

The Funeral Ruckus

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SHIMON PERES WOULD have enjoyed it. A public battle about his funeral.

The Arab members of the Knesset did not attend. So what?

I did not attend, either. We never liked each other, and my attendance would have been sheer hypocrisy. I don't like hypocrisy.

The Knesset members of the Joint List decided to boycott the event. They accused Peres of having devoted most of his life to the fight against the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular.¹

This decision to boycott the funeral aroused a storm of protest among the Jewish Knesset members. How dare they? Boycotting the dead Peres is like boycotting Israel! They should be evicted from the Knesset! Let all the other members of the Knesset exit the hall when they speak! (Curiously enough, nobody has yet proposed putting them in prison.)

But the really interesting part of the affair was the inter-Arab debate it unleashed. Some Arab citizens denounced the decision of the Joint List. They were immediately accused by other Arab citizens of being "Good Arabs", a derogatory term for Arabs who crave to be liked by member of the Jewish majority, rather like "Uncle Tom" for blacks in the US.

This debate is still going on. It touches the very foundations of the existence of the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel, which numbers about 20% of the population.

ALL THIS brings me back to my early childhood.

I lived for nine and a half years in the democratic German "Weimar Republik", and another half year in Nazi Germany. We were "German Jews". Meaning: Germans in every respect, Jews only by religion.

In practice it meant that we were Germans, but a different kind of Germans, belonging but not quite belonging, belonging at the same time to some world-wide community called the "Jewish people".

I frequently recall a major event in my life: a patriotic memorial ceremony in high school, some time after the Nazis had come to power. The entire school was assembled in the Aula (assembly hall), and at the end all rose

to sing the national anthem and the Nazi one. Since I was a pupil of the lowest class and younger than all the other pupils of my class, I was the smallest boy in school. I was also the only Jew.

Without thinking I rose like all the others, but did not raise my arm for the Nazi salute and did not sing, as did all the others. One little boy among hundreds of larger ones.

When it was finished, some of the bigger boys threatened me with dire consequences if I did that again. Fortunately, we left for Palestine a few days later.

THIS TINY incident does perhaps help me somehow to understand the feelings of Arab citizens of Israel.

What are they? Israelis? Arabs? Palestinians? Israeli Arabs (a term they detest)? Palestinian Citizens of Israel (as many now prefer to call themselves)? All of these? None of these?

After the war of 1948, during which the State of Israel was founded, and during which some 750,000 Arabs fled or were expelled (and prevented from returning), the population of the new state amounted to 650,000 people, of which 20% were Arabs. By a miracle (or Jewish immigration), this percentage has remained unchanged to this day, in spite of the much higher Arab birth rate.

After the foundation of Israel, all Arab towns and villages in the new state were subject to a "military government", a regime that did not apply to any specific territory, but only to the Arab inhabitants. It meant that no Arab was allowed to leave their village or township without written permission, even if it meant only a visit to a cousin in the next village. No transaction, whether an import license for a tractor or permission to send a daughter to teachers' college, could be effected without written permission.

This detestable regime lasted for 18 years. Jewish Israelis of the peace camp and the bi-national Communist Party were actively engaged in attempts to terminate it. I took part in dozens of demonstrations, and even devised the emblem of the campaign (a simple "x").

AS long as David Ben-Gurion was in power, assisted by Shimon Peres, our protests came to naught. Only when both were kicked out by their own party was the military government abolished. The Shin Bet (secret internal se-

¹The Joint List is composed of three Arab parties, who mostly detest each other. They were compelled to join forces in Parliament by a law initiated by far-right (some would say fascist) minister Avigdor Lieberman, which raised the election threshold for entering the Knesset. Therefore it is a Joint List, not a United List.

curity service), by the way, advocated abolition—arguing that it did more harm than good, that the service could do its job better without it.

During those years I was closely connected with the Arab community, making many friends in Arab towns and villages. I had Arabs on the staff of my magazine, which was unusual at the time, and when I set up a new party, we had Arab candidates and voters.

Unfortunately, I have neglected these connections since the 6-day war of 1967, when Israel seized the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. I became completely engrossed in the fight for the creation of a Palestinian state and for human rights in the occupied territories.

SO WHAT is the situation of the Arab citizens in Israel proper?

There are two descriptions.

One is that they are equal to all other citizens of Israel, the “Jewish and Democratic State”.

The other is that they are a mistreated minority, downtrodden and discriminated against, eking out a miserable life.

Which picture is true?

Years ago, long before Avigdor Lieberman became Minister of Defense and could still say what he wanted, idiotic or otherwise, he made a startling proposal: to set up a Palestinian state and join to it the adjacent Israeli territories inhabited by Arabs, in exchange for West Bank areas inhabited by Jewish settlers.

According to this proposal, many of the Arabs who are now citizens of Israel would become part of the future State of Palestine together with all their lands, villages and towns. Wonderful.

But the reaction among the Arabs in Israel was a furious outcry. Not one single Arab voice was raised in favor of it.

Why? The average income of Israeli citizens, including the Arabs, is more than ten times higher than that of the Arab inhabitants of the occupied territories. Human and civil rights are incomparably more secure.

There are in Israel Arab chiefs of hospital medical departments. Arab male nurses are uniquely lauded. There is a highly respected Arab member of the Supreme Court, who is sending Jewish ministers to prison. There are Arab professors in the universities.

So Arab citizens enjoy full equality?

Far from it. They are discriminated against in innumerable ways. Arab municipalities receive much lower government subsidies than their Jewish neighbors. Arab schools suffer generally from a lower standard (though a few are high up the list). Bedouin villages are destroyed

and forcibly relocated. No Jewish party would ever dream of including the Joint List in a government coalition.

The average standard of living of Arab citizens is lower than that of Jewish citizens, though still much higher than in the occupied territories and most Arab countries.

But even more important: Arab citizens are made to feel every minute of their lives that this is a “Jewish state”, that the state does not belong to them, that at best they are tolerated. They are compelled to sing a national anthem that has nothing to do with them (“As long as a Jewish soul. . .”)—reminding me of my own singing incident as a boy. The flag and all the other symbols of the state are exclusively Jewish.

Yet several Arab friends revealed to me in private that when they visit relatives in the West Bank, they feel a sense of superiority. But when they go to the Tel Aviv seashore, which they rarely do, they dare not speak Arabic.

Altogether, a very mixed picture, far from the simple slogans of either side.

NO NATIONAL minority in the world feels entirely happy. It seems to go against human nature.

In the first years of the state, the Arab minority was subservient. Most of its members in the Knesset were quislings of Zionist parties. One member, Abd-al-Aziz Zoabi, complained: “My country is at war with my people!”

Almost all Jewish Israelis, including almost all parties, denied the very existence of a Palestinian people. “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people,” Golda Meir famously declared. I myself have spent thousands of hours of my life trying to convince Israeli audiences that there is a Palestinian people, and that there will be no peace without it.

These days are long past. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are now a strong, proud community. Another Zoabi, Hanin, is driving Jews mad with fury by her provocative antics.

But if we hoped for many years that this Arab community would become a “bridge” between Israel and the Arab world, this hope is long lost. (“A bridge is something people trample on,” an Arab friend once told me.) Worse, the abyss between the Arab and the Jewish citizens inside Israel is growing wider and deeper all the time.

In my eyes, this is a tragedy. If all the prejudices were to disappear, and if peace between Israel and Palestine came about, Jews and Arabs in Israel proper could easily fuse into one Israeli public.

One thing is quite certain: there will be no change for the better in Israel, no change of government and policy, unless the Arab citizens and their representatives become an integral part of the new peace force without which there is no hope.

Well, I'm an optimist.