

{JANUARY 31 2004}

MOURNING BECOMES ISRAEL

Two ceremonies on the same day, but what a difference! At an Israeli Air Force base, the bodies of three soldiers killed on the Lebanese border were ceremonially repatriated. The bodies had been held for three years by Hisbullah (the “Party of God”), who also freed a rather shady Israeli businessman they had detained in Beirut. In return, the Sharon government released 429 prisoners, Palestinian, Lebanese and others, and returned to Lebanon the bodies of 60 Lebanese militants buried temporarily in Israel.

The Lebanese prisoners who were released by Israel arrived at Beirut airport at exactly the time the bodies of the three soldiers arrived at the Israeli air base. Television created a virtual reality: the viewer could be present at both ceremonies simultaneously. By a simple movement of the finger, one could switch from Israel to Lebanon and back in a split second.

In Israel it was said that the deal was unbalanced. That it encourages the kidnapping of more Israelis, in order to secure the release of more prisoners. That it boosts the prestige of the Hisbullah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, enormously. That Sharon is using it in order to divert attention from the corruption affairs in which he and his two sons are involved.

All true, but all missing the main point.

It's not about three bodies. The huge difference between the two ceremonies reflects this. It was not just a result of the different circumstances.

In Beirut there was an outpouring of joy. All the highest officials of the Lebanese state were there, as well as the leaders of Hisbullah - a movement officially designated by the USA government as a terrorist organization. While a Lebanese army band played marches, everybody hugged and kissed everyone else. Al-Jazeera TV brought the scene live to tens of millions of viewers throughout the Arab world.

The Israeli ceremony was entirely different. A scene of mourning and tears. The live prisoner, who returned with the bodies, was spirited away. The three simple boxes covered with the national flag (Orthodox Judaism forbids caskets) were lying in front. Opposite them sat a row of personalities with faces suitably grief-stricken for such a

dignified ritual. Behind them, there sat hundreds of politicians, generals and the members of the bereaved families. The President of Israel, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff made speeches that were remarkably alike, as if one and the same person had written all four. They spoke about Jewish Morality and the Jewish Soul. They declaimed the old saying “He who saves one Jew is as if he has saved the whole world”, meaning the lone businessman who was returned. (“One Jew”, not one human being, in spite of the fact that one of the three fallen soldiers was not a Jew at all, but an Israeli Arab). The fallen soldiers defended our lives. The cruel enemy threatens to destroy all of us.

That morning, ten Israelis were killed and about fifty wounded in a suicide bombing in the heart of Jerusalem, a few dozen meters from the official residence of the Prime Minister. Throughout the day, Israeli TV broadcast the pictures, together with the news about the prisoner swap. It became all one story: the bodies in Jerusalem and the bodies returning from Lebanon, the moaning of the wounded and the tears of the bereaved families as the bodies of their loved ones arrived.

The next morning, the main headline of Yediot Aharonot, by far the largest-circulation newspaper in Israel, proclaimed in huge letters: “The Day of Tears”. Its competitor, Ma’ariv, displayed an equally huge headline: “Sad and Hurting”.

The message was self-evident: the Jewish people are suffering. But the Jewish people are alive. They try to kill us, but we move on. We are a moral people, no one is as moral as we. We redeem our brothers and sisters in captivity, whatever the price (429 live prisoners for three bodies and one adventurer). As the old saying goes: “The people of Israel are responsible for each other”. Thus behaves a long-suffering people, the nation of victims.

The Jerusalem attack reminded us again that the cruel enemy wants to annihilate us, as it had always been. He kills us because we are Jews. (The army announced that there was absolutely no connection between the attack and the fact that a day before, the army had killed eight Palestinians in Gaza, including one 11-year old boy and three other civilians.) Palestinians kill Jews, and there is no difference between them and the Crusaders who butchered the Jews on their way to the Holy Land, the Spanish inquisition, the Russian pogroms and the Holocaust. We are, have always been and will always be the victims.

Cynics will say that all this is nothing but a propaganda spin designed to further Sharon’s aims. It is not the Palestinians who are the victims, but we. When we kill Palestinians, build the monster wall, demolish homes and uproot plantations, we do it only for our own protection, because a nation of victims must defend themselves against those who arise to destroy it.

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This is indeed spin, but behind the propaganda a real psychological need is hidden. The rituals of bereavement, the rites of mourning and the sense of being victims, around which so much of Israeli life revolves, are deeply rooted in the national psyche. The ceremony at the Air Force base expressed this vividly. It united the “People in Israel” and connected it again with Jewish existence throughout the ages.

Zionism was supposed to put an end to all this. It was supposed to turn us from a passive into an active people, from a helpless, suffering people into a nation that has taken its destiny into its own hands. On the face of it, we have succeeded. We have set up a strong state, we have immense military power, but reality has not changed our consciousness. It has remained the consciousness of a helpless, suffering people, waiting for the Cossacks to set upon us at any minute.

Psychologists can probably explain this. The Jews have become accustomed to being victims. This is a perception that is being inculcated in children in Israel by hundreds of different methods, from the national holidays to visits to Auschwitz.

A known reality, even a bad one, confers a sense of orientation. One knows where one is, who is the enemy, how to defend oneself. Any change from one reality to another upsets this security, it creates a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, one feels like a person who has unwittingly entered a foreign land, without maps and signposts. A frightening experience.

Those in our country who talk about a “Jewish state” - as opposed to an “Israeli state” - mean this, too. The commander of an armored division reveals that he is the son of Holocaust survivors, but continues to enforce the oppressive occupation. At the ceremony for the bodies of the fallen soldiers, dignitaries speak of the Jewish Soul. And all feel that they are members of one big family, united in suffering and mourning, connected to former generations.

Non-conformists may argue that we have long since become a nation of occupiers, that the appellation “nation of victims” now belongs to our neighbors. Such talking revolts the national psyche, it is upsetting and infuriating. It hurts the sense of belonging.

There is only one nation of victims. If somebody else wants to claim this crown of thorns for himself, we will bash in his head.