

Remember Naboth

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AN INCREDIBLE PIECE of legislation is now being debated in Jerusalem.

The country is busy with a settlement called Amona. There, deep in the occupied territories, a few dozen Jewish families have set up an illegal settlement—illegal even under Israeli law, not to mention international law.

Trouble is, they did not take the trouble to find out who owns the land on which they settled. As it turns out, it actually belongs to private Arab farmers. The Israeli Supreme Court ordered the settlers to evacuate the site.

Evacuate Jews? Unthinkable! The Amonites swore “passive” resistance. This means calling upon tens of thousands of settlers from all over the occupied Palestinian territories to rush to the scene. It means crying babies, screeching girls, violent youngsters pushing bewildered soldiers (many of them settlers themselves), men wearing Nazi-era yellow stars, woman clutching their many weeping children, cameras galore. Awful.

So, as the date set for the evacuation comes closer and the court refuses to grant another postponement—after years of legal playing around—the government has found a way out: the Amona settlers will move a hundred yards, to land on a part of the same hill which does not officially belong to private persons.

In return for this favor by the settlers, the government promises to enact a “legitimization law”, an invention of sheer legal genius. It says that in many dozens of places all over the West Bank, where other settlements have been set up on private Palestinian property, the land will simply be expropriated, and the rightful owners will be paid compensation.

In short: a gigantic act of stealing the property of private persons, who happen to be Palestinian Arabs, in order to “legitimize” the settlements of fanatical far-right Jews.

WHEN I read the text of the proposed bill, I was reminded of a sentence in the Bible that has always bewildered me.

It's in Exodus (12). When Pharaoh at long last allowed the Children of Israel to leave Egypt, after the awful ten plagues, they did something extraordinary.

¹How do we know that the exodus story was invented at a much later time? Among other indications, because the Egyptian places mentioned in the story did not even exist at the time of the imaginary Moses, but did exist at the time of the Maccabees, many centuries later, when the text was written.

“And the Children of Israel . . . borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver and jewels of gold and raiment. . . and they spoiled the Egyptians.”

Since the Children of Israel were leaving for good, “borrowing” meant stealing. And not from Pharaoh and the state, but from ordinary people, their neighbors.

It is now generally agreed among experts that the exodus never really happened, and that the story was written about a thousand years after the purported event. But why would a writer attribute to his forefathers such disgusting behavior? Especially when it never happened?

The only answer I can imagine is that the writers and editors at the time saw nothing disgusting in this story. Cheating and plundering non-Israelites was alright.

It is also alright now for the settlers and the government of Israel.¹

ANOTHER CHAPTER of the Bible is even more pertinent to the present happenings. It is a text which every Israeli schoolboy learns in his early teens. In the Hebrew original it is of exquisite literary beauty, apart from its overpowering moral power.

It recounts (1 Kings, 21) that:

“Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard. . . hard by the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria.

And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying: “Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house, and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it, or, if it seems good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money.”

And Naboth said to Ahab: “The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee!

And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased. . . But Jezebel his wife came to him and said unto him: “Why is thy spirit so sad?”

The wife took matters into her own hands, ordered the elders of Samaria to put Naboth on trial on false charges, and had him stoned to death.

God the Almighty did not like this at all. He sent his prophet, Elijah, who accosted Ahab and said unto him:

“Hast thou killed and also taken possession?”

... Where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, shall dogs lick thy blood!"

And so it came to pass. Ahab died a hero's death in battle, felled by an arrow shot at random. The dogs licked his blood from his battle-carriage. They also ate the flesh of Jezebel, his wife.

In Hebrew the story sounds infinitely more beautiful than in translation. Non-religious people can read it with as much aesthetic pleasure as the religious.

IF GOD were around today, he would surely send one of his on-duty prophets to Binyamin Netanyahu (a nice Biblical-sounding name), and tell him about today's blood-licking dogs. (Journalists? TV reporters?)

The proposed "legalization" of the taking of private Arab property, under any conditions, is sheer theft. Any Arab landowner would quote Naboth, "Allah forbid it me. . ."

Netanyahu does not need to trouble his wife, Sarah'le, who has her own troubles with the law. Instead of Jezebel, he has the Knesset and the Attorney General.

Yet the proposed solution—moving the settlers a few yards to government-owned properties—is no better than Ahab's proposal to Naboth. Actually, it is much worse.

King Bibi, like king Ahab, offers money in compensation, but he does not offer other—and better—land. Actually, he expects the Arabs to take the money and move to Brazil or Sweden.

The offer to move the settlers of Amona to "government lands" nearby needs some explanation. How come that the Israeli government owns lands in the occupied West Bank (as distinct from the East Bank of the Jordan river, which is the Kingdom of Jordan. The government and the settlers themselves call the territory Samaria, as in the Bible.)

In the good old days of the Ottoman Empire, the land belonged to the Sultan, who rented it out to the fellaheen (peasants). Before World War I, when the Sultan was—as usual—bankrupt, he sold off some land to private subjects, mostly rich Arab merchants in Jaffa, Beirut or Monte Carlo. They were absentee landlords. and the peasants on the land did not change.

However, most of the land continued to belong to the Sultan, until the end of World War I, when the government of the new British mandate in Palestine took over. The local Palestinian peasants, of course, remained.

This was the situation when—after the Israeli-Arab war of 1948—the Royal Jordanian government took possession of the land. Nothing changed. The government of Jordan retained formal ownership of the land, the fellaheen worked their plots as they had done for many generations.

When Israel conquered the West Bank in 1967, a totally different situation arose. Unlike the Turks, the British and the Jordanians, the present Israeli government has designs on the land. It wants to turn it over to Jewish settlers, extreme rightist settlers, extreme religious settlers or both.

The legal fiction of "Government-owned land" became a reality overnight. Huge stretches of land on the West Bank suddenly belonged to the government of Israel. Other huge stretches, which belonged to the Palestinians who had fled or were driven out in the 1967 war, so-called "absentee property", was also expropriated by the Israeli government.

All this is now "government land", on which Israelis can settle freely according to Israeli law. No need to add that all this is totally illegal under international law, which categorically forbids the "occupying power" from moving its citizens into the occupied territory.

This, then, is the legal situation: putting Israeli settlers on "government lands" is legal under Israeli law, but absolutely forbidden under international law. Putting settlers on private Palestinian land is forbidden by both international and Israeli law.

As of now, the Amona settlers are asked by the government to move to nearby "government land". They now face the choice between eviction or agreeing to walk the hundred yards to their new abode.

I WONDER what the prophet Elijah would have said about all this. He was not a person given to understatement.

Israeli dogs will not lick the blood of Netanyahu. Nor will they eat the flesh of Sarah'le. God forbid.