

“The Darkness to Expel!”

Uri Avnery

December 25th 2010

IT IS easy to despair before the filthy wave of racism that is engulfing us.

The remedy for this despair: the growing number of young people, sons and daughters of the new Israeli generation, who are joining the fight against racism and occupation.

THIS WEEK, several hundred of them gathered in a hall in Tel Aviv (belonging, ironically, to the Zionist Federation of America) to launch a book published by the group “Breaking the Silence”.

In the hall there were some veterans of the peace camp, but the great majority of those present were youngsters in their twenties, male and female, who have completed their military service.

“The Occupation of the Territories” is a book of 344 pages, consisting of almost 200 testimonies by soldiers about the daily and nightly life of the occupation. The soldiers supplied the eyewitness accounts, and the organization, which is composed of ex-soldiers, verified, compared and sifted them. In the end, 183 of some 700 testimonies were selected for publication.

Not even one of these testimonies was denied by the army spokesman, who generally hastens to contradict honest accounts of what is happening in the occupied territories. Since the editors of the book have themselves served as soldiers in these places, it was easy for them to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

The book makes very depressing reading, and not because it details gruesome atrocities. On the contrary, the editors made it a point not to include incidents of exceptional brutality committed by sadists, which can be found in every army unit in Israel and throughout the world. Rather, they wanted to throw light on the grey routine of the occupation.

There are accounts of nocturnal incursions into quiet Palestinian villages as exercises – breaking into random houses where there were no “suspects”, terrorizing children, women and men, creating mayhem in the village – all this to “train” the soldiers. There are stories about the humiliation of passers-by at the checkpoints (“Clean up the checkpoint and you will get your keys back!”), casual harassment (“He started to complain, so I hit him in the face with the butt of my weapon!”). Every testimony is meticulously documented: time, place, unit.

At the launch of the book, some of the testimonies were shown on film, with the witnesses daring to show their faces and identify themselves by their full name. These were no exceptional people, no fanatics or bleeding hearts. No weepers of the “we shoot and we weep” school. Just ordinary young people, who had time to come to grips with their personal experiences.

There are even occasional flashes of humor. Like the tale of the soldier who had for a long time been manning a roadblock between two Palestinian villages, without understanding its purpose or its security value. One day, a bulldozer suddenly

appeared from nowhere, uprooted the concrete blocks and drove off with them, again without any explanation. “They have stolen my roadblock!” the soldier complains, having got used to the place.

The titles of the testimonies speak for themselves: “To produce sleeplessness in the village”, “We used to send neighbors to disarm explosive charges”, “The battalion commander ordered us to shoot anyone trying to remove the bodies”, “The commander of the navy commandos put the muzzle of the rifle into the man’s mouth”, “They told us to shoot at anybody moving in the street”, “You can do whatever you feel like, nobody is going to question it”, “You shoot at the TV set for fun”, “I did not know that there were roads for Jews only”, “A kind of total arbitrariness”, “The [Hebron settler] boys beat up the old woman”, “Arrest the settlers? The army cannot do that”. And so on. Just routine.

The intention of the book is not to uncover atrocities and show the soldiers as monsters. It aims to present a situation: the ruling over another people, with all the high-handed arbitrariness that this necessarily entails, humiliation of the occupied, corruption of the occupier. According to the editors, it is quite impossible for the individual soldier to make a difference. He is just a cog in a machine that is inhuman by its very nature.

GROUPS OF young people who are simply fed up are springing to life in the country. They are signs of an awakening that finds its expression in the daily fight of hundreds of groups devoted to different causes. Only seemingly different – because these causes are essentially bound up with each other. The fight against the occupation, for the refugees who seek shelter in this country, against the demolition of the houses of the Bedouin in the Negev, against the invasion of Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem by settlers, for equal rights for the Arab citizens in Israel, against social injustices, for the preservation of the environment, against government corruption, against religious coercion, etc etc. They have a common denominator: the fight for a different Israel.

Young volunteers for each of these fights - and for all of them together - are needed today more than ever, in face of the racism that is raising its ugly head all over Israel – an open racism, shameless and indeed proud of itself.

The phenomenon by itself is not new. What is new is the loss of any vestige of shame. The racists shout their message on every street corner and earn applause from politicians and rabbis.

It started with the flood of racist bills designed to delegitimize the Arab citizens. “Admission committees”, “loyalty oaths”, and much more. Then came the religious edict of the chief rabbi of Safed, forbidding Jews to let apartments to Arabs. This still caused shock and embarrassment. Since then, however, all the dams have broken. A gang of 14-year old boys ambushed

Arabs in the center of Jerusalem, using a 14-year old girl as bait, and beat them unconscious. Hundreds of rabbis all over the country signed a manifesto forbidding the letting of apartments to “foreigners” (meaning Arabs who have lived in the country for centuries). In Bat Yam, a city bordering Tel Aviv, a stormy demonstration called for the expulsion of all Arabs from the town. Next day, a demonstration in Tel Aviv’s squalid Hatikva quarter demanded the expulsion of refugees and foreign workers from the neighborhood.

Ostensibly, the demonstrations in Bat Yam and Hatikva were aimed at different targets: the first against Arabs, the second against foreign workers. But the same well-known fascist activists appeared and spoke at both, carrying the same placards and shouting the same slogans. The most conspicuous of these was the assertion that the Arabs and the foreigners are endangering Jewish women – the Arabs marry them and take them to their villages, the foreign workers flirt with them. “Jewish Women for the Jewish People!” cried the posters – as if women were property.

The connection between racism and sex has always intrigued researchers. White racists in the US spread the rumor that “niggers” have bigger penises. Among German Nazi newspapers, the most sensationalist was *Der Stürmer*, a pornographic sheet filled with stories about innocent blond girls seduced by the money of crooked-nosed ugly Jews. Its editor, Julius Streicher, was condemned and hanged in Nuremberg.

Some believe that one of the roots of racism is a feeling of sexual inadequacy, the lack of self-confidence of men afraid of sexual impotence and/or competition – the very opposite of the picture of the macho racist he-man. It is enough to look at the racist protesters to draw conclusions.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE famously said that every person is a racist – the difference being between those who admit it to themselves and try to combat it and those who do not.

That is undoubtedly true. I have a simple test for the power of racism: you are driving and somebody cuts your path. If it is a black driver, you say: “Damn nigger!” If it is a woman, you shout: “Go home to your kitchen!” If he wears a kippah, you cry: “Bloody Dos!” (“Dos” is a derogatory Hebrew term for a religious Jew.) If it is a driver without special features, you just shout: “Idiot! Who gave you a driving license?”

The hatred of strangers, the aversion to everyone who is unlike you, are – so it seems – biological traits, remnants from the time of ancient man, when every stranger was a threat to the limited resources the tribe had to depend on. It exists in many other animal species, too. Nothing to be proud of.

The civilized human being, and even more so the civilized human society, has a duty to fight these traits - not only because they are ugly in themselves, but also because they hinder the modernization of the globalized world, in which cooperation between peoples and between people is imperative. It takes us back to the stone age.

The situation here is now moving in the opposite direction: the country is embracing the racist demon. After millennia as the victims of racism, it seems as if Jews here are happy to be able to do unto others what has been done to them.

IT IS impossible to ignore the central role played by rabbis in this filthy mess. They ride the wave and assert that this is the spirit of Judaism. They quote the holy texts at length.

The truth is that Judaism, like almost every religion, includes

racist and anti-racist, humanist and barbarian elements. The Crusaders, who massacred the Jews on their way to the Holy Land and who slaughtered the inhabitants of Jerusalem – Muslims and Jews alike – when they conquered the city, shouted: “God Wills It!” One can find in the New Testament magnificent passages preaching love, side by side with quite different sections. So, too, in the Koran there are Surahs full of love for humankind and calls for justice and equality, as well as others full of intolerance and hatred.

So, too, the Hebrew Bible. The racists quote Rabbi Maimonides, who interpreted two biblical words as a commandment not to let non-Jews reside in the country. The whole Book of Joshua is a call to genocide. The Bible commands the Israelites to murder the entire tribe of Amalek (“both man and woman, infant and suckling”) and the Prophet Samuel dethroned King Saul because he spared the lives of Amalekite prisoners (1 Samuel 15).

But the Hebrew Bible is also a book of unequalled humanity. It starts with the description of the creation of man and woman, stressing that all human beings are created in the image of God – and therefore equal. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he him.” The Bible repeatedly demands the treatment of “Gerim” (foreigners living among the Israelites) as Israelites, “because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt”.

As Gershom Schocken, the owner and long-time editor in chief of *Haaretz*, pointed out in an article republished this week on the 20th anniversary of his death: Ezra did indeed expel the non-Jewish wives from the community, but before that, foreign women played a central role in the Biblical story. Bathsheba was the wife of a Hittite, before she married King David and became the mother of the house from which the Messiah will come in due course (or from which, as Christians believe, Jesus – who was born 2010 years ago today – already came.) David himself was the descendant of Ruth, a Moabite woman. King Ahab, the greatest of Israelite kings, married a Phoenician woman.

When our racists present the ugliest face of Judaism, ignoring its universalist message, they do great damage to the religion of millions of Jews around the world. The most important Jewish rabbis were silent this week in face of the racist fire that was ignited by rabbis, or murmured something about “ways of peace” – referring to the rule forbidding the provocation of Goyim, because they might treat the Jews in their countries as the Jews treat the minorities in their own state. Up to now, no Christian priest has yet called upon his flock not to let apartments to Jews – but it could happen.

The silence of the “Torah sages” is thunderous. Even more so the silence of the country’s political leaders: Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shimon Peres did not roar his outrage, and Binyamin Netanyahu has contented himself with calling upon the racists “not to take the law into their own hands”. Not a single word against racism, not a single word about morality and justice.

WHEN I listened to the ex-soldiers at the “Breaking the Silence” meeting, I was filled with hope. This generation understands its duty to heal the state in which they will spend their lives.

In the words of the Hanukkah song, which is rapidly becoming the anthem of the anti-racist demonstrations: “We come the darkness to expel!”