

Uri Avnery

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Vox Taxi – Vox Dei

ON SATURDAY evening, two weeks ago, we returned by taxi from the annual memorial rally for Yitzhak Rabin, and as usual got into a conversation with our driver.

Generally, these conversations flow smoothly, with lots of laughs. Rachel loves them, because they bring us face-to-face with people we don't normally meet. The conversations are necessarily short, the people express their views concisely, without choosing their words. They are of many kinds, and in the background we generally hear the radio news, talk shows or music chosen by the driver. And, of course, the soldier-son and the student-daughter are mentioned.

But this time, things were less smooth. Perhaps we were more provocative than usual, still depressed by the rally, which was devoid of political content, devoid of emotion, devoid of hope. The driver became more and more upset, and so did Rachel. We felt that if we had not been paying customers, it might have ended in a fight.

THE VIEWS of our driver can be summed up as follows:

There will never be peace between us and the Arabs, because the Arabs don't want it.

The Arabs want to slaughter us, always did and always will.

Every Arab learns from early childhood that the Jews must be killed.

The Koran preaches murder.

Fact, wherever there are Muslims, there is terrorism. Wherever there is terrorism, there are Muslims.

We must not give the Arabs one square inch of the country.

What did we get when we gave them Gaza back? We got Qassam rockets!

There's nothing to be done about it. Only to hit them on the head and send them back to the countries they came from.

According to the Talmudic injunction: He who comes to kill you, kill him first.

THIS DRIVER expressed in simple and unvarnished language the standard convictions of the great majority of Jews in the country.

It is not something that can be identified with any one part of society. It is common to all sectors. The owner of a stall in the market will express it crudely, a professor will set it down in a learned treatise with numbered footnotes. A senior army officer regards it as self-evident, a politician bases his election campaign on it.

This is the real obstacle facing the Israeli peace camp today. Once upon a time, the discussion was about whether a Palestinian people exists at all. That's already behind us. After that we had to discuss "Greater Israel" and "Liberated Territory Will Not Be Given Back". We overcame. Then there was the discussion about whether to return the "Territories" to King Hussein or to a Palestinian state to be established next to Israel. We overcame. After that, whether to negotiate with the PLO, which was defined as a terrorist organization, and with the arch-terrorist, Yasser Arafat. We overcame. All the leaders of the nation later stood in line to shake his hand. Then there was the quarrel about the "price" – return to the Green Line? Swap of territories? A compromise in Jerusalem? Evacuate settlements? That is also largely behind us.

All these debates were, more or less, rational. Of course, deep emotions were involved, but so was logic.

But how to speak with people who believe wholeheartedly that the discussion itself is irrelevant? That it is divorced from reality?

In the eyes of our conversation partners, questions about whether it is worthwhile to make peace or not, whether peace is good or bad for the Jews, are meaningless, if not downright stupid. Questions which make no sense, since we are having a debate only with ourselves.

There will never be peace, because the Arabs will never want peace. End of discussion.

WHO IS to blame for this attitude? If there is one person who is guilty more than anyone else, it is Ehud Barak.

If there existed an international court for peace crimes, like the international court for war crimes, we should have to send him there.

When Barak won his landslide victory against Binyamin Netanyahu in 1999, he had no idea about the Palestinian problem. He talked as if he had never had a serious conversation with a Palestinian. But he promised to achieve peace within months, and more than a hundred thousand jubilant people acclaimed

him on the evening of election day in the square where Rabin had been murdered.

Barak was certain that he knew exactly what to do: summon Arafat to a meeting and offer him a Palestinian state. Arafat would thank him with tears in his eyes and give up everything else.

But when the Camp David conference convened, he was shocked to see that the Palestinians, evil as they were, had some demands of their own. The conference ended in failure.

Coming home, Barak did not declare: "Sorry, I was ignorant. I shall try to do better." There are not many leaders in the world who admit to stupidity.

A normal politician would have said: "This conference has not borne fruit, but there was some progress. There will be more meetings, and we shall try to bridge the differences."

But Barak produced a mantra that every Israeli has since heard a thousand times: "I have turned every stone on the way to peace / I have offered the Palestinians unprecedented generous offers / The Palestinians have rejected everything / They want to throw us into the sea / WE HAVE NO PARTNER FOR PEACE!"

If Netanyahu had said something like this, nobody would have been impressed. But Barak had appointed himself the leader of the Left, the head of the peace camp.

The result was disastrous: the Left collapsed, the peace camp almost disappeared. Barak himself lost the elections by a landslide, and justly so: if there is no chance for peace, who needs him? Why vote for him? After all, Ariel Sharon, his adversary in the elections, was much better qualified for war.

The result: the ordinary Israeli was finally convinced that there is no chance for peace. Even Barak said that there is no partner. So that's that.

NO SINGLE person, even a genius like Barak, would have been able to bring about such a disaster if the conditions had not been there.

The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians began 130 years ago. A fifth and sixth generation have been born into it. A war deepens myths and prejudices, hatred and distrust, demonization of the enemy and blind conviction of one's own righteousness. That is the nature of war. On both sides it shapes a closed and fanatical world, which no alternative views can penetrate.

Consequently, if an Arab declares his willingness to make peace, this only confirms that all Arabs are liars. (And conversely: if an Israeli offers a compromise, this

only reinforces the Palestinian's belief that there is no limit to the tricks of the Zionist Enemy, which is plotting to drive them out.)

AND WHAT is most important, the belief that "we have no partner for peace" is extremely convenient.

If there is no chance for peace, there is no need to rack our brains about it, much less to do anything about it.

No need to waste words on this silliness. Indeed, the very word "peace" has gone out of fashion. It is no longer mentioned in polite political society. At most, one speaks about "the end of the occupation" or "the final status settlement" – presenting both, of course, as quite impossible.

If there is no chance for peace, the whole matter can be forgotten. It's unpleasant to think about the Palestinians and what is happening to them in the "Territories". So let's devote all our attention (which has a limited span anyhow) to the really important matters, such as the squabble between Barak and Ashkenazi, Olmert's business affairs, the fatal road accidents and the critical state of the Lake of Tiberias.

And while we are at it, if there is no chance for peace, why not build settlements? Why not Judaize East Jerusalem? Why not forget about the Palestinians altogether?

If there is no chance for peace, what are all these bleeding hearts in the world lecturing us for? Why is Obama bothering us? Why is the UN boring us? If the Arabs want to massacre us, we clearly have to defend ourselves, and everybody who wants us to make peace with them is nothing but an anti-Semite or self-hating Jew.

THE HEBREW saying "The voice of the masses is like the voice of God" is derived from the Latin "vox populi, vox dei" ("the voice of the people, the voice of God"). It was first used by an Anglo-Saxon clergyman some 1200 years ago in a letter to the Emperor Charlemagne, and in a negative way: one should not listen to those who say this, since "the feelings of the masses always border on madness".

I am not prepared to subscribe to such an anti-democratic statement. But if we want to move towards peace, we undoubtedly have to remove this huge rock blocking the road. We must infuse the public with another belief – the belief that peace is possible, that it is essential for the future of Israel, that it depends mainly on us.

We shall never succeed in inspiring such a belief through routine discussions. Anwar Sadat taught us that it can be done, but only through dramatic actions that rock the foundations of our spiritual world.

For the attention of Mr. Obama. Uri Avnery