

The New Protest

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RABIN SQUARE IN Tel Aviv has seen many demonstrations, but none quite like last Saturday's.

It has nothing to do with the event which gave the square its name: the huge rally for peace at the end of which Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. It was different in every respect.

It was a joyous occasion. Dozens of NGOs, many of them small, some of them slightly larger, each with a different agenda, came together in an effort to restart last year's social protest. But it was not a continuation of last year's Israeli Spring by any means.

Last year's upheaval was quite unplanned. A young woman, Daphni Leef, could not pay her rent and so she put up a small tent in Rothschild Boulevard, five minutes' walk from Rabin Square. She had obviously struck a chord, because within days hundreds of tents had sprung up in the boulevard and all over the country. It ended in a huge demonstration, called the "March of Half a Million", which led to the setting up of a government commission, which made a list of suggestions to relieve social injustice. Only a small fraction of them were put into practice.

The whole effort called itself "apolitical", rebuffed politicians of all stripes, and resolutely refused to deal with any national problem such as peace (what's that?), occupation, settlements and such.

All decisions were made by an anonymous leadership grouped around Daphni. Some of the names became known, others did not. The masses who took part were quite content to accept their dictates.

NO MORE. This year's new initiative has no obvious leadership at all. There was no central tribune, no central speakers. It resembled London's Hyde Park Corner, where anyone can climb on a chair and preach his or her gospel. Each group had its own stand where its flyers were displayed, each had its own name, its own agenda, its own speakers and its own guides (since we should not call them leaders).

Since the square is big and the audience amounted to some thousands, it worked. Many different – and some contradictory – versions of social justice were advocated, from a group called "Revolution of Love" (everybody should love everybody) to a group of anarchists (all governments are bad, elections are bad, too).

They all agreed only on one point: they were all "apolitical", all shrank back from the taboo subjects (see above).

Gideon Levy called the scene "chaotic" and was immediately attacked by the protesters as lacking understanding (with a hint that he was too old to understand). Chaos is wonderful. Chaos is real democracy. It gives the people their voice back. There are no leaders who steal and exploit the protest for their own careers and egos. It's the way the New Generation expresses itself.

IT ALL reminded me of a happy period – the 60s of the last century, when almost none of this week's protesters was yet born, or even "in the planning stage" (as Israelis like to put it).

At the time, Paris was seized by a passion for social and political protest. There was no common ideology, no unified vision of a new social order. At the Odeon theatre an endless and uninterrupted debate was going on, day after day, while outside, demonstrators threw cobblestones at the police, who beat them up with the leaden seams of their overcoats. Everyone was elated, it was clear that a new epoch in human history had begun.

Claude Lanzmann, the secretary of Jean-Paul Sartre and lover of Simone de Beauvoir, and who later directed the monumental film "Shoah", described the atmosphere to me like this: "The students burnt the cars in the streets. In the evenings I parked my car at distant places. But one evening I told myself: What the hell, what do I need a car for? Let them burn it!"

But while the Left was talking, the Right gathered its forces under Charles de Gaulle, a million Rightists marched down the Champs Elisees. The protest petered out, leaving only a vague longing for a better world.

The protest was not limited to Paris. Its spirit infected many other cities and countries. In lower Manhattan, youth reigned supreme. Provocative posters were sold in the streets of the Village, young men and women wore humorous buttons on their chests.

On the whole, the vague movement had vague results. Without a concrete agenda, it had no concrete results. De Gaulle fell some time later for other reasons. In the US, the people elected Richard Nixon. In public consciousness, some things changed, but for all the revolutionary talk, there was no revolution.

ON SATURDAY'S rally, young Daphni Leef and her comrades wandered around in the crowd like a relic from the past, hardly noticed. After only one year, it seemed as if a new New Generation was taking over from yesteryear's New Generation.

It was not that they were unable to unite around a common agenda – rather, they did not see the virtue, or even the necessity of having a common agenda, a common organization, common leadership. All these are, in their eyes, bad things, attributes of the old, corrupt, discredited regime. Away with them!

I am not quite sure what I think about it.

On the one hand, I like it very much. New energies are released. A young generation that seemed egoistic, apathetic and indifferent, suddenly shows that it cares.

For years now, I have expressed my hope that the young people would create something new, with a new vocabulary, new definitions, new slogans, new leaders, that are totally divorced from today's party structures and government coalitions. A new beginning. The beginning of the Second Israeli Republic.

So I should be happy, watching a dream coming true.

And indeed, I am happy about this new development. Israel needs basic social reforms. The gap between very rich and very poor is intolerable. A broad new social movement, even with so much diversity, is a good thing.

Social Justice is a leftist demand and always has been. A demonstration shouting "The People Demand Social Justice" is leftist, even if it wants to avoid this stigma.

But the adamant refusal to enter the political arena and proclaim a political agenda is disturbing. This could mean that it will all peter out just like last year's effort.

When the demonstrators insist that they are "apolitical" - what do they mean? If it means that they do not identify themselves with any existing political party, I can only applaud. If it is a tactical ploy, in order to attract people from all existing camps, ditto. But if it is a serious determination to leave the political arena to others, I must condemn it.

Social justice is a political aim par excellence. It means, among other things, to take away money from other uses and devote it to social purposes. In Israel, it inevitably means taking away money from the huge military budget, as well as from the settlement drive, from the subsidies paid as a bribe to the Orthodox and from the parasitic tycoons.

Where can this be done? Only in the Knesset. To get there, you need a political party. So you have to be political. Period.

An "apolitical" protest, avoiding the burning questions of our national existence, is something that is outrageously divorced from reality.

Last year I compared the social protest to a mutiny on board the Titanic. I could expand on this. Imagine the wonderful ship on its maiden voyage with all the lively activity on board. The band throws away the old-fashioned music of Mozart and Schubert, replacing it with hard rock. Anarchists dismiss the captain and elect a new captain every day. Others reject the Boat Drill - a ridiculous exercise on the "unsinkable" ship - and organize sport events instead. Also the scandalous difference between first class and the steering passengers is abolished. And so on. All deserving causes.

But somewhere along the route there lurks an iceberg.

Israel is heading towards an iceberg, bigger than any of those in the path of the Titanic. It is not hidden. All its parts are clearly visible from afar. Yet we are sailing straight towards it, full steam ahead. If we don't change course, the State of Israel will destroy itself - turning first into an apartheid-state monster from the Mediterranean to the Jordan, and later, perhaps, into a bi-national Arab-majority state from the Jordan to the Mediterranean.

Does this mean that we must give up the struggle for social justice? Certainly not. The fight for social solidarity, for better education, for improved medical services, for the poor and the handicapped, must go on, every day, every hour.

But to be successful this struggle must be a part - politically and ideologically - of the wider struggle for the future of Israel, for ending the occupation, for peace.