

“Around Us the Storm is raging. . .”

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“AROUND US THE STORM is raging / But our head will not be bowed. . .” we sang when we were young, before the State of Israel was born.

On the eve of Israel’s 65th birthday, this coming Monday, we could sing this rousing song again. And not just out of nostalgia.

Around us, many storms are raging. In Syria, a terrible civil war is tearing the country apart. In Egypt, after the victory of the Arab spring, the country is still in turmoil. The Lebanese state is still unable to impose its authority on the various armed sects, and the same is true for Iraq. Iran is busy advancing its nuclear program, all the while muttering dark threats.

Israel sees itself as an island in the stormy sea, threatened on all sides, ready for the tsunami to hit any minute.

THERE IS something ironic about all this.

The Zionist adventure started with the promise to create a safe haven for the Jews, after centuries of helplessness.

Indeed, stripped of all ideological decorations, that was the central theme of the endeavor. Everywhere, Jews were defenseless, dependent on the mercies of others. Here, in a state of our own, we would be able to defend ourselves, head unbowed.

In other words, for ages we were the object of history, now we were taking our destiny in our own hands, an actor on the stage of history, a nation among the nations.

Before that, Jews were some kind of ethnic-religious entity. With Zionism, the Jews—or a part of them—constituted themselves as a modern nation, able to defend itself against any enemy.

In this sense, Zionism was indeed a roaring success. Its creation, the State of Israel, is now strong and secure.

OR IS it? Listening to many of our leaders, the opposite seems to be true.

Years ago, Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the caustic critic of the Zionist establishment, famously asserted that Israel was the only place in the world where the lives of Jews were in mortal danger. As it turned out, that was not entirely exact.

A few days ago, on Holocaust Day, our Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, declared that we are threatened by a Second Holocaust, perpetrated by a nuclear-armed Iran.

The next day, a group of international hackers, animated by pro-Palestinian sentiments, declared a cyber-war on Israel. They promised to inactivate the main institutions of the country, both military and civilian, governmental and private. As it turned out, the attack failed miserably. No significant damage was caused. But before this became clear, former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman responded by comparing the campaign with the Nazi Holocaust.

What is this? Paranoia? Manipulation? Political gimmickry? All of these and more?

IN THE span of nine days, Israel is experiencing three national events. Each with sirens howling, official ceremonies, endless speeches. All TV, radio and print media totally devoted to the subject of the day.

Last Monday was Holocaust Day. The entire country turned to the memory of that awful chapter of history. At 10 o’clock, to the sound of the sirens, the whole country came to a standstill. Cars stopped in the middle of the road, men, women and children got out and stood at attention. Survivors still alive—mostly over 80—told their horrible stories, listeners shed tears.

At Yad Vashem, Netanyahu made his standard speech—Never again. . . We shall not. . . the Iranian bomb. . . Second Holocaust. . .

Tomorrow evening will be Memorial Day. The country will mourn for the many thousands who fell in Israel’s numerous wars. Bereaved parents will lay flowers on the graves of their beloved. Politicians will make speeches about the lives so nobly given up for the nation to prevent a Second Holocaust.

The next day will be a day of joy. Without an interruption, the sirens will announce the end of Memorial Day and the beginning of Independence Day. Speeches about the sacrifices of the fallen will be superseded by speeches about the glories and achievement of the state, which rose so miraculously from the ashes of the Holocaust. In the center of festivities stand Israel’s armed forces, among the strongest and most efficient in the world.

The close proximity of these three dates is not accidental. It is a conscious attempt to imbue generations of Israelis with the idea that Israel is under constant threat, like the Jewish communities in Europe throughout the cen-

turies, and that the IDF is the sole guarantor of our national and even individual security.

Many people consider this a manipulation, as indeed it is. Under Netanyahu, this has reached new heights (or depths). Jewish victimhood is bandied about as a totem that sanctifies all our policies: the occupation, the settlements, the oppression of the Palestinians, the rejection in practice of peace based on the two-state solution.

It is also a political ploy. The constant reminders of existential dangers—in Iran, in Syria, in Egypt and elsewhere—are designed to rally the population around the leadership. In the recent election campaign, Netanyahu presented himself as a “*strong leader for a strong state*”. Never mind that he is actually a weakling, notorious for succumbing to foreign and internal pressures. Fear-mongering is his most effective instrument.

HOWEVER, it would be a great mistake to discount Israeli fears as artificial. They are quite real.

Foreigners are often amazed to hear Israelis asserting in the same sentence, literally in the same breath, that “*Israel is a regional power*”, and that we shall not go “*like lambs to the slaughter*”, as Jews were alleged (by Israelis) to have done in the Holocaust. Both halves of this sentence are real. They live side by side in the minds of most Israelis.

No one who has been in Israel on Holocaust Day can have the slightest doubt about the huge impact that the Holocaust continues to have on our minds. Most of us (myself included) have relatives who perished in the Shoah. The profound sense of victimhood, the fears and apprehensions are deeply ingrained in us. It would be almost impossible to eradicate them in a few years.

YET WE must overcome them, because they have no relation with current reality and prevent us from rational behavior.

The simple fact is that Israel is a strong state, and will remain so for a long time to come.

We have a very strong and efficient military, more than sufficient for meeting any foreseeable threat. The Arab

spring has at least temporarily removed several military menaces. That is true also for the real or imagined nuclear threat from Iran. No Iranian leader would ever risk the total destruction of his country, with its thousands of years of civilization, in order to destroy poor us.

But a strong military is only one component of security. There are many others.

In 65 years we have built a solid and strong economy, more resilient than much bigger and stronger economies around the world. In several areas, such as high-tech, science, medicine, agriculture and the arts, we belong to the premier world league. Israel’s intimate relations with the No. 1 world power seem safe for a long time to come and of huge advantage in many fields, even given the gradual decline of US power.

The revived Hebrew language is vibrant and firmly entrenched. Israeli democracy, though under constant threat, seems to be able to withstand the onslaught. We can surely be proud of what our society has achieved, practically from scratch.

The only real dangers facing Israel come from within. Mad policies, the continued occupation, the permanent war, the encroachment of fundamentalist religion—these are the real causes for worry.

I AM pointing this out not in order to inflame a sense of triumphalism, but on the contrary.

In Israel, it is the Right which thrives on fear and constantly invents new threats, in order to deny peace and promote a sense of “*the whole world against us*”. They depict our state as just another beleaguered ghetto, facing a perpetual danger of annihilation.

The Israeli peace camp must resolutely stand up against this world view. Israel is strong, and because it is strong it can take risks, make peace with the Palestinian people and the entire Arab and Muslim world.

65 years ago, when we were a population of hardly 650 thousand people, my generation had this self-confidence. Our heads were unbowed. We must rediscover this now.