

In Praise of Emotion

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IT WAS A moving experience. Moments that spoke not only to the mind, but also—and foremost—to the heart.

Last Sunday, on the eve of Israel's Remembrance Day for the fallen in our wars, I was invited to an event organized by the activist group Combatants for Peace and the Forum of Israeli and Palestinian Bereaved Parents.

The first surprise was that it took place at all. In the general atmosphere of discouragement of the Israeli peace camp after the recent elections, when almost no one dared even to mention the word peace, such an event was heartening.

The second surprise was its size. It took place in one of the biggest halls in the country, Hangar 10 in Tel-Aviv's fair grounds. It holds more than 2000 seats. A quarter of an hour before the starting time, attendance was depressingly sparse. Half an hour later, it was choke full. (Whatever the many virtues of the peace camp, punctuality is not among them.)

The third surprise was the composition of the audience. There were quite a lot of white-haired old-timers, including myself, but the great majority was composed of young people, at least half of them young women. Energetic, matter-of-fact youngsters, very Israeli.

I felt as if I was in a relay race. My generation passing the baton on to the next. The race continues.

BUT THE outstanding feature of the event was, of course, its content. Israelis and Palestinians were mourning together for their dead sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, victims of the conflict and wars, occupation and resistance (a.k.a. terror).

An Arab villager spoke quietly of his daughter, killed by a soldier on her way to school. A Jewish mother spoke of her soldier son, killed in one of the wars. All in a subdued voice. Without pathos. Some spoke Hebrew, some Arabic.

They spoke of their first reaction after their loss, the feelings of hatred, the thirst for revenge. And then the slow change of heart. The understanding that the parents on the other side, the Enemy, felt exactly like them, that their loss, their mourning, their bereavement was exactly

as their own.

For years now, bereaved parents of both sides have been meeting regularly to find solace in each other's company. Among all the peace groups acting in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they are, perhaps, the most heart-lifting.

IT WAS not easy for the Arab partners to get to this meeting. At first, they were denied permission by the army to enter Israel. Gabi Lasky, the indomitable advocate of many peace groups (including Gush Shalom), had to threaten with an application to the Supreme Court, just to obtain a limited concession: 45 Palestinians from the West Bank were allowed to attend.¹

What was so special about the event was that the Israeli-Arab fraternization took place on a purely human level, without political speeches, without the slogans which have become, frankly, a bit stale.

For two hours, we were all engulfed by human emotions, by a profound feeling for each other. And it felt good.

I AM writing this to make a point that I feel very strongly about: the importance of emotions in the struggle for peace.

I am not a very emotional person myself. But I am acutely conscious of the place of emotions in the political struggle. I am proud of having coined the phrase "*In politics, it is irrational to ignore the irrational.*" Or, if you prefer, "*in politics, it is rational to accept the irrational.*"

This is a major weakness of the Israeli peace movement. It is exceedingly rational—indeed, perhaps too rational. We can easily prove that Israel needs peace, that without peace we are doomed to become an apartheid state, if not worse.

All over the world, leftists are more sober than rightists. When the leftists are propounding a logical argument for peace, reconciliation with former enemies, social equality and help for the disadvantaged, the rightists answer with a volley of emotional and irrational slogans.

But masses of people are not moved by logic. They are moved by their feelings.

One expression of feelings—and a generator of

¹It is a routine measure of the occupation: before every Jewish holiday the West Bank is completely cut off from Israel—except for the settlers, of course. This is how most Palestinians become acquainted with Jewish holidays.

feelings—is the language of songs. One can gauge the intensity of a movement by its melodies. Who can imagine the marches of Martin Luther King without “*We shall overcome*”? Who can think about the Irish struggle without its many beautiful songs? Or the October revolution without its host of rousing melodies?

The Israeli peace movement has produced one single song: a sad appeal of the dead to the living. Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated within minutes of singing it, its blood-stained text found on his body. But all the many writers and composers of the peace movement have not produced one single rousing anthem—while the hate-mongers can draw on a wealth of religious and nationalist hymns.

IT IS said that one does not have to like one’s adversary in order to make peace with them. One makes peace with the enemy, as we all have declaimed hundreds of times. The enemy is the person you hate.

I have never quite believed in that, and the older I get, the less I do.

True, one cannot expect millions of people on both sides to love each other. But the core of peace-makers, the pioneers, cannot fulfill their tasks if there is not an element of mutual sympathy between them.

A certain type of Israeli peace activist does not accept this truism. Sometimes one has the feeling that they truly want peace—but not really with the Arabs. They love peace, because they love themselves. They stand before a mirror and tell themselves: Look how wonderful I am! How humane! How moral!

I remember how much animosity I aroused in certain progressive circles when I created our peace symbol: the crossed flags of Israel and Palestine. When one of us raised this emblem at a Peace Now demonstration in the late eighties, it caused a scandal. He was rudely asked to leave, and the movement publicly apologized.

To give an impetus to a real peace movement, you have to imbue it with the spirit of empathy for the other side. You must have a feeling for their humanity, their culture,

their narrative, their aspirations, their fears, their hopes. And that applies, of course, to both sides.

Nothing can be more damaging to the chances of peace than the activity of fanatical pro-Israelis and pro-Palestinians abroad, who think that they are helping their preferred side by demonizing the other. You don’t make peace with demons.

FRATERNIZATION BETWEEN Palestinians and Israelis is a must. No peace movement can succeed without it.

And here we came to a painful paradox: the more this fraternization is needed, the less there is.

During the last few years, there has been a growing estrangement between the two sides. Yasser Arafat was very conscious of the need for contact, and did much to further it. (I constantly urged him to do more.) Since his death, this effort has receded.

On the Israeli side, peace efforts have become less and less popular. Fraternization takes place every week in Bil’in and on many other battlefields, but the major peace organizations are not too eager to meet.

On the Palestinian side there is a lot of resentment, a (justified) feeling that the Israeli peace movement has not delivered. Worse, that joint public meetings could be considered by the Palestinian masses as a form of “normalization” with Israel, something like collaboration with the enemy.

This must be changed. Only large-scale, public and heart-felt cooperation between the peace movements of the two sides can convince the public—on both sides—that peace is possible.

THESE THOUGHTS were running through my head as I listened to the simple words of Palestinians and Israelis in that big remembrance meeting.

It was all there: the spirit, the emotion, the empathy, the cooperation.

It was a human moment. That’s how it all starts.