

The Terrible Problem

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ZE'EV BEGIN, THE son of Menachem Begin, is a very nice human being. It is impossible not to like him. He is well brought up, polite and modest, the kind of person one would like to have as a friend.

Unfortunately, his political views are far less likeable. They are much more extreme than even the acts of his father. The father, after leading the Irgun, sat down and made peace with Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt. Ze'ev is closer to Golda Me'ir, who ignored Sadat's peace overtures and led us into the disastrous Yom Kippur war.

Begin jr. is a strict follower of the "revisionist" Zionist creed founded by Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky. One of the characteristics of this movement has always been the importance it gave to written texts and declarations. The labor movement, headed by David Ben-Gurion, didn't give a damn about words and declarations and respected only "facts on the ground".

Last week, Ze'ev Begin wrote one of his rare articles. Its main purpose was to prove that peace with the Palestinians is impossible, a pipe-dream of Israeli peace-lovers (Haaretz 9.10). Quoting numerous Palestinian texts, speeches and even schoolbooks, Begin shows that the Palestinians will never, never, never give up their "Right of Return".

Since such a return would entail the end of the Jewish State, Begin asserts, peace is a pipe dream. There will never be peace. End of story.

A SIMILAR point is made by another profound thinker, Alexander Jakobson, in another important article in Haaretz (9.26). It is directed against me personally, and its headline asserts that I am "True to Israel, but Not to the Truth". It accuses me of being tolerant towards the BDS movement, which is out to put an end to Israel.

How does he know? Simple: BDS confirms the Palestinians' "Right of Return", which, as everybody knows, means the destruction of the Jewish State.

Well, actually I object to BDS for several reasons. The movement to which I belong, Gush Shalom, was the first (in 1997) to declare a boycott of the settlements. Our aim was to separate the Israeli people from the settlements. The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, by boycotting all of Israel, achieves the opposite effect: it

pushes the Israeli people into the arms of the settlers.

I also don't like to call on people to boycott me.

But of all the points in the BDS platform, the one that bothers me the least is the demand that the State of Israel recognize the Palestinians' Right of Return. It is simply ridiculous. Not in a thousand years will the BDS compel Israel to do so. So why bother?

LET' US FIRST throw some light on the issue.

When the British withdrew from Palestine in 1948, there were in the country between the Mediterranean and the Jordan about 1.2 million Arabs and 635,000 Jews. By the end of the war that ensued, some 700,000 Arabs had fled and/or were driven out. It was a war of what was (later) called "ethnic cleansing". Few Arabs were left in the territory conquered by Jewish arms, but it should be remembered that no Jews at all were left in the territory conquered by Arab arms. Fortunately for our side, the Arabs succeeded in occupying only small slices of land inhabited by Jews (such as the Etzion bloc, East Jerusalem et al.), while our side conquered large, inhabited territories. As a combat soldier, I saw it with my own eyes.

The Arab refugees multiplied by natural increase, and today number about 6 million. About 1.5 million of them live in the occupied West Bank, about a million in the Gaza Strip, the rest are dispersed in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and all over the world.

Would they all come back, if given the opportunity? Let us consider this.

YEARS AGO, I had a unique experience.

I was invited to give a lecture in New York. To my pleasant surprise, in the front row I saw a good friend of mine, the young Arab poet Rashid Hussein. Rashid was born in a village near Nazareth. He begged me to come and visit him in his New Jersey apartment.

When I arrived, I was flabbergasted, The small apartment was crowded with people—Palestinian refugees of all kinds, young and old, men and women. We had a long and extremely emotional discussion on the refugee issue.

When we drove home, I told my wife: "You know what I felt? That only a few of them really care to return, but that all of them were ready to die for their right to return!"

Rachel, a very keen observer, replied that she had the

same impression.

TODAY, DOZENS of years later, I am convinced that this basic truth is still valid: there is a huge difference between the principle and its implementation.

The principle cannot be denied. It belongs to the individual refugee. It is safeguarded by international law. It is sacred.

Any future peace treaty between the state of Israel and the State of Palestine will have to include a paragraph saying that Israel affirms in principle the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees and their descendents.

No Palestinian leader could possibly sign a treaty that does not include this clause.

Only after this obstacle has been removed from the table, can the real discussion about the solution start.

I can imagine the scene: after agreement has been reached on this at the peace conference, the chairperson will take a deep breath and say, "Now, friends, let's get to the real issue. How shall we solve the refugee problem in practice?"

The six million Palestinian refugees constitute six million individual situations. There are many categories of refugees. No single solution can apply to all.

There are many refugees—perhaps most of them—who during the last 50 years have built for themselves a new life in another country. For these, the right of return is—well—a principle. They would not dream of going back to their ancestral village, even if it were still there. Some of them are well-to-do, some are rich, some very rich.

One of the richest is my friend (may I call you so?) Salman Abu Sitta, who started life as a barefoot boy in the Negev, fled in 1948 with his family to Gaza and later became an immensely successful contractor in Britain and the Gulf. We met at a peace conference, had a long and emotional private dinner afterwards and did not agree.

Abu Sitta insists that all refugees must be allowed to return to Israel, even if they are to be settled in the Negev desert. I do not see the practical logic in this.

I have had hundreds of discussions about solutions with Palestinians, from Yasser Arafat down to people in

the refugee camps. The great majority nowadays would sign a formula that seeks a "just and agreed solution of the refugee problem"—"agreed" includes Israel.

This formula appears in the "Arab Peace Plan" devised by Saudi Arabia and officially accepted by the entire Muslim world.

How would this look in practice? It means that every refugee family would be offered a choice between actual return and adequate compensation.

Return—where? In a few extraordinary instances, their original village still stands empty. I can imagine some symbolic reconstruction of such villages—say two or three—by their former inhabitants.

An agreed number must be allowed to return to the territory of Israel, especially if they have relatives here, who can help them to strike roots again.

This is a hard thing for Israelis to swallow—but not too hard. Israel already has some 2 million Arab citizens, more than 20% of the population. Another—say—quarter million would make no real difference.

All the others would be paid generous compensation. They could use that to consolidate their lives where they are, or emigrate to places like Australia and Canada, which would gladly receive them (with their money).

About 1.5 million refugees live in the West Bank and Gaza. Another large number live in Jordan and are Jordanian citizens. Some still live in refugee camps. For all of them, compensation would be welcome.

Where will the money come from? Israel must pay its share (at the same time reducing its huge military budget). The world organizations will have to contribute a large part.

IS THIS feasible? Yes, it is.

I dare say more: if the atmosphere is right, it is even probable. Contrary to Begin's belief in texts written today by demagogues to serve today's purposes, once the process starts rolling, a solution like this—more or less—is almost unavoidable.

And let's not forget for a moment: these "refugees" are human beings.