

# Angel Face

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SEEING HER FACE ON THE TV SCREEN, one is struck by her beauty. It is the face of an angel, pure and innocent.

Then she opens her mouth, and what pours out is vile and ugly, the racist message of the extreme right. Like seeing a cherub parting its lips and revealing the teeth of a vampire.

Ayelet Shaked may be the beauty queen of the present Knesset. Her name is enticing: Ayelet means gazelle, Shaked means almond. But she is the instigator of some of the most outrageous right-wing initiatives in this Knesset. She is also the chairwoman of Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home faction, the nationalist-religious party of the settlers, the most radical rightist party of the current government coalition.

Her latest exploit is a bill which is now being debated in the Knesset, which would levy a huge tax on donations given by foreign "political entities" to Israeli human rights associations, those who advocate a boycott of Israel (or of the settlements only), the indictment of Israeli officers accused of war crimes in international courts, and more.

All this while immense sums of money are flowing from abroad to the settlements and their supporters. A large share of these sums is practically donated by the US government, which allows their exemption from US income tax as philanthropic. Much of it comes from American Jewish billionaires of dubious repute.

IN A way, this Gazelle is the face of an international phenomenon. All over Europe, extreme fascistic parties are flourishing. Small despised fringe groups suddenly expand into large parties with a national impact. From Holland to Greece, from France to Russia, these parties propagate a mixture of super-nationalism, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and immigrant-hatred. A deadly witches' brew.

The explanation seems to be simple. All over the place, the economic crisis has hit the people hard. Unemployment is high. Young people cannot find jobs. The victims look for a scapegoat on which to vent their anger. They choose the foreigner, the minority, the helpless. That has been so since antiquity. That's how a failed painter named Adolf Hitler became a historic figure.

For politicians without vision or values, this is the eas-

iest way to success and prominence. It is also the most despicable.

An Austrian socialist said more than a century ago: "*Anti-Semitism is the socialism of the fools*".

Social reformers may believe that the whole thing is instigated by the world's billionaires, who are concentrating an ever larger part of the world's assets in their hands. The gap between the upper 1% and everybody else is growing relentlessly, and the beneficiaries are financing radical right-wingers to divert the anger of the masses in other directions. Stands to reason.

HOWEVER, TO my mind the economic explanation is too simple. If the same phenomenon appears at the same time in so many different countries, with different economic situations, there must be more profound reasons. There must be some elements of *Zeitgeist* in it.

I think that we are witnessing a basic cultural breakdown, a crisis of accepted values. This kind of upheaval generally accompanies social changes, often caused by economic and technological breakthroughs. It is a sign of social dissonance, of disorientation. On the eve of the Nazi revolt, the German writer Hans Fallada wrote an immensely successful book called "*Kleiner Mann — was nun?*" (Little Man, What Now?), expressing the despair of the newly disinherited masses. Many little men and women around the world are in the same situation now.

In Israel, too.

LAST WEEK, we saw a spectacle that would have shaken our grandparents to the core.

Some 300 black people, many of them barefoot in the biting cold of an exceptionally severe winter, were walking dozens of kilometers on a central road. They were refugees who had managed to flee from Sudan and Eritrea, to walk all the way through Egypt and the Sinai and had crossed the border into Israel. (Since then, a wall has been erected along the Sinai border, and this stream has practically stopped.)

There are now about 60,000 such African refugees in Israel. Thousands of them are crowded in the most run-down slums of Tel Aviv and other cities, causing deep resentment among the locals. This has proved a fertile breeding ground for racism. The most successful agitator is another beautiful member of the Knesset, the Likud's

Miri Regev, a former army chief spokeswoman, who is inciting the inhabitants and the country in the most primitive and vulgar manner.

Looking for a solution to the problem, the government built a large prison in the middle of the desolate Negev desert, unbearably hot in summer and unbearably cold in winter. Thousands of black refugees have been crowded there without trial for three years. Some called it a concentration camp.

Israeli human rights associations—the same as above—applied to the Supreme Court, and the imprisonment of the refugees was declared unconstitutional. The government thought again (if thinking is the right word) and decided to circumvent the decision. Not far from the forbidden prison a new prison was built, and the refugees were put there for one year each.

No, not a prison. Something called “Open Live-in Facility”. We are good at naming things. We call that “verbal laundry”.

This “open” desert prison is closed during the night, but inmates are free during the day. However, it is far from anywhere. The inmates must register three times during daytime—thus making it impossible to go anywhere, not to mention finding work.

It is from this “open” prison that the valiant 300 have walked out and marched all the way to Jerusalem, some 150 kilometers, in order to demonstrate in front of the Knesset. It took them three days. They were accompanied by a few Israeli human rights activists, mostly female, their light faces very conspicuous among all the black heads.

In front of the Knesset they were brutally attacked by specially trained riot police. Each demonstrator was surrounded by half a dozen bullies and violently thrown into a bus, which brought them to the old non-open prison.

I AM dwelling on this incident because I am profoundly ashamed.

Racism is not a new thing in Israel. Far from it. But whenever we accuse our gazelles of racism, they answer that this is pure libel. There is a conflict between us and the Palestinians, strict security measures are called for, this has nothing to do with racism, God forbid.

This is a very dubious argument, but at least it has some plausibility.

But we have no national conflict with the refugees. No

security considerations are involved.

It is racism, pure and simple.

Let’s imagine that suddenly, in a remote corner between Eritrea and the Sudan, a Jewish tribe had been discovered. Its 60,000 members want to come to Israel.

The country would be in a delirium. The red carpet would be rolled out in Ben-Gurion airport. Both the President and the Prime Minister would be there, ready with their most banal speeches. They would receive an “absorption subsidy”, free housing and work.

So it’s not an economic problem, nor a question of absorption, housing or employment. It’s not even a question of skin color. Black Jews from Ethiopia are readily welcomed.

It’s simply THAT THEY ARE NOT JEWISH.

No room here for other people. They would take away our jobs. They would change the demographic balance. This, after all, is a Jewish State!

OR IS it?

If this were a Jewish State, would it treat refugees this way?

A hundred memories float into our minds. Of Jews being hounded from country to country. Of the mighty United States of America rejecting Jewish refugees on a German ship, fleeing from Nazi persecution. And later exterminated in the death camps. Of the Swiss pushing back Jews escaping from the concentration camps who had made it to their border.

Remember “The Boat Is Full?”

If this really were a Jewish state, would it try to bribe African states to accept these refugees without asking what would happen to them there? For a refugee from the hell of Darfur, Zimbabwe is as foreign as New Zealand (unless one subscribes to the theory that “all blacks are the same”).

If this really were a Jewish state, would the Minister of the Interior, a Likud functionary, send his force of goons to go hunting for refugees in the streets?

No, this is not a Jewish state. The Bible commands us to treat the stranger in our midst as we would want to be treated ourselves. “ALSO, THOU SHALT NOT OPPRESS A STRANGER, FOR YE KNOW THE HEART OF A STRANGER, SEEING YE WERE STRANGERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT!” (Exodus 23:9)

Amen!