

“Rest has Come to the Weary...”

PASSOVER Week is a time for outings. News programs on radio and television start with words like: “The masses of the House of Israel spent the day in the national parks...” It is also a feast of homeland songs. On television one sees groups of white-haired oldsters surrounded by their children and grandchildren fervently singing the songs of their youth, the words of which they know by heart.

“Rest has come to the weary / And repose to the toiler / A pale night spreads / Over the fields of the Valley of Jezreel / Dew below and the moon above / From Beit-Alfa to Nahalal...” The camera focuses on the furrowed face of a grandmother with wet eyes, and it is not hard to imagine her as the beautiful girl she once was. It is easy to see her in a Jezreel kibbutz, with short pants and a long braid swinging behind her, smiling, bowed over tomato plants in the communal vegetable garden.

Nostalgia is having a field-day.

I ADMIT that I am not free from this nostalgia. Something happens to me, too, when I hear the songs, and I join in them involuntarily.

Like many others, I am suffering from “cognitive dissonance”. The heart and the head are not coordinated. They operate on different wavelengths. In other words: my head knows that the Zionist enterprise has imposed a historic injustice on the people who lived in this land. But my heart remembers what we felt in those days.

At the age of 10, a few weeks after our flight from Nazi Germany and arrival in this country, my parents sent me to Nahalal, the first Moshav (communal village). I lived with a family of “peasants” – there were not yet known as “agriculturists” – in order to get “acclimatized” and learn Hebrew.

What was Nahalal like in those days? 75 families, their small white houses arranged in a perfect circle, who worked from sunrise to sunset. In the winter, the village became a sea of mud, which stuck to your rubber boots and felt as heavy as lead. In summer, the temperature was often around blood heat. We, the children, went out to work with the adults, and sometimes it was almost unbearable.

Everyone lived in indescribable poverty. A small glass of home-made wine on Friday night was the height of luxury. Money was measured in piasters (dimes). When the mother of the family, at long last, got a Singer sewing machine and could make the family new clothes, it was a cause for celebration.

When the poet Nathan Alterman wrote about the “rest for the weary”, it was not a poetic phrase. He was talking about real people.

These people were the sons and daughters of the St. Petersburg and Kiev bourgeoisie, spoiled children of well-to-do parents, who came here to “build the country”, walking with open eyes into a life of abject poverty and

back-breaking work, learning a foreign language and giving up their mother tongue forever. During the first years they worked hard to drain the swamp on their land. I can’t imagine that after a day’s work any of them had the energy left to read Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky.

They knew, of course, that there were Arabs around. On the road from Nahalal to Haifa they went past Arab villages. They saw fellaheen working in the fields. But they were from another world. That year – 1934 – was still tranquil, the quiet before the storm of the 1936 “disturbances”. They had no contact with Arabs, did not understand their language, had no idea at all about what went on in their heads when they saw the Jews tending their fields.

What they knew was that the fields of the Jezreel Valley, many of which had been swamps, had been bought with good money from an Arab landowner. Nobody thought about the peasants who had lived on this land and derived from it their daily bread for generations, and who were evicted when the rich absentee landowner sold it to the Jewish National Fund.

NOSTALGIA IS a human emotion. In every generation, old people remember their youth, and mostly it appears to them as an age of purity and happiness.

This natural, personal nostalgia is joined in our case by another feeling, which causes the old songs to flood us with longing for the innocence of those days, the virtue, the belief in “the rightness of the way”, when everything looked so simple.

We felt then that we were taking part in an unprecedented heroic undertaking, creating a new world, a new society, a new human being, a new culture, a new language. We remembered where we came from – from a Europe that was turning into a hell for the Jews. We knew that it was our duty to build a safe haven for millions of Jews who were living in growing danger (even though nobody could yet imagine the Holocaust) and who had nowhere to escape to.

There was a spirit of togetherness, of belonging, of idealism. The new songs expressed it. We all sang them in the youth movements, at Kibbutz evenings, during trips around the country, even in the diverse underground organizations, and of course at school.

When the “disturbances” started in April 1936, we did not see them as an “Arab Revolt”. Like the “pogrom” of 1921 and the “massacre” of 1929, they looked to us like a British plot to incite the ignorant Arabs against us in order to continue to rule the country. The “incited” Arab crowds attacked us because they did not understand how good we were for them. They did not grasp that we were bringing to the country progress, modern agriculture, health care, socialism, workers’ solidarity. Their leaders, the rich “Effendis” (Turkish for noblemen) were inciting them because they were afraid that they would learn from us to

demand higher wages. And there were, of course, those who believed that the Arabs were murdering for the sake of murdering, that murder was their nature and the essence of Islam.

These were not cynical excuses. Zionism was not cynical. The entire Yishuv (the new Hebrew society) believed in this doctrine. In retrospect one can say: this belief was necessary in order to keep up the idealist spirit while ignoring the other side of the coin.

Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who lived abroad and had no part in the pioneer endeavor of (the socialist) "Working Eretz Israel", looked at things from afar and saw them as they were: already in the 1920s he stated that the Palestinian Arabs were behaving as any people would if they saw strangers coming to their country with the intent of turning it into their own homeland. But only a few listened to him.

On the Zionist Left there were always some groups and individuals who tried to find a compromise between Zionism and the people of the land, which would not hinder the Zionists from settling all over the country. It was 1946 before there came into being the first group (of which I was one of the founders) which recognized the Palestinian – and the general Arab - National Movement and proposed striking an alliance with it.

IN 1948, the songs of the War of Independence joined the pioneer songs. Regarding them, too, not a few among us suffer from cognitive dissonance. On the one side – what we felt then. On the other – the truth as we know it now.

For the fighters – as for the entire Yishuv – it was, quite simply, an existential war. The slogan was "There is No Alternative", and all of us believed in it completely. We were fighting with our backs to the wall, the lives of our families hanging in the balance. The enemy was all around us. We believed that we, the few, the very few, almost without arms, were standing up against a sea of Arabs. In the first half of the war, the Arab fighters (known to us as "the gangs") indeed dominated all the roads, and in the second half, the regular Arab armies approached the centers of the Hebrew population, surrounding Hebrew Jerusalem and coming close to Tel-Aviv. The Yishuv lost 6000 young people out of a population of some 635 thousand. Whole year-groups were decimated. Innumerable heroic acts were performed.

The idealism of the fighters found its expression in the songs. Most of them are imbued with faith in victory, and, of course, total conviction of the justness of our cause. We did not leave Arabs behind our lines, nor did the Arabs leave any Jews behind theirs. It looked in those circumstances like a simple military necessity. The fighters did not think then about "ethnic cleansing" – a term not yet invented.

We had no understanding about the real balance of power between us and the other side. The Arabs looked to us like a huge force. We did not know that the

Palestinians were quarreling with each other, unable to unite and to create a country-wide defense force, that they had a severe shortage of modern arms. Later, when the Arab armies joined the fray, we did not know that they were unable to cooperate with each other, that it was more important for them to compete with each other than to defeat us.

Today, a growing number of Israelis have started to understand the full significance of the "Nakba", the great tragedy of the Palestinian people and all the individuals who lost their homes and most of their homeland. But the songs come and remind us of what we felt at the time, when the things happened. An abyss yawns between the emotional reality of those days and the historical truth as we know it now.

Some see the entire 1948 war as a conspiracy of the Zionist leadership which intended right from the beginning to expel the Palestinians from the country in order to turn it into a Jewish State. According to this view, the soldiers of 1948 were war criminals who implemented a vicious policy, much as the pioneers of the preceding generation were land robbers, knights of ethnic cleansing by expulsion and expropriation.

They are strengthened in this view by today's settlers, who are driving the Palestinians from what remains of their land. By their actions they blacken the pioneer past. Religious fanatics and fascist hooligans, who claim to be the heirs of the pioneers, obliterate the real intentions of that generation

HOW CAN one overcome the contradiction between the intentions and emotions of the actors and their many magnificent achievements in building a new nation, and the dark side of their actions and the consequences?

How to sing about the hopes and dreams of our youth and at the same time admit to the terrible injustice of many of our actions? Sing with full heart the pioneer songs and the 1948 war songs (one of which I wrote, of which I am far from proud), without denying the terrible tragedy we imposed on the Palestinian people?

Barack Obama told the Turkish people this week that they must come to grips with the massacre of the Armenians committed by their fathers, while at the same time reminding the Americans that they must confront the genocide of the Native Americans and the black slavery exploited by their own forefathers.

I believe we can do this regarding the catastrophe that we have caused the Palestinians. I am convinced that this is important, indeed essential, for our own national mental health, as well as a first step toward eventual reconciliation. We must acknowledge and recognize the consequences of our deeds and repair what can be repaired – without rejecting our past and the songs that express the innocence of our youth.

We must live with this contradiction, because it is the truth of our lives.