

“Stupid and Mean and Brutal”

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“In blood and sweat / A race will arise to us / Proud and generous and brutal. . .” Thus wrote Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky, the founder of extreme right-wing Zionism, who was also a writer and a poet. Present-day Likud leaders see him as their forefather, much as Stalin saw Karl Marx.

The word “brutal” stands out, because it seems implausible that Jabotinsky really meant it. His Hebrew was not very good, and he probably meant something like “hard” or “tough”.

If Jabotinsky saw today’s Likud, he would shudder. His was a 19th century mixture of extreme nationalism, liberalism and humanism.

Paradoxically, brutality is the only one of the three traits that is prominent in our life today, especially in the occupied Palestinian territories. There is nothing there to be proud of, and generosity is something associated with the despised leftists.

THE ROUTINE, everyday brutality that governs the occupied territories was caught on video this week. A searing flash in the darkness.

It happened on Route 90, a highway that connects Jericho with Beth She’an along the Jordan River. It is the main road of the Jordan valley, which our government aims to annex to Israel one way or another. It is reserved solely for Israeli traffic and closed to Palestinians.¹

A group of young international pro-Palestinian activists decided to demonstrate against the closure of the road. They invited their Palestinian friends to a jolly bicycle ride along it. They were stopped by a unit of the Israeli army. For some minutes they faced each other: the cyclists, some with Arab keffiyehs (headaddresses) draping their shoulders, and the soldiers with their rifles.

The drill in such a situation is for the army to call the police, who are trained for this job and who have the means for non-lethal crowd dispersal. But the commander of the army unit decided otherwise.

What happened then was shown on a video clip taken by one of the protesters. It is clear, unambiguous and unequivocal.

The officer, a lieutenant-colonel, is standing opposite a fair-haired young man, a Dane, who was just looking on, neither saying nor doing anything. Nearby, protesters and soldiers are standing around. No sign of violence anywhere.

Suddenly the officer raises his rifle, holding it horizontally, one hand on the butt and one on the barrel, and then he drives the squared-off end of the magazine hard into the young Dane’s face. The victim falls backward on the ground. The officer grins with satisfaction.

IN THE evening, Israeli TV showed the clip. By now, almost every Israeli has seen it a hundred of times. The more one sees it, the more one is shocked. The sheer brutality of this

completely unprovoked act makes one flinch.

To veterans of demonstrations in the occupied territories, there is nothing new in this incident. Many have suffered brutality in many different forms.

What was unusual in this case was that it was caught on camera. And not a hidden camera. There were quite a lot of cameras around. Not only those of the protesters, but those of army photographers, too.

The officer must have been aware of this. He just did not give a damn.

The undesired publicity caused a national uproar. Obviously it was not the act itself that upset the military and political leadership, but the publicity it attracted. Coming at the same time as the glorious defense of Tel Aviv airport by 700 policemen and policewomen against the terrifying invasion of some 60 international human rights activists, such additional publicity was definitely unwanted.

The army Chief of Staff condemned the officer and promptly suspended him. All senior officers followed suit, the Prime Minister himself spoke out. As is well known, our army is “the most moral in the world”, so what had happened was the unpardonable act of a single rogue officer. There will be a thorough investigation, etc etc.

THE HERO of the affair is Lieutenant Colonel Shalom Eisner (“Iron Man”, in German).

Far from being exceptional, he seems to be the quintessential army officer, indeed the quintessential Israeli.

The first thing TV viewers noticed was the kippah on his head. “*Well of course,*” many murmured to themselves. For decades the national-religious movement has systematically infiltrated the officers’ corps of the armed forces, starting from officers’ induction courses and climbing up, with the aim of having one of their number end up as the army Chief of Staff. By now, kippah-ed lieutenant colonels are common – a far cry from the kibbutzniks who dominated the officers corps at the birth of our army. At the time of the incident, Eisner was a deputy brigade commander.

The national-religious movement, to which the core of the settlers belong, was also the home of Yigal Amir, the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin and of Baruch Goldstein, the mass-murderer of the Muslims in the mosque in Hebron.

One of the pillars of this movement is the yeshiva Merkaz Harav (“Center of the Rabbi”), where Eisner’s father was a prominent rabbi. During the evacuation of the Gaza Strip settlers by Ariel Sharon, Eisner Jr. was among the protesters. Last year Eisner was photographed on the very same spot on Road 90 fraternizing with extreme rightist demonstrators, who also protested on bicycles there.

¹There is a Palestinian joke about this. During the post-Oslo negotiations, the Israeli team insisted on retaining this road. The Palestinian chief negotiator turned to his colleagues and exclaimed: “*What the hell, if we have got 89 other roads, why insist on this one?*”

He did not take the rebukes lying down. With unprecedented impertinence, he attacked the Chief of Staff, the Commander of the Central Front and his division commander for suspending him. He waved his bandaged hand to prove that he was attacked first and acted in self-defense. He even produced confirmation from some doctor that one of his fingers was broken.

That is highly improbable. First of all, the way he holds his rifle in the video would have been impossible with a broken finger. Second, the video shows that his act was not in reaction to any violence. Third, there were several army photographers around, who shot every detail (to be used as evidence if protesters were brought to trial in a military court). If any act of violence had taken place, their videos would have been displayed by the army the same day. Fourth, Eisner similarly struck two women protesters in the face and one male protester on the back- unfortunately off camera.

He fervently insists that he did the right thing. After all, he did break up the demonstration, right?

But he was not entirely without remorse. He publicly admitted that it *“may have been a mistake to act this way in the presence of cameras”*. With this the army and many commentators wholeheartedly agreed: they did not criticize his brutality, but his stupidity.

AS AN individual, Eisner is not very interesting. If armies refrained from enlisting stupid people, where would we be?

The trouble is that Eisner is not an exception, but rather a representative of a norm. There are some excellent people in the army, but Eisner typifies many officers who come out of the military melting pot.

And not only in the army. To paraphrase Jabotinsky: our educational system now produces “a race / stupid and mean and brutal”. How could it be otherwise after 60 years of relentless indoctrination and 45 years of occupation? Every occupation, every oppression of another people, corrupts the occupier and makes the oppressor stupid.

While still a teenager I worked as a clerk for an Oxford-educated, Jewish-British lawyer, many of whose clients were members of the British colonial administration. I found them mostly nice, intelligent and courteous with an engaging sense of humour. Yet the British administration acted with an astonishing lack of intelligence.

At the time I was a member of the Irgun, whose aim was to drive them out of the country. At my home there was an arsenal of guns, which were used to kill them.

Living between the two worlds, I constantly asked myself: how can these nice English people behave so stupidly?

My conclusion was that no colonial masters can behave intelligently. The colonial situation itself compels them to act against their better nature and their better judgement.

As a matter of fact, during the first years of the Israeli occupation, it was widely praised as “enlightened” and “liberal”. The then Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, gave orders to treat the Palestinians as generously as possible. He let them trade with the enemy and listen to enemy broadcasts to their heart’s content. In a gesture without precedent, he kept open the bridges between the West Bank and Jordan, an enemy country.²

Behind this policy there was no benevolence – just a belief that if the Arabs were allowed to live their daily lives in peace, they would not rise up, but put up with an eternal occupation. Indeed this worked more or less for some 20 years. Until a new generation started the first intifada and the occupation became – well, stupid, mean and brutal. Along with the officers in charge.

TWO DAYS ago, Israel observed the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day. In this connection, I would like to quote Albert Einstein, a Jew and a Zionist:

Should we be unable to find a way to honest cooperation and honest pacts with the Arabs, then we have learned absolutely nothing during our two thousand years of suffering and deserve all that will come to us.

²I joked at the time that Dayan, never having read a book, did not know that this was unthinkable.