

The Son of my Eyes

Uri Avnery

November 29, 2014

THE PRESIDENT OF Israel was aghast. Ruviv Rivlin, who was recently elected to the high but largely ceremonial post, is far from being a leftist. On the contrary, this scion of a family that has been living in Jerusalem for seven generations, believes in a Jewish state in all the country from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan river.

But Rivlin is a true liberal. When he read The Poem he was shocked to the depths of his soul. Then he remembered that the writer of this masterpiece had been invited to the President's residence to read from his works. He was promptly disinvited.

For this the President was attacked from many quarters. How dare he? What about artistic freedom?

THE "POET" in question is one Amir Benayoun, a popular "oriental" folk singer. "Oriental" music, in this context, means the melodies preferred by oriental Jews, based on the Arab music of their former homelands with primitive lyrics about love and such.

The professional fortunes of Benayoun were declining, but The Poem restored them, and how! It became the center of a stormy national debate, all the media discussed it at length, even Haaretz printed it verbatim. Politicians, commentators and everyone else who respects himself or herself praised or condemned it.

The imaginary narrator of The Poem is an Arab named Ahmed, who dreams about killing Jews, especially Jewish babies.

My own translation:

Salaam Aleikum I am called Ahmed / And I live in Jerusalem / I study at the university a thing or two / Who enjoys all the worlds like me? / Today I am moderate and smiling / Tomorrow I shall ascend to heaven / I shall send to hell a Jew or two / It's true that I am just ungrateful scum / That's true, but I am not to blame, I grew up without love / The moment will come when you turn your back to me / And then I shall stick into you the sharpened axe.

I am Ahmed living in the central region / I work near a kindergarten and am responsible for gas containers / Who like me enjoys two worlds? / Today I am here and tomorrow they will not be here / Many of them, very many of them will not / It's true that I am nothing but ungrateful scum / That's true, but I am not to blame, I grew up without love / It's true that the moment will come when you turn your back to me / And then I shall stick into you the sharpened axe / It's true that I am nothing but ungrateful scum / That's true, but I am not to blame, I grew up without love

It's true that the moment will come when you turn your back to me / And then I shall shoot you straight in the back

SUBSTITUTE DAVID for Ahmed and Berlin or Paris for Jerusalem and you have a perfect anti-Semitic poem. It is totally

certain that the Bundespräsident would not invite the author for tea in his residence.

But the president of Israel was attacked from all sides for canceling the invitation. The rightists attacked him for rebuffing a true patriot, many leftist do-gooders disapproved in the name of freedom of creation and universal tolerance.

When I was a nine-year old in Germany, I heard the catchy song "When Jewish blood spurts from the knife / Everything will be twice as good". If the author was still alive, would German liberals demand that he should be accorded artistic freedom?

Benayoun (39) bears an Arab name. Benayoun derives from the Arab term of endearment "Son of (my) Eyes". His first name sounds like the Arab title Amir (prince), though written differently. He was born in a Beersheba slum, his parents are immigrants from Morocco. They could be called Arab Jews, as my parents were called German Jews.

Benayoun was not a fanatic to start with. But when his brother adopted a more extreme form of the Jewish religion, he followed suit. This procedure, called "Return to the Faith", is almost always accompanied by a rabid racism.

The poet claims that his spiritual master is the Messiah. He does not carry amulets, only a dollar bill given to him by the late (?) Rabbi of Lubavitch who, his US followers claim, is the Messiah and did not die.

Benayoun's poetic masterpiece of sheer, undiluted hatred reflects the mood of a large part of Israeli Jews at this point in time. The latest events in Jerusalem have created a climate in which racist hatred can raise its ugly head without shame.

THE CENTER of racism is the government itself. It is completely dominated by the most extreme Right—indeed, there is nothing to the right of it.

From its inauguration, it seems that this government has done nothing but enacting racist laws (apart from the Gaza war, of course). Almost every week we hear about an initiative to make yet another new law, worse than the last, if that is possible.

Just three days ago the Minister of Home Security, a minion of Avigdor Lieberman, initiated a law which would define the Arab Temple Guard as an "unlawful organization"—the equivalent of a terrorist group. This guard is employed by the Waqf (Muslim charitable association) which is in charge of the Temple Mount by international agreement (with Jordan).

The Guard cannot defend the Holy Shrines against the Israeli police, but it can warn Muslims of the approach of Jews who come to pray, which is forbidden. Removing the Guard would tighten even more the grip of Jewish fanatics and cynical politicians on the Mount.

This measure, at this precise moment, is a direct provocation. It confirms the darkest Muslim fears that Israel is about to change the status quo and turn the Mount into a Jewish prayer site.

Why would a police minister do so just now, when Jerusalem is in flames and the entire Muslim world is rallying to the defense of the Holy Shrines? Is he out of his mind?

Not at all. It is just that he must compete with other politicians in grabbing headlines. And, as Benayoun is now showing, hatred of “the Arabs” is the hottest article on the market.

Then there is the proposed law that would allow the Knesset majority to annul the Knesset membership of any deputy who “favors the armed struggle against Israel”. Who decides? The Knesset majority, of course. It would act as prosecutor, judge and executioner at the same time.

This bill is clearly aimed at Haneen Zuabi, a provocative female Arab member, who has already been banned from the Knesset for half a year (except for voting).

Another measure is the annulment of residence in Jerusalem for terrorists and their families. (Arabs in annexed East Jerusalem were not accorded citizenship, but only “permanent residency”. This can be revoked any time.)

This week the residence status of a local Arab was indeed revoked. He was accused of having driven another Arab to Tel Aviv, where the passenger carried out a suicide attack at a pub. This happened 13 years ago. The driver protested that he had no idea of his passenger's intentions, but was sent to prison nevertheless. Now the ministry remembered to expel him from the city.

SUCH BILLS, laws and executive actions fill the news every day.

Since its inauguration, the current Knesset has included a group of about twenty members who in other countries might be called neo-fascists. Most of them are leading Likud members, the others belong to rival coalition factions. They compete fiercely with each other. They are like 20 cats in one bag.

It seems that these members spend their days looking for ideas for even more atrocious anti-Arab measures. These make headlines and grab public attention. The more atrocious, the bigger the headline and the longer the TV interviews. These translate into popularity within their parties and guarantee re-election.

If you have no other qualities, this alone will assure you of a successful political career.

FOR SEVERAL weeks now the center of activity has been a bill called “Basic Law: Israel the Nation-State of the Jewish People”.

Israel has no constitution. From the beginning, the religious-secular controversy has prevented it.

However, the declaration of independence adopted in May 1948, which has no legal status, defined Israel as a “Jewish State” and promised complete equality to non-Jewish citizens. Later, several Basic Laws defined Israel as a “Jewish and Democratic State”, giving equal status to the two components, which often seem contradictory.

The diverse versions of the new bills define Israel as a “Jewish State” only, demoting the “democratic” aspect to second-class status. They abolish the word “equality” altogether. Arabic, which is now the second official language, will lose that status. Discrimination, now practiced clandestinely, will become legal and overt.

These versions were officially adopted last Sunday by the government. However, Binyamin Netanyahu promised to produce a more moderate version before the measure comes to the final vote in the Knesset.

Netanyahu rightly fears that the current versions might set off a world-wide reaction. The “only democracy in the Middle East” would become far less democratic. Tunisia might assume this title.

As far as is known at the moment, Netanyahu's version – which will probably be adopted in the end—will restore the “Jewish and democratic” appellation, but omit the term “equality”. The rights of individual non-Jewish citizens will be upheld, but not any collective rights of non-Jewish communities, concerning language, religion and education.

President Rivlin has denounced the bills squarely, much to his credit. Leading jurists have called them “superfluous”, doubting that they would effect any real change. Liberal commentators have come out against them. “Moderate” coalition members have threatened to vote against them, or at least to abstain. Perhaps in the end very little will come out of the whole squabble.

But the fact that one can build a career on attacking democracy, on hatred of Israel's 1.7 million Arab citizens—more than 20% of the population—is chilling.

BY THE way, nobody has asked the seven million Jews outside Israel about their stand on the matter.

What do they think about Israel being the “nation-state of the Jewish People”? Do they believe that there is a “Jewish people”? Do they want to owe allegiance to Israel? Do they fear being accused of dual loyalty?

Do they want at least to be consulted?

But what the hell, who asks them anyway?