

Daphne and Itzik

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September 10, 2011

IT SOUNDS LIKE the title of a romantic movie. “Daphne, Itzik and all the Others”.

It starts off with a friendship between two youngsters, he in his early thirties, she in her mid twenties. Then they quarrel. He leaves. She remains.

The audience knows exactly what it wants: it wants the two to reunite, kiss, marry and walk arm-in-arm into the sunrise, to the accompaniment of a soft melody.

As for the actors, they are perfect. They both play themselves. Hollywood’s Central Casting couldn’t have done better.

She is an attractive young woman, wearing a man’s hat for easy recognition. He is the Israeli young male, vaguely handsome, easily recognizable by his nose.

THE STORY starts with Daphne Leef, an editor of short films, daughter of a composer, unable to rent an apartment in Tel Aviv. She is fed up. She announces on Facebook that she is going to live in a tent on Rothschild Boulevard and asks if anyone will join her.

Some do. Then more. Then even more. In no time, there are more than a hundred tents on the avenue, one of the oldest in town, a quiet residential neighbourhood. Other tent cities spring up all around the country. A mass movement has come into being. Last Saturday, 350 thousand people demonstrated in Tel Aviv, 450 thousand throughout the country. That would be something like 18 million in the US, or three million in Germany.

Some time after the whole thing started, the Israeli National Student Union, lead by its chairman, Itzik Shmuli, joined the protest. Daphne and Itzik were seen as the leaders, together with some others, notably Stav Shaffir, also easily recognizable with her flaming red hair (Stav means autumn).

The media loved them. They embraced them with a fervor never seen before. In a way that was quite remarkable, since all the media are owned by the very same “tycoons” against whom the protesters are railing. The explanation may be that the average working journalist belongs to the same social group as Daphne and the other protesters – young middle-class men and women who work hard and still do not make enough to “finish the month”.

Also, the media need the “rating”: the public wanted to see and hear the protests. No one could afford to ignore it, not even a tycoon eager for profit.

THREE WEEKS ago, the first signs of a split started to appear. After first treating the protest with disdain, Binyamin Netanyahu saw the danger and did what he (and politicians like him) always do: he appointed a commission to propose “reforms”. He neither promised to implement its recommendations, nor did he allow the commission to break the bounds of the

two-year state budget already enacted by the Knesset.

For some, this was just a manoeuvre to gain time and let the protest movement lose its momentum. Others pointed to the fact that the commission is headed by an independent, 61 year old professor in good standing, Manuel Trajtenberg (a German name written in the Spanish way) who could be expected to do his best within the limits dictated to him. Netanyahu himself, something between a pious Reaganite and a devout Thatcherite, promised to change his economic views altogether.

That’s how the split started. Daphne, Stav and most of the others refused to cooperate with the commission. Itzik embraced it and met with its members. Daphne was not satisfied with the limited reform likely to emanate from the commission, Itzik was ready to accept what was achievable.

Actually, the controversy was not inevitable. Daphne and her colleagues could do what Zionists have always done with immense success: at every stage, take what you can get and move on to get more.

But the split is much more than a disagreement over tactics. It reflects a basic difference of world view, strategy and style.

DAHPNE IS anti-establishment. She is not doing this for slight changes within the existing system. Though she was born into the heart of the establishment, Jerusalem’s sedate Rehavia neighborhood, she wants to overthrow it and to create something completely new.

Itzik wants to work within the establishment. He talks about the “New Israeli”, but it is not at all clear what is new about him.

Just before the huge demonstration, a terrible fact was disclosed: Daphne had not served in the army. When it emerged that the reason was her suffering from epilepsy, something even more terrible was dug out: when she was 17 years old, she had signed a petition of high school pupils condemning the occupation and refusing to serve in the occupied territories, or even to serve altogether.¹ Itzik, of course, had done his duty.

The fact that the masses joined the protest in spite of these disclosures shows that the old militaristic language has lost its lustre. Daphne and her followers stand for a different discourse.

Some believe that it is basically a gender clash: male versus female. Daphne’s style is soft, inclusive, affirmative, reaching out to all parts of society. Itzik’s style is much more exclusive. Daphne and Stav never say “I”, always preferring “we”. Itzik uses “I” freely. He raised quite a few eyebrows when he said at the demonstration: “You are all partners in MY struggle...”

The protest movement is heavily influenced by women. Women founded it, women are its main spokespersons. Does

¹Obviously, these disclosures must have come from the files of the Shin Bet Security service, or from one of the neo-fascist “research” centres financed by far-right Jewish billionaires in the US.

this change its texture?²

DAPHNE SEEMS to have no ego, no political ambitions. Almost everybody believes that Itzik, on the other hand, has his eyes set on a seat in the Knesset – using his new-found public stature in order to join the Labor (or any other) Party, if he cannot win the leadership of the protest movement and turn it into a party in his image.

The latter seems unlikely. At the huge demonstration, his speech was well received. But it was undoubtedly Daphne who really touched the heart of the masses. Itzik spoke to the head, Daphne to the heart.

Something very strange – or perhaps not so strange – happened to the media on this occasion. All three major TV stations covered the event live and at length. Itzik's speech was carried in its entirety by all three. But in the middle of Daphne's speech, as if on orders from above, all three stations cut off her voice and started broadcasting "comments" by the same tired old gang of government spokesmen, "analysts" and "experts".

From then on, almost all the media overplayed Itzik and underplayed Daphne. The tycoons, it seems, have taken over again.

FROM THE start, the leaders of the protest insisted that the movement is not "political", neither "left" nor "right". It is solely concerned with social justice, solidarity and welfare, not with affairs of state like peace, occupation and such.

How long can this stance be maintained?

This week, General Eyal Eisenberg, commander of the home front (one of the four geographical commands of the army) made a speech in which he forecast a "general war, a total war" between Israel and an "Islamized" Arab world. In this war,

weapons of mass destruction would be employed.

Military and political leaders immediately downplayed this speech, saying that no such danger existed for the near future. But the implications were clear: the need to expend huge sums to equip all of Israel with "Iron Dome" anti-missile defenses, expend huge sums to buy submarines for our nuclear arm (only partly paid for by the Germans), and expend even more huge sums for buying the latest American stealth fighters. Billions and billions of dollars on top of the existing huge military budget.

Israel is becoming more and more isolated. Just before stepping down, the US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, warned that Netanyahu is "endangering Israel". The Palestinian application to the UN for recognition of the State of Palestine may lead to a severe crisis; the conflict with Turkey is becoming more dangerous by the day; in Egypt and other awakening Arab countries, anti-Israeli sentiments are reaching new heights.

Can one really pretend that all this does not affect the chances of creating a welfare state? That the momentum of the protest movement can be maintained and increased under these darkening clouds?

THE NEXT stage will arrive with the recommendations of the Trajtenberg commission in a few weeks.

Will they enable Itzik to celebrate and call the whole thing off? Will they confirm Daphne's prediction by offering only crumbs from the table around which the politicians and tycoons are feasting? Will they extinguish this historic movement or give it new life?

How will this movie go on? Ah, there we have to wait and see. We wouldn't disclose the end, would we? Assuming we knew it.

² I had an argument about this with a feminist friend. She insisted that there is no basic difference between the genders, that the existing difference is created by culture. Boys and girls are educated to follow different role models from age zero. I believe that there is a basic biological difference, going back to the primates and before. Nature intended the female to bear and rear children, while the male had to fight and hunt for food. But in the end it comes to the same: the modern human being has the ability to shape him/herself, so we can design our culture according to our will.