

“How Goodly Are Thy Tents”

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FIRST OF all, a warning.

Tent cities are springing up all over Israel. A social protest movement is gathering momentum. At some point in the near future, it may endanger the right-wing government.

At that point, there will be a temptation – perhaps an irresistible temptation – to “warm up the borders”. To start a nice little war. Call on the youth of Israel, the same young people now manning (and womanning) the tents, to go and defend the fatherland.

Nothing easier than that. A small provocation, a platoon crossing the border “to prevent the launching of a rocket”, a fire fight, a salvo of rockets – and lo and behold, a war. End of protest.

In September, just a few weeks from now, the Palestinians intend to apply to the UN for the recognition of the State of Palestine. Our politicians and generals are chanting in unison that this will cause a crisis – Palestinians in the occupied territories may rise in protest against the occupation, violent demonstrations may ensue, the army will be compelled to shoot – and lo and behold, a war. End of protest.

THREE WEEKS ago I was interviewed one morning by a Dutch journalist. At the end, she asked: “You are describing an awful situation. The extreme right-wing controls the Knesset and is enacting abominable anti-democratic laws. The people are indifferent and apathetic. There is no opposition to speak of. And yet you exude a spirit of optimism. How come?”

I answered that I have faith in the people of Israel. Contrary to appearances, we are a sane people. Some time, somewhere, a new movement will arise and change the situation. It may happen in a week, in a month, in a year. But it will come.

On that very same day, just a few hours later, a young woman called Daphne Liff, with an improbable man’s hat perched on her flowing hair, said to herself: “Enough!”

She had been evicted by her landlady because she couldn’t afford the rent. She set up a tent in Rothschild Boulevard, a long, tree-lined thoroughfare in the center of Tel Aviv. The news spread through facebook, and within an hour, dozens of tents had sprung up. Within a week, there were some 400 tents, spread out in a double line more than a mile long.

Similar tent-cities sprang up in Jerusalem, Haifa and a dozen smaller towns. The next Saturday, tens of thousands joined protest marches in Tel Aviv and elsewhere. Last Saturday, they numbered more than 150,000.

This has now become the center of Israeli life. The Rothschild tent city has assumed a life of its own – a cross between Tahrir Square and Woodstock, with a touch of Hyde Park corner thrown in for good measure. The mood is indescribably upbeat, masses of people come to visit and return home full of enthusiasm and hope. Everybody can feel that something momentous is happening.

Seeing the tents, I was reminded of the words of Balaam, who was sent by the king of Moab to curse the children of Israel in the desert (Numbers 24) and instead exclaimed: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, Oh Israel!”

IT ALL started in a remote little town in Tunisia, when an unlicensed market vendor was arrested by a policewoman. It seems that in the ensuing altercation, the woman struck the man in the face, a terrible humiliation for a Tunisian man. He set himself on fire. What followed is history: the revolution in Tunisia, regime change in Egypt, uprisings all over the Middle East.

The Israeli government saw all this with growing concern – but they didn’t imagine that there might be an effect in Israel itself. Israeli society, with its ingrained contempt for Arabs, could hardly be expected to follow suit.

But follow suit it did. People in the street spoke with growing admiration of the Arab revolt. It showed that people acting together could dare to confront leaders far more fearsome than our bumbling Binyamin Netanyahu.

Some of the most popular posters on the tents were “Rothschild corner Tahrir” and, in a Hebrew rhyme, “Tahrir – Not only in Cahir” – Cahir being the Hebrew version of al-Cahira, the Arabic name for Cairo. And also: “Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu”.

In Tahrir Square, the central slogan was “The People Want to Overthrow the Regime”. In conscious emulation, the central slogan of the tent cities is “The People Want Social Justice”.

WHO ARE these people? What exactly do they want?

It started with a demand for “Affordable Housing”. Rents in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and elsewhere are extremely high, after years of Government neglect. But the protest soon engulfed other subjects: the high price of foodstuffs and gasoline, the low wages. The ridiculously low salaries of physicians and teachers, the deterioration of the education and health services. There is a general feeling that 18 tycoons control everything, including the politicians. (Politicians who dared to show up in the tent cities were chased away.) They could have quoted an American saying: “Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.”

A selection of the slogans gives an impression:

We want a welfare state!

Fighting for the home!

Justice, not charity!

If the government is against the people, the people are against the government!

Bibi, this is not the US Congress, you will not buy us with empty words!

If you don’t join our war, we shall not fight your wars!

Give us our state back!

Three partners with three salaries cannot pay for three rooms!

The answer to privatization: revolution!

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, we are slaves to Bibi in Israel!

I have no other homeland!

Bibi, go home, we'll pay for the gas!

Overthrow swinish capitalism!

Be practical, demand the impossible!

WHAT IS missing in this array of slogans? Of course: the occupation, the settlements, the huge expenditure on the military.

This is by design. The organizers, anonymous young men and women – mainly women – are very determined not to be branded as “leftists”. They know that bringing up the occupation would provide Netanyahu with an easy weapon, split the tent-dwellers and derail the protests.

We in the peace movement know and respect this. All of us are exercising strenuous self-restraint, so that Netanyahu will not succeed in marginalizing the movement and depicting it as a plot to overthrow the right-wing government.

As I wrote in an article in Haaretz: No need to push the protesters. In due course, they will reach the conclusion that the money for the major reforms they demand can only come from stopping the settlements and cutting the huge military budget by hundreds of billions – and that is possible only in peace. (To help them along, we published a large ad, saying: “It’s quite simple – money for the settlements OR money for housing, health services and education”).

Voltaire said that “the art of government consists in taking as much money as possible from one class of citizens to give it to the other”. This government takes the money of decent citizens to give it to the settlers.

WHO ARE they, these enthusiastic demonstrators, who seemingly have come from nowhere?

They are the young generation of the middle class, who go out to work, take home average salaries and “cannot finish the month”, as the Israeli expression goes. Mothers who cannot go to work because they have nowhere to leave their babies. University students who cannot get a room in the dormitories or afford accommodation in the city. And especially young people who want to marry but cannot afford to buy an apartment, even with the help of their parents. (One tent bore the sign: “Even this tent was bought by our parents”)

All this in a flourishing economy, which has been spared the pains of the world-wide economic crisis and boasts an enviable unemployment rate of just 5%.

If pressed, most of the protesters would declare themselves to be “social-democrats”. They are the very opposite of the Tea Party in the US: they want a welfare state, they blame privatization for many of their ills, they want the government to interfere and to act. Whether they want to admit it or not, the very essence of their demands and attitudes is classically leftist (the term created in the French Revolution because the adherents of these ideals sat on the left side of the speaker in the National Assembly). They are the essence of what Left means - (though in Israel, the terms “Left” and “Right” have until now been largely identified with questions of war and peace).

WHERE WILL it go from here?

No one can say. When asked about the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai famously said: “It’s too early to say.” Here we are witnessing an event still in progress, perhaps even still beginning.

It has already produced a huge change. For weeks now, the public and the media have stopped talking about the borders, the Iranian bomb and the security situation. Instead, the talk is now almost completely about the social situation, the minimum wage, the injustice of indirect taxes, the housing construction crisis.

Under pressure, the amorphous leadership of the protest has drawn up a list of concrete demands. Among others: government building of houses for rent, raising taxes on the rich and the corporations, free education from the age of three months [sic], a raise in the salary of physicians, police and fire-fighters, school classes of no more than 21 pupils, breaking the monopolies controlled by a few tycoons, and so on.

So where from here? There are many possibilities, both good and bad.

Netanyahu can try to buy off the protest with some minor concessions – some billions here, some billions there. This will confront the protesters with the choice of the Indian boy in the movie about becoming a millionaire: take the money and quit, or risk all on answering yet another question.

Or: the movement may continue to gather momentum and force major changes, such as shifting the burden from indirect to direct taxation.

Some rabid optimists (like myself) may even dream of the emergence of a new authentic political party to fill the gaping void on the left side of the political spectrum.

I STARTED with a warning, and I must end with another one: this movement has raised immense hopes. If it fails, it may leave behind an atmosphere of despondency and despair – a mood that will drive those who can to seek a better life somewhere else.