

Daphni Rides Again

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DON'T TELL ANYONE, but in many a demonstration, when we were standing and proclaiming our message of peace and justice, knowing that not a word about it would appear in the media, I secretly wished for the police to come and beat us up.

That would attract the media, who would convey our message to the general public – which was, after all, the whole purpose of the exercise.

This happened last week.

REMEMBER DAPHNI LEEF? She was the young woman who could not pay her rent and put up a tent in Tel Aviv's central Rothschild Boulevard, starting a protest movement that in the end brought almost half a million people to a mass social protest.

Imitating Tahrir Square, their slogan was: "The people demand social justice!"

Like all of us, the powers that be were totally unprepared. Faced with this new and threatening phenomenon, they did what politicians always do in such a situation: the government beat a sham retreat, appointed a committee, ceremoniously adopted its findings and then sat on its hands.

Since the end of last year's "Social Summer", next to nothing has changed. If there was any movement at all, it was for the worse. CEOs doubled their salaries, and the poorer became even less able to pay their rent.

At the end of the summer, the mayor of Tel Aviv, Ron Huldai, nominally a member of the Labor Party, sent his "inspectors" to demolish the hundred tents in the Boulevard. The protest went into prolonged hibernation over the winter and good old "security" pushed "social justice" off the agenda.

Everyone expected the protest, like the sleeping beauty, to come to life again this summer. The question was: how?

NOW IT is happening. With the official beginning of summer, June 21, the protest started again.

There were no new ideas. Daphni and her friends obviously believed that the best way was to repeat last year's success in every detail.

They went back to Rothschild Boulevard, tried to put up their little tents and called upon the masses to join them.

But there was a huge difference between this year and the last: the element of surprise.

Every strategist knows that in war, surprise is half of victory. The same is true in political action.

Last year, the surprise was complete. Like the Egyptians crossing the Suez Canal on Yom Kippur 1973, Daphni and her friends surprised everyone, including themselves.

But surprise cannot be warmed up again like coffee.

This time, the authorities were prepared. Lengthy – if secret – consultations have obviously taken place. The Prime Minister was determined not to be humiliated again – not after TIME magazine crowned him "King Bibi" and the German vulgar mass-circulation paper, BILD, followed suit, enthroning his wife, Sara, too. (Sara'le, as she is generally called, is as popular as Marie Antoinette in her time.)

The orders of Netanyahu and his minions for the police were evidently to put down any protest forcefully and right from the beginning. The mayor decided to turn the boulevard into a fortress against the tent-dwellers.¹

It seemed that Netanyahu learned a lot from Vladimir Putin, who paid him a courtesy visit this week. Weeks ago, last year's protest leaders were summoned to the police and interrogated about their plans – something unheard of in Israel (for Jews within the Green Line). The legality of this procedure is doubtful, to say the least.

SO WHEN Daphni appeared on the scene, everything was ready.

Mayor Huldai's "inspectors", who have never before been seen in a violent role, attacked the few dozen protesters, shoved them roughly around and trampled on their tents.

When the protesters did not cede their ground, the police were deployed. Not just ordinary police officers, but also the specially trained riot police and police commandos. The photos and videos show policemen attacking protesters, hitting and kicking them. One policeman was shown choking a young woman with both his hands. Daphni herself was thrown to the ground, kicked and beaten.

Next day, the pictures appeared in the papers and on television. The public was shocked.

When 12 protesters were brought to court, after spending the night under arrest, the judge sharply criticized the police and sent them home.

The next day, a second demonstration took place to protest against the treatment of Daphni. Again the police attacked the protesters, who reacted by blocking central thoroughfares and smashing the glass doors of two banks.

The government, the police chiefs and the mayor were horrified. "A well-prepared riot by violent thugs!" the commander of the country's police force called the event in a specially convened press conference. "Vandalism!" the mayor chimed in.

AT THE time these events occurred, a group of Palestinian, Israeli and international activists were holding a protest in Susia, a small Arab village on the edge of the desert south of Hebron.

For a long time, the occupation authorities have been trying to drive the Palestinians from this area, in order to enlarge the

¹The French word "boulevard" is derived from the German "Bollwerk" which means fortification, because citizens loved to stroll atop the city walls. They still do in the beautiful Tuscan town of Lucca.

neighboring settlement (which bears the same name) and in future annex the area. After the Arab houses were destroyed, the inhabitants found refuge in ancient caves. From time to time the army tries to drive them out, blocking the wells and arresting the people. All of us in the peace movement have taken part in protests there at one time or another.

Compared to what happened there, the Rothschild events were child's play. The police employed tear gas, rubber-coated steel bullets, water cannon and "skunk water" – a stinking substance that clings to the body for days and weeks.

There is a lesson there. Police officers who are routinely employed to put down the protests in Bil'in and other places in the West Bank and then are sent to Tel Aviv cannot be expected to become London policemen overnight. Brutality cannot be stopped forever on the Green Line. Sooner or later, Bil'in was bound to come to Tel Aviv.

Now it's here.

SO WHAT NOW? A public opinion poll taken this week shows that 69% of Jewish Israelis (Arabs were not asked) support the renewed protest, and 23% said that violent protests may become necessary.

Hours after publication, Binyamin Netanyahu announced that the planned tax raise for the poor and the middle class had been dropped. Instead, the budget deficit would be allowed to rise dramatically. This is blatantly against Netanyahu's basic convictions and shows how afraid of the protest he is.

But this, of course, will not effect any real change in the structure of our economy, which is being sucked dry by the huge military-industrial complex, as well as by the settlers and the orthodox. Daphni and her friends refuse to go into this. But that's where the money is, and without it the welfare state cannot

be resurrected.

They also refuse to engage in politics, rightly fearing to lose a lot of support if they did. But, as has been said, if you run away from politics, politics will follow you.

There is no chance at all for any real gain for social justice without a major shift in the political setup of the country. As of now, King Bibi and his right-wing cohorts reign supreme. The right-wing bloc controls a huge majority of 80% in the Knesset, leaving the remnants of the left-wing bloc completely powerless. In such a situation, change is impossible.

Sooner or later, the social protest movement will have to decide to enter the political arena. The right thing to do is to turn it into a political party – something like "Movement for Social Justice" - and run for the Knesset.

The 69% of supporters will shrink, of course. But a sizable part will remain and create a new force in the Knesset.

People who have habitually voted for Likud or Shas would then be able, for the first time, to vote for a party that conforms to their vital economic interests, upsetting the obsolete Israeli division between Left and Right and creating a completely new division of power.

This may not bring about the decisive change on the first attempt, but the second effort may well succeed in doing so. Anyhow, from the first day on it would change the agenda of Israeli politics.

Such a party would be compelled, by its own momentum, to embrace a program of peace, based on the two-state solution and of a secular, liberal, social-democratic system.

This just might be the beginning of the Second Israeli Republic.