

The Ministry of Fear

Uri Avnery

September 26, 2015

“WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF,” said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was wrong.

Fear is a necessary condition for human survival. Most animals in nature possess it. It helps them to respond to dangers and evade or fight them. Human beings survive because they are fearful.

Fear is both individual and collective. Since its earliest days, the human race has lived in collectives. This is both a necessary and a desired condition. Early humans lived in tribes. The tribe defended their territory against all “strangers”—neighboring tribes—in order to safeguard their food supply and security. Fear was one of the uniting factors.

Belonging to one's tribe (which after many evolutions became a modern nation) is also a profound psychological need. It, too, is connected with fear—fear of other tribes, fear of other nations.

But fear can grow and become a monster.

RECENTLY I received a very interesting article by a young scientist, Yoav Litvin, dealing with this phenomenon.

It described, in scientific terms, how easily fear can be manipulated. The science involved was the research of the human brain, based on experiments with laboratory animals like mice and rats.

Nothing is easier than to create fear. For example, mice were given an electric shock while exposed to rock music. After some time, the mice showed reactions of extreme fear when the rock music was played, even without being given a shock. The music alone produced fear.

This could be reversed. For a long time, the music was played for them without the pain. Slowly, very slowly, the fear abated. But not completely: when, after a long time, a shock was again delivered with the music, the full symptoms of fear re-appeared immediately. Once was enough.

APPLY THIS to human nations, and the results are the same.

The Jews are a perfect laboratory specimen. Centuries of persecution in Europe taught them the value of fear. Smelling danger from afar, they learned to save themselves

in time—generally by flight.

In Europe, the Jews were an exception, inviting victimizing. In the Byzantine (East Roman) Empire, Jews were normal. All over the empire, territorial peoples turned into ethnic-religious communities. A Jew in Alexandria could marry a Jewess in Antioch, but not the girl next door, if she happened to be an Orthodox Christian.

This “millet” system endured all through the Islamic Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate and still lives happily in today's State of Israel. An Israeli Jew cannot legally marry an Israeli Christian or Muslim in Israel.

This was the reason for the absence of anti-Semitism in the Arab world, apart from the detail that the Arabs are Semites themselves. Jews and Christians, the “peoples of the book”, have a special status in an Islamic state (like Iran today), in some ways second-class, in some ways privileged (they do not have to serve in the army). Until the advent of Zionism, Arab Jews were no more fearful than most other human beings.

The situation in Europe was quite different. Christianity, which split off from Judaism, harbored a deep resentment towards the Jews from the start. The New Testament contains profoundly anti-Jewish descriptions of Jesus' death, which every Christian child learns at an impressionable age. And the fact that the Jews in Europe were the only people (apart from the gypsies) who had no homeland made them all the more suspicious and fear-inspiring.

The continued suffering of the Jews in Europe implanted a continuous and deep-seated fear in every European Jew. Every Jew was on continuous alert, consciously, unconsciously or subconsciously, even in times and countries which seemed far from any danger—like the Germany of my parents' youth.

My father was a prime example of this syndrome. He grew up in a family that had lived in Germany for generations.¹ But when the Nazis came to power, it took my father just a few days to decide to flee, and a few months later my family arrived happily in Palestine.

ON A personal note: my own experience with fear was also interesting. For me, at least.

When the Hebrew-Arab war of 1948 broke out, I nat-

¹My father, who had studied Latin, always insisted that our family had come to Germany with Julius Caesar.

urally enlisted for combat duty. Before my first battle I was—literally—convulsed by fear. During the engagement, which happily was a light one, the fear left me, never to return. Just so. Disappeared.

In the following 50 or so engagements, including half a dozen major battles, I felt no fear.

I was very proud of this, but it was a stupid thing. Near the end of the war, when I was already a squad leader, I was ordered to take over a position which was exposed to enemy fire. I went to inspect it, walking almost upright in broad daylight, and was at once hit by an Egyptian armor-piercing bullet. Four of my soldiers, volunteers from Morocco, bravely got me out under fire. I arrived at the field hospital just in time to save my life.

Even this did not restore to me my lost fear. I still don't feel it, though I am aware that this is exceedingly stupid.

BACK TO my people.

The new Hebrew community in Palestine, founded by refugees from the pogroms of Moldavia, Poland, Ukraine and Russia, and later reinforced by the remnants of the Holocaust, lived in fear of their Arab neighbors, who revolted from time to time against the immigration.

The new community, called the Yishuv, took great pride in the heroism of its youth, which was quite able to defend itself, its towns and its villages. A whole cult grew up around the new Sabra (“cactus plant”), the fearless, heroic young Hebrew born in the country. When in the war of 1948, after prolonged and bitter fighting (we lost 6500 young men out of a community of 650,000 people) we eventually won, collective rational fear was replaced by irrational pride.

Here we were, a new nation on new soil, strong and self-reliant. We could afford to be fearless. But we were not.

Fearless people can make peace, reach a compromise with yesterday's enemy, reach out for co-existence and even friendship. This happened—more or less—in Europe after many centuries of continuous wars.

Not here. Fear of the “Arab World” was a permanent fixture in our national life, the picture of “little Israel surrounded by enemies” both an inner conviction and a propaganda ploy. War followed war, and each one produced new waves of anxiety.

This mixture of overweening pride and profound fears, a conqueror's mentality and permanent Angst, is a hallmark of today's Israel. Foreigners often suspect that this is make-believe, but it is quite real.

FEAR IS also the instrument of rulers. Create Fear and Rule. This has been a maxim of kings and dictators for ages.

In Israel, this is the easiest thing in the world. One has just to mention the Holocaust (or Shoah in Hebrew) and fear oozes from every pore of the national body.

Stoking Holocaust memories is a national industry. Children are sent to visit Auschwitz, their first trip abroad.

The last Minister of Education decreed the introduction of Holocaust studies in kindergarten (seriously). There is a Holocaust Day—in addition to many other Jewish holidays, most of which commemorate some past conspiracy to kill the Jews.

The historical picture created in the mind of every Jewish child, in Israel as well as abroad, is, in the words of the Passover prayer read aloud every year in every Jewish family: “In every generation they arise against us to annihilate us, but God saves us from their hands!”

PEOPLE WONDER what is the special quality that enables Binyamin Netanyahu to be elected again and again, and rule practically alone, surrounded by a flock of noisy nobodies.

The person who knew him best, his own father, once declared that “Bibi” could be a good Foreign Minister, but on no account a Prime Minister. True, Netanyahu has a good voice and a real talent for television, but that is all. He is shallow, he has no world vision and no real vision for Israel, his historical knowledge is negligible.

But he has one real talent: fear-mongering. In this he has no equal.

There is hardly any major speech by Netanyahu, in Israel or abroad, without at least one mention of the Holocaust. After that, there comes the latest up-to-date fear-provoking image.

Once it was “international terrorism”. The young Netanyahu wrote a book about it and established himself as an expert. In reality, this is nonsense. There is no such thing as international terrorism. It has been invented by charlatans, who build a career on it. Professors and such.

What is terrorism? Killing civilians? If so, the most hideous acts of terrorism in recent history were Dresden and Hiroshima. Killing civilians by non-state fighters? Take your pick. As I have said many times: “freedom fighters” are on my side, “terrorists” are on the other side.

Palestinians, and Arabs in general, are, of course, terrorists. They hate us for taking part of their land away. Obviously, you cannot make peace with perverse people like that. You can only fear and fight them.

When the field of terrorist-fighters became too crowded, Netanyahu switched to the Iranian bomb. There it was—the actual threat to our very existence. The Second Holocaust.

To my mind, this has always been ridiculous. The Iranians will not have a bomb, and if they did—they would not use it, because their own national annihilation would be guaranteed.

But take the Iranian bomb from Netanyahu, and what remains? No wonder he fought tooth and nail to keep it. But now it has been finally pushed away. What to do?

Don't worry. Bibi will find another threat, more blood-curdling than any before.

Just wait and tremble.