

Harakiri?

IF GOD wills, even a broomstick can shoot – so I wrote after the appointment of the Turkel commission. I was quoting the Jewish saying in the hope that in spite of everything, something would come out of it.

The commission was born in sin. Those who appointed it were not interested in discovering the truth but in preventing the setting up of an international inquiry commission or an Israeli State Board of Inquiry. The “terms of reference” that were dictated to the commission were extremely narrow. At the beginning, the commission was not even empowered to compel witnesses to testify.

In short: a commission without wings, a broomstick without the brush.

I hoped that the members of the commission would not agree to dance to the government’s tune. Today it is still too early to judge whether they have passed this test, but it can already be said: they have broken their chains.

AFTER THE testimony of the three central witnesses this week – Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak and Gabi Ashkenazi – one can already draw the first conclusion: the commission is ignoring the terms of reference that were imposed on it. The terms have disappeared. The commission hardly mentioned the subject it was charged with exploring – international law – and instead took up all the rest.

That was not difficult, because all three witnesses disregarded the terms of reference they themselves had framed. Each of them was so eager to show how right and wise he was, that the official subject of the investigation was well-nigh forgotten.

Thus a *fait accompli* was established: the commission is not fettered anymore by its terms of reference, but is dealing with all the aspects of the failed operation. (The terms of reference may however pop up again when the time comes to draw up their findings.)

IT WAS interesting to observe how the three testimonies were received by the media.

Almost all the media fell upon the first two witnesses and glorified the third.

Netanyahu was careless to the point of frivolity, put all the responsibility on Barak and did not even master the facts. After all, he was abroad at the time, so what do they want from him, it was Barak who managed the affair single-handedly.

After the media assaulted him ferociously, Netanyahu quickly convened an improvised press conference and grandly announced that he was taking all the responsibility upon himself.

Barak was more studious. He spoke endlessly, drowned the commission in a deluge of details and also took the responsibility upon himself, but immediately kicked it downstairs, to the military. The government, he stated, decides upon the mission, it is the military that is responsible for the implementation. He, too, was

sharply taken to task by the media.

The Chief of Staff pointed to the errors in the execution of the operation which were committed by the lower military ranks, the navy and army intelligence, but with impressive magnanimity took upon himself the responsibility for these, too.

His testimony was a masterpiece. Rather surprisingly, it appeared that he was far more astute than the two experienced politicians. While they looked like slippery eels, out only to defend themselves, he appeared like a lovable, bumbling, unsophisticated bear, a simple, honest, artless soldier, radiating integrity, who tells the truth because he doesn’t know otherwise.

Ashkenazi is much smarter than he looks. True, his testimony may have been prepared by his advisers, but the smartness of a leader also finds expression in the ability to choose smart advisers.

Again it was proven that the media – and, indeed, the entire state – is controlled by the army. The same remarks that were greeted with jeers when uttered by Netanyahu and Barak were received with reverent attention when they came from the Chief of Staff. A chorus of admirers praised him on TV, on the radio and in the newspapers. What an honest person! What an upright soldier! What a responsible, level-headed commander! If there was any difference between the uniformed army spokesmen and the military correspondents in civilian cloths, it could hardly be discerned.

THE GENERAL picture that emerged from the three main testimonies is quite clear: there were no serious preparations for dealing with the flotilla, though the plans for it were known many months in advance. Everything was done in an amateurish way, in the famous tradition of Israeli improvisation, “rely on me” and “it’ll be OK”.

Previous aid ships carried only non-violent peace activists, and everybody assumed that this would continue to be so. Nobody paid attention to the fact that the Turkish activists were imbued with quite a different ideology. Who cares, anyhow, what Turks are thinking. The glorious Mossad did not even take the trouble to plant an agent among the hundreds of activists on board the ship.

The planning of the operation was slapdash, without enough intelligence, without sufficient consideration of the alternatives, without taking into account potential dangerous scenarios. After all, one did not have to be a prophet to foresee that the Turkish activists, instilled with religious fervor, would forcefully oppose the boarding of a Turkish ship on the high seas by Israeli soldiers. What a surprise!

What is the conclusion? The Chief of Staff disclosed it without hesitation: next time, the army will use snipers to pick off everybody on deck (or, in the language of the military commentators, “the attackers”) while the

soldiers abseil from the helicopters.

Since Netanyahu and Barak pushed all the responsibility onto the military, and Ashkenazi pointed to the faults in planning and execution, there again arises a practical question: how can the members of the Turkel commission do a serious job when they are not allowed to summon military personnel?

To forestall the problem, the Chief of Staff threw them two bones: the Army Advocate General and Giora Eyland will be allowed to give evidence. (Eyland is the retired general who conducted the army's internal investigation.) But that is far from sufficient. To fulfill its mission, the commission must hear evidence from the chief of the navy and his staff. In response to the Gush Shalom petition, the Supreme Court has already hinted that if Turkel demands their appearance, the court will compel compliance.

NONE OF the three witnesses touched upon the main question: the existence of the Gaza blockade itself.

In the fateful meeting of "The Seven" (the senior ministers), it was clear that all of them believe in the necessity of the blockade, as well as in the necessity of the forceful suppression of any attempt to break it.

The legal side of the matter is liable to arouse much debate. It seems that international law is unclear here, both as far as the imposition and the implementation of a blockade is concerned. The law is not set down in writing in a consistent format. It allows for many different interpretations. There will not be a single, agreed and clear answer.

The real question is in any case not legal, but moral and political: for what purpose was the blockade imposed?

All the witnesses who have appeared so far have repeated the same agreed argument: we are at war with the Gaza Strip (whatever its legal standing), the blockade is designed to prevent the import of war material. Therefore it is both legal and moral.

But that is a complete lie.

It is very simple to control the movement of cargo by sea. In such cases, it is customary to stop ships on the high seas, inspect the cargo, impound war materials (if any) and allow them to continue on their way. The cargo can also be inspected at the port of departure.

These methods were not employed, because the whole matter of war materials is nothing but a pretext. The aim of the blockade is just the opposite: to prevent the transfer of non-military goods, the same goods which were also not allowed through the land crossings: many sorts of foodstuffs and medicines, raw materials for industry, building materials, spare parts and many

other goods, from children's copybooks to water purification equipment.

The little that made life bearable came through the tunnels, and the prices were sky-high, far beyond the means of most inhabitants.

From the beginning, the purpose was to disrupt normal life in the Gaza Strip, to bring the population to the brink of despair and induce them to rise and overthrow the Hamas government. This aim was obviously supported by the government of the US and its satellites in the Arab world, and perhaps, as some believe, the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

Netanyahu argued in his testimony that "there was no humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip". That depends very much on the interpretation of the term.

True, people did not die of hunger or disease in the streets. It was not a Warsaw ghetto. But there was widespread malnutrition among the children, misery and poverty. The blockade caused general unemployment, because almost all industrial and agricultural production was made impossible. There was no import of raw materials, no exports at all, insufficient fuel. Products from Gaza were unable to reach the West Bank, Israel or Europe. All this is also true now, even though the flotilla has partly succeeded in its task and has compelled the Israeli government to allow the bringing in of many types of goods that were blocked before.

The closure of Gaza port has also contributed to the humanitarian crisis. Seventeen years ago, Shimon Peres wrote: "The Gaza port has a very great potential for growth. The goods and cargos that will be handled there and will leave its gates on the way to Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, Saudi and even Iraqi recipients, will illustrate the economic revolution that will come to the entire region." Perhaps Peres should be summoned to testify.

THE KEY word in all the testimonies was "responsibility". Every witness took responsibility and kicked it as far away as possible – like soccer players who receive the ball and pass it to somebody else.

What does responsibility mean? Once upon a time, when a Japanese leader took responsibility for failure, he stuck a knife into his belly – it was called Hara-kiri ("belly cutting"). No such barbaric habit exists in the West, but there, too, a leader responsible for failure resigns.

Not here. At least, not now. Here, a person who "takes responsibility" evokes praise. What courage! What nobility! He takes responsibility!

And that's the end of that.