

Decent Respect

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IF THE BRITISH parliament had adopted a resolution in favor of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the reaction of our media would have been like this:

“In an atmosphere of great enthusiasm, the British parliament adopted with a huge majority (274 for, a mere 12 against) a pro-Israeli motion. . . Over half the seats were occupied, more than usual. . . the opponents of Israel were in hiding and did not dare to vote against. . .”

Unfortunately, the British parliament voted this week on a pro-Palestinian resolution, and our media reacted almost unanimously like this:

“The hall was half empty. . . there was no enthusiasm. . . a meaningless exercise. . . Only 274 Members voted for the resolution, which is not binding. . . Many Members stayed away altogether. . .”

Yet all our media reported on the proceedings at length, many related articles appeared in the newspapers. Quite a feat for such a negligible, unimportant, insignificant, inconsequential, trivial, petty act.

A day before, 363 Jewish Israeli citizens called upon the British Parliament to adopt the resolution, which calls for the British government to recognize the State of Palestine. The signatories included a Nobel Prize laureate, several winners of the highest Israeli civilian award, 2 former cabinet ministers and four former members of the Knesset (including myself), diplomats and a general.

The official propaganda machine did not go into action. Knowing that the resolution would be adopted anyhow, it tried to downplay the event as far as possible. The Israeli ambassador in London could not be reached.

WAS IT a negligible event? In a strictly procedural sense it was. In a broader sense, far from it. For the Israeli leadership, it is the harbinger of very bad news.

A few days before, a similar news item came from Sweden. The newly elected leftist prime minister announced that his government was considering the recognition of the State of Palestine in the near future.

Sweden, like Britain, was always considered a “pro-Israeli” country, loyally voting against “anti-Israel” resolutions in the UN. If such important Western nations are reconsidering their attitudes towards the policy of Israel, what does it mean?

Another unexpected blow came from the South. The Egyptian dictator, Muhammad Abd-al-Fatah al-Sisi, disabused the Israeli leadership of the notion that the “moderate” Arab states would fill the ranks of our allies against the Palestinians. In a sharp speech, he warned his new-found soul-mate, Binyamin Netanyahu, that the Arab states would not cooperate with Israel before we make peace with a Palestinian state.

Thus he punctured the newly inflated balloon floated by Netanyahu – that pro-American Arab states, such as Egypt, Saudi

Arabia, Jordan, the Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar, would become open allies of Israel.

IN South America, public opinion has already shifted markedly against Israel. The recognition of Palestine is gaining ground in official circles, too. Even in the US, unconditional support for the Israeli government seems to be wavering.

What the hell is going on?

WHAT IS going on is a profound, perhaps tectonic change in the public attitude towards Israel.

For years now, Israel has been appearing in world media mainly as a country that occupies the Palestinian lands. Press photos of Israelis almost always show heavily armed and armored soldiers confronting protesting Palestinians, often children. Few of these pictures have had an immediate dramatic impact, but the cumulative, incremental effect should not have been underestimated.

A truly alert diplomatic service would have alerted its government long ago. But our foreign service is thoroughly demoralized. Headed by Avigdor Lieberman, a brutal heavyweight bully considered by many of his colleagues around the world as a semi-fascist, the diplomatic corps is terrorized. They prefer to keep quiet.

This ongoing process reached a higher pitch with the recent Gaza war. It was not basically different from the two Gaza wars that preceded it not so long ago, but for some unfathomable reason it had a much stronger impact.

For a month and a half, day after day, people around the world were bombarded with pictures of killed human beings, maimed children, crying mothers, destroyed apartment buildings, damaged hospitals and schools, masses of homeless refugees. Thanks to Iron Dome, no destroyed Israeli buildings could be seen, nor hardly any dead Israeli civilians.

An ordinary decent person, whether in Stockholm or Seattle or Singapore, cannot be exposed to such a steady stream of horrible images without being affected—first unconsciously, then consciously. The picture of “The Israeli” in the mind's eye changes slowly, almost imperceptibly. The brave pioneer standing up to the savages around him mutates into an ugly bully terrorizing a helpless population.

WHY DO Israelis not realize this? Because We Are Always Right.

It has often been said before: the main danger of propaganda, any propaganda, is that its first victim is the propagandist himself. It convinces him, rather than his audience. If you twist a fact and repeat it a hundred times, you are bound to believe it.

Take the assertion that we were compelled to bomb UN installations in the Gaza Strip because Hamas was using them to launch rockets at our towns and villages. Kindergartens, schools, hospitals and mosques were targeted by our artillery, planes, drones and warships. 99% of Israelis believe that this

was necessary. They were shocked when the UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon, who visited Gaza this week, claimed that this was totally inadmissible.

Doesn't the General Secretary know that ours is the Most Moral Army in the World?

Another assertion is that these buildings were used by Hamas to hide their arms. A person of my age reminded us this week in Haaretz that we did exactly the same during our fight against the British government of Palestine and Arab attackers: our arms were hidden in kindergartens, schools, hospitals and synagogues. In many places there are now proud memorial plaques as a reminder.

In the eyes of the average Israeli, the extensive killing and destruction during the recent campaign was completely justified. He is quite incapable of understanding the world-wide outrage. For lack of another reason, he attributes it to anti-Semitism.

AFTER ONE of the Lebanon wars (I forget which) I received an unusual message: an army general invited me to give a lecture to his assembled officer corps about the impact of the war on the world media. (He probably wanted to impress his officers with his enlightened attitude.)

I told the officers that the modern battlefield has changed, that modern wars are fought in the full glare of the world media, that today's soldiers have to take this into account while planning and fighting. They listened respectfully and asked relevant questions, but I wondered if they were really absorbing the lesson.

Soldiering is a profession like any other. Any professional person, be he (or she) a lawyer or a street-cleaner, adopts a set of attitudes suitable to it.

A general thinks in real terms: how many troops for the job, how many cannon. What is necessary to break the enemy's resistance? How to reduce his own casualties?

He does not think about photos in the New York Times.

In the Gaza campaign, children were not killed nor houses destroyed arbitrarily. Everything had a military reason. People had to be killed in order to reduce the risk to the lives of our soldiers. (Better a hundred Palestinians killed than one Israeli soldier.) People had to be terrorized to make them turn against Hamas. Neighborhoods had to be destroyed to allow our troops to advance, and also to teach the population a lesson they will remember for years, thus postponing the next war.

All this makes military sense to a general. He is fighting a war, for God's sake, and cannot be bothered with non-military

considerations. Such as the impact on world public opinion. And anyway, after the Holocaust. . .

WHAT THE general thinks, Israel thinks.

Israel is not a military dictatorship. General al-Sisi may be Netanyahu's best friend, but Netanyahu is not a general. Israel likes doing business, especially arms business, with military dictators all around the world, but in Israel itself the military obeys the elected civilian government.

True, but. . .

But the State of Israel was born in the middle of a hard-fought war, the outcome of which was by no means assured at that moment. The army was then, and is now, the center of Israel's national life. It may be said that the army is the only truly unifying element in Israeli society. It is where males and females, Ashkenazi and Oriental, secular and religious (except the orthodox), wealthy and poor, old-timer and new immigrant meet and are indoctrinated in the same spirit.

Most Jewish Israelis are former soldiers. Most officers, who leave the army in their mid-40s, spread out in the administrative, economic, political and academic elite. The result is that the military mindset is dominant in Israel.

This being so, Israelis are quite unable to comprehend the turn of world public opinion. What do they want from us, these Swedes and Britons and Japanese? Do they believe that we enjoy killing children, destroying homes? (As Golda Meir memorably once declared: "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children, but we shall never forgive them for compelling us to kill their children!")

THE FOUNDERS of Israel were very conscious of world public opinion. True, David Ben-Gurion once declared the "it is not important what the goyim are saying, what is important is what the Jews are doing!" but in real life Ben-Gurion was very conscious of the need to win over world opinion. So was his adversary, the right-wing Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky, who once told Menachem Begin that if he despairs of the conscience of the world, he should "jump into the Vistula".

World public opinion is important. More than that, it is vital. The British Parliament's resolution may be non-binding, but it expresses public opinion, which will sooner or later decide government action on arms sales, Security Council resolutions, European Union decisions and what not. As Thomas Jefferson said: "If the people lead, then eventually the leaders will follow."

The same Jefferson recommended "a decent respect for the opinion of mankind."