

Wistful Eyes

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THE WHOLE WORLD watched with bated breath while the days passed. Then the hours. Then the minutes.

The world watched while the condemned man, Muhammad Abu-Ali of Qalqiliya, waited for his execution.

Abu-Ali was a convicted terrorist. He had bought a knife and killed four members of a family in a nearby Jewish settlement. He had acted alone in a fit of anger, after his beloved cousin, Ahmed, was shot and killed by the Israeli border police during a demonstration.

This is an imaginary case. But it resembles very much what would happen if a real case that is now pending were to take this turn.

THERE IS no death penalty in Israel. It was abolished during the first years of the state, when the execution of Jewish underground fighters (called “terrorists” by the British) was still fresh in everybody’s mind.

It was a solemn and festive occasion. After the vote, in an unplanned outburst of emotion, the entire Knesset rose and stood at attention for a minute. In the Knesset, such expressions of emotion, like applause, are forbidden.

On that day I was proud of my state, the state for which I had spilled my blood.

BEFORE THAT day, two people had been executed in Israel.

The first was shot during the early days of the state. A Jewish engineer was accused of passing information to the British, who passed it on to Arabs. Three military officers constituted themselves as a military court and condemned him to death. Later it was found that the man was innocent.

The second death sentence was passed on Adolf Eichmann, an Austrian Nazi who in 1944 directed the deportation of Hungarian Jews to the death camps. He was not very high up in the Nazi hierarchy, just a lieutenant-colonel (“Obersturmbannführer”) in the SS. But he was the only Nazi officer with whom Jewish leaders came into direct contact. In their minds, he was a monster.

When he was kidnapped in Argentina and brought to Jerusalem, he looked like an average bank clerk, not very impressive and not very intelligent. When he was condemned to death, I wrote an article asking myself whether I was in favor of his execution. I said: “I dare not say yes

and I dare not say no.” He was hanged.

A PERSONAL confession: I cannot kill a cockroach. I am unable to kill a fly. That is not a conscious aversion. It is almost physical.

It was not always so. When I had just turned 15, I joined a “terrorist” organization, the Irgun (“National Military Organization”), which at the time killed lots of people, including women and children, at Arab markets in retaliation for the killing of Jews in the Arab rebellion.

I was too young to be employed in the actions themselves, but my comrades and I distributed leaflets proudly proclaiming the actions. So I certainly was an accomplice, until I left the organization because I started to disapprove of “terrorism”.

But the real change in my character occurred after I was wounded in the 1948 war. For several days and nights I lay in my hospital bed, unable to eat, drink or sleep, just thinking. The result was my inability to take the life of any living being, including humans.

So, naturally, I am a deadly enemy of the death penalty. I greeted with all my heart its abolition by the Knesset (before I became a member of that not-very-august body).

But a few days ago, somebody remembered that the death penalty was not really quite abolished. An obscure paragraph in the military code has remained in force. Now there is an outcry for its application.

The occasion is the murder of three members of a Jewish family in a settlement. The Arab assailant was wounded but not killed on the spot, as usually happens.

The entire right-wing clique that governs Israel now broke out in a chorus of demands for the death penalty. Binyamin Netanyahu joined the chorus, as did most members of his cabinet.

Netanyahu’s attitude can easily be understood. He has no principles. He goes with the majority of his base. At the moment he is deeply involved in a huge corruption affair concerning the acquisition of German-built submarines. His political fate hangs in the balance. No time for moral quibbles.

PUTTING ASIDE, for the moment, my personal mental disabilities concerning the death penalty, judging the problem on a rational basis shows that it is a huge mistake.

The execution of a person who is considered a patriot

by their own people arouses profound anger and a deep desire for revenge. For every person put to death, a dozen others arise to take their place.

I speak from experience. As already mentioned, I joined the Irgun when I was hardly 15. A few weeks before, the British had hanged a young Jew, Shlomo Ben-Yossef, who had shot at an Arab bus full of women and children, without hitting anyone. He was the first Jew in Palestine to be executed.

Later on, after I had already forsworn “terrorism”, I still felt emotionally involved whenever the British hanged another Jewish “terrorist”.¹

ANOTHER ARGUMENT against the death penalty is the one I described at the beginning of this piece: the inherent dramatic effect of this penalty.

From the moment a death sentence is passed, the entire world, not to mention the entire country, gets involved. From Timbuktu to Tokyo, from Paris to Pretoria, millions of people, who have no interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, get aroused. The fate of the condemned man starts to dominate their lives.

Israeli embassies will be deluged by messages from good people. Human rights organizations everywhere will get involved. Street demonstrations will take place in many cities and grow from week to week.

The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people, until then a minor news item in newspapers and on TV news, will be the center of attention. Editors will send special correspondents, pundits will weigh in. Some heads of state will be tempted to approach the president of Israel and plead for clemency.

As the date of execution grows nearer, the pressure will grow. In colleges and in churches, calls to boycott Israel will become shrill. Israeli diplomats will send urgent alarms to the Foreign Office in Jerusalem. Embassies will strengthen anti-terror precautions.

The Israeli government will meet in urgent emergency sessions. Some ministers will advise commuting the sentence. Others will argue that that would show weakness and encourage terror. Netanyahu, as usual, will be unable to decide.

I KNOW that this line of argument may lead to a wrong conclusion: to kill Arab assailants on the spot.

Indeed, this is a second discussion tearing Israel apart at the moment: the case of Elor Azaria, a soldier and field medic, who shot at close range a wounded Arab assailant lying on the ground and bleeding profusely. A military court sentenced Azaria to a year and half in jail, and the sentence was confirmed on appeal. Many people want him released. Others, including Netanyahu again, want his sentence commuted.

Azaria and his entire family are enjoying themselves hugely at the center of national attention. They believe that he did the right thing, according to an unwritten dictum that no Arab “terrorist” should be allowed to remain alive.

Actually, this was openly pronounced years ago by the then Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir (who himself, as a leader of the Lehi underground, was one of the most successful “terrorists” of the 20th century). For that he did not need to be very intelligent.

FROM WHATEVER angle one looks at it, the death sentence is a barbaric and stupid measure. It has been abolished by all civilized countries, except some US states (which can hardly be called civilized).

Whenever I think about this subject, the immortal lines of Oscar Wilde in his “Ballad of Reading Gaol” come to my mind. Observing a fellow prisoner, a convicted murderer, awaiting his execution, Wilde wrote:

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon the little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky...

¹I take pride in having invented the only scientifically sound definition of “terrorism”: “A freedom fighter is on my side, a terrorist is on the other side.”