and tell them: This state belongs to you, you can change it, don't allow the nationalist wreckers to steal it from you!

True, 61 years ago we had another state in mind. Now, after our state has tumbled to where it is today, we must remember that other state, and remind everybody, every day, what the state should have been like, what it can be like, and not allow our vision to disappear like a dream. Let's lend our shoulders to every effort to repair and heal!

You have voiced the message of Jeremiah, the prophet of anger. I beg you, give voice also to Jeremiah, the prophet of hope!