

Quarrel on the Titanic

ONE OF THE HAPPIEST moments in my life occurred in a restaurant.

It happened before the second intifada. I had invited Rachel to celebrate her birthday with dinner at a famous restaurant in Ramallah.

We were sitting in the garden under strings of colorful lights, the air was fragrant with the perfume of flowers and the waiters were hurrying back and forth with laden trays. We ate Mussakhan, the Palestinian national dish (chicken with tahini baked on pita bread), and I drank arak. Our waiter, who had overheard us talking, took our order in Hebrew. We were the only Israelis there. At the nearby tables, Arab families with the children in their best clothes, as well as a bride and groom with their wedding guests. Bursts of laughter punctuated the murmur of Arabic conversations, and spirits were high.

I was happy, and a sigh escaped me: "How wonderful this country could be, if only we had peace!"

I THINK of that moment every time I hear sad news from Ramallah. The news is depressing, but the memory helps me to keep alive my hope that things could be different.

The most depressing news concerns the split between the Palestinians themselves. This split is a disaster for them, and, I believe, also for Israel and the world at large. That's why I dare to comment on a matter that seemingly does not concern us Israelis. It does.

It is easy to blame Israel. Easy and also justified. In their struggle against the national aspirations of the Palestinians, successive Israeli governments have applied the old Roman maxim *divide et impera*, divide and rule.

Since the Oslo agreement, the central component of this policy has been the physical separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Article IV of the Oslo Agreement of September 1993 says: "The two sides view the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit, whose integrity will be preserved".

Article X of Annex 1 of the Interim Agreement of September 1995 says: "There shall be a safe passage connecting the West Bank with the Gaza Strip for movement of persons, vehicles and goods...Israel will ensure safe passage for persons and transportation during daylight hours...in any event not less than 10 hours a day."

In practice, the safe passage was never opened. Among all the blatant violations of the Oslo agreements, this was the most severe. Its consequences have been disastrous for both sides.

True, there was a lot of talking about the passage. Ehud Barak once fantasized about constructing a giant bridge between the West Bank and the Strip, after seeing such a 40 km long bridge somewhere abroad.

Others spoke about a tunnel underneath Israeli territory. Yet others proposed an extraterritorial highway or railway. None of these ideas was ever implemented. On the contrary, while before Oslo there had been free movement for all, including the inhabitants of the occupied territories, after Oslo this freedom was abolished.

THE PRETEXT was – as always – security: convoys of murderers and terrorists would pack the safe passage, trucks loaded with Palestinian rockets would drive to and fro. But the consequences disclose the true aim: what remained of Palestine was cut into two disconnected parts.

One cannot rule a territory without physical contact with it. That was proven in Pakistan, which was founded as a state with two disconnected parts separated by Indian territory. Soon enough, war between the two broke out and the Eastern part became the independent state of Bangladesh.

According to the latest Palestinian statistics, which seem reliable, there are now 2.42 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and 1.46 million in the Gaza Strip (in addition to 379 thousand in East Jerusalem). From Yasser Arafat I once heard that more than half of the Palestinian Authority's resources were being devoted to the Gaza Strip, in spite of the fact that the Strip amounted to only 6% (one sixteenth) of the Palestinian territories.

Now there exist in practice two Palestinian entities: the West Bank, whose actual capital is now Ramallah, and the Gaza Strip, with its capital Gaza city. >>From the political, economic and ideological points of view, the distance between them is growing.

And from the point of view of the Israeli occupation policy, that is a great victory.

THE ISRAELI government conducts different strategies against the two Palestinian entities.

Against Gaza, the policy is simple and brutal: to overthrow the Hamas government by turning the life of those 1,460,000 men and woman, old people and children, into hell. They are allowed to bring in only the most basic foodstuffs. There was an international outcry when Senator John Kerry discovered the import of noodles is prohibited, because pasta is apparently a luxury. "We shall not give them chocolate when Gilad Shalit is not getting chocolate," an army officer declared this week. It would be interesting to know how much chocolate the 11 thousand Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails are getting.

The war against Gaza ("Molten Lead") was intended to wreak death and destruction upon the civilians, so that they would rise up and overthrow their elected government. The dead are already buried, but the piles of rubble remain. The Israeli government does not allow building materials to be brought in, and the inhabitants

have started to build homes of mud, as their ancestors did centuries ago. (To make the whole thing even more depressing, it is forbidden to bring in toys, books and musical instruments.)

The Egyptian government cooperates with the Israeli army in enforcing the blockade on the inhabitants of Gaza. Lately it has intensified its efforts to choke the essential supply line through the Rafah tunnels ("smuggling" in Israeli and Egyptian parlance). The campaign recently started by the Egyptian authorities against Hizbullah agents in Sinai has the aim, among others, of cutting this pipeline.

The Gaza people have not toppled the Hamas government. On the contrary, their opposition to the Ramallah government seems to be growing, and some say that it is turning into pure hatred.

AGAINST THE Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the occupation authorities employ a different, but no less destructive, strategy. They make every effort to present it as a kind of Palestinian Vichy regime, in order to prevent the healing of the Palestinian rift.

The Israeli government declares this openly and loudly. This week, the Chief of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, wondered publicly how the Palestinian Minister of Justice could sue Israel before the International Criminal Court for war crimes committed in Gaza.

How come, Ashkenazi complained, when throughout the Gaza War there was such close cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority?

In other words, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli army declares publicly before the Palestinian people and the entire world that the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah cooperated with the Israeli government in the war against their Palestinian brothers in Gaza, in which - according to the Ramallah Minister of Justice - systematic war crimes were committed. A more damaging blow to the standing of Mahmoud Abbas can hardly be imagined.

Other Israeli officers do not spare their praise for the Palestinian security forces, which - they allege - cooperate with the Israeli army in eliminating Hamas sympathizers in the West Bank. It is hard to imagine that such statements by the occupation officers will do anything to elevate the standing of Abbas in the eyes of the Palestinians, who see with their own eyes how the settlements on their land grow daily.

This week, a friend told me about a conversation he had with a Palestinian official from Ramallah. If Israel attacks Iran, he said with great enthusiasm, the Hamas regime in Gaza will collapse.

For an outsider looking in, this is incomprehensible. When the entire Palestinian people is facing a danger to their very existence, when the Israeli government is

working tirelessly to make it impossible for a Palestinian state to come into being and there is a real threat that the Palestinian people will be eventually driven out of Palestine altogether, the split resembles a quarrel on the bridge of the Titanic.

THERE IS an old Jewish saying that "the destruction of the temple (in the year 70 A.D.) was caused by mutual hatred." When the Romans were already besieging Jerusalem, the various Zealot factions in the beleaguered city burned each other's stocks of food. Among the Palestinians, such things are happening right now.

Disunity has always been a curse. In 1948, when they were fighting for their survival, they were unable to form a unified leadership and a unified military force. In practice, every village fought alone, without coming to the aid of its neighbors. Otherwise, perhaps, the Naqba would not have happened, and the untold suffering that continues to this very day would have been prevented.

The main result of the disunity 61 years ago was that the Palestinians were unable to establish the State of Palestine next to the State of Israel, and the territory allotted for it by the UN was divided between Israel, Jordan and Egypt.

Yasser Arafat understood this well. He made a huge effort to maintain the unity of his people at almost any cost. As long as he was alive, this unity was maintained. The secret services that planned his murder obviously wanted to sabotage this unity, much as Yitzhak Rabin's murderers wanted to destroy the peace process. The two murders complemented each other, and not by accident.

Anyone who believes that peace is essential for the two peoples and for the entire world must fervently hope for the establishment of a Palestinian unity government.

I believe that this is still possible.

IT SEEMS that in this matter, too, Barack Obama must play a leading role. He must put an end to the stupid and disastrous policy of boycotting Hamas and employ his full power to bring about the creation of a Palestinian unity government. Perhaps it will have to be, in the beginning, a kind of super-government under which both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip keep some kind of autonomy.

Peace among the Palestinians themselves is a necessary precondition for peace between Israel and Palestine. Only Israeli-Palestinian peace can also bring about reconciliation between the two peoples and perhaps restore the atmosphere of that magic evening in the Ramallah restaurant - so that it will not remain just a sweet memory.