

{MARCH 6 2004}

O TANNENBAUM, OH TANNEBAUM!

*O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum,
How faithful are your leaves!
You're green not only in summertime,
But also in winter when it snows,
O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum...*

(Old German Christmas song. "Tannenbaum" is the fir tree.)

This is a well-established Israeli ritual: One takes a trivial matter, declares it to be the center of national life, decorates it and dances around it, all in order to escape from the real national problems that are so exasperating and frightening.

This time it really is a fir tree. A gentleman called Elhanan Tannenbaum. He was a prisoner of Hizbullah. In order to bring him back home, together with the bodies of three soldiers, Ariel Sharon released several hundred "terrorists". Since then, the whole country has been in uproar, day after day, week after week.

Why did Sharon make the deal? This week the terrible secret has come out: this fir tree is the former son-in-law of somebody who had some business with Sharon 30 years ago, when an American Jewish billionaire helped a poor army officer by the name of Ariel Sharon to acquire the biggest private farm in the country.

Did Sharon release hundreds of "terrorists" to help a former son-in-law of a former business associate? Is this a giant scandal? A most terrible case of corruption?

Even if it were so, I can answer only with two Hebrew words, which translate literally as "the delight of my grandmother". Or, in American: "big deal!"

As usual, the media do not pose the right questions, because the right questions might annoy some important people. For example: the security chiefs.

This Tannenbaum is a colonel in the reserves. In this capacity he was party to one of the most secret military projects in Israel. According to leaked hints, this project is no less secret than our nuclear activities (see Mordecai Vanunu, below.)

Now it transpires that Tannenbaum was, in civilian life, a professional crook,

compulsive gambler, with an irregular family life, steeped in debt and closely connected with Lebanese drug dealers. How did such a person become a party to the most top secret project?

Well? Nobody knew what he was doing. Nobody inquired. He did not mention it to the chief of internal security of the defense establishment, a certain Yehiel Horev. And if nobody tells Horev, how is he to know?

When Tannenbaum went to Dubai, and then found himself in Hizbullah-land in Lebanon, the security establishment was shaken to its very foundations. A person who carries with him such awesome secrets is in the hands of our enemies? What has he told them, and what is he going to tell?

Because of this, the security establishment was ready to pay any price to get him back as quickly as possible: 50 “terrorists”? 500 “terrorists”? 5000 “terrorists”? Doesn’t matter. The main thing is that he be returned at once.

That is understandable. If Tannenbaum had told what he knows, he would have caused “irreparable damage” (as official sources emphasized) to national security. In such cases, it is essential to find out if he did spill the beans or not. Therefore he was bought back for a high price, and since then he is being investigated, investigated and investigated.

The former son-in-law of the former friend does not come into it. The connection is intriguing, but not important.

A more significant question is: How did a person like Tannenbaum become a colonel? How inefficient must a security apparatus be for such a fiasco to become possible? And how come that Horev, one of the best-paid civil servants in Israel, was not kicked out?

Furthermore: if hundreds of “terrorists” can be released for one living crook and three dead bodies, perhaps their imprisonment was not really necessary for the security of the state? Perhaps the continued stay in prison of 7000 more of them is pointless? And if so, why were they not released in the cause of peace, to strengthen the position of Arafat in 1993 or Abu-Mazen not so long ago?

Horev and Co. are angry with Tannenbaum because he has revealed their incompetence. They are also angry with Mordecai Vanunu, for the same reason.

Vanunu was a minor technician at the Dimona nuclear reactor, a site so secret that for a long time it was forbidden to mention its very existence. When it became impossible to deny its existence any longer, the government pretended that it was a “textile factory”.

At this site, the most highly guarded in Israel, Vanunu freely took pictures. Then he went abroad, became a Buddhist, converted to Christianity (or the other way round) and passed his information and photos to a British paper. On the basis of this

information, scientists decided that Israel has 200 nuclear bombs.

The disclosure was credible but unofficial. Thus it strengthened Israel's deterrence, without the government being obliged to confirm it. This was so convenient for the government that, at the beginning, many people believed that Vanunu was really a Mossad agent.

But he was not. On the contrary, he represented a catastrophic failure of the security structure that was ? and still is ? headed by the above mentioned Horev. The reaction was drastic: Vanunu was kidnapped in Rome and brought to Israel in a box ? just as Tannenbaum was kidnapped in Dubai and brought (apparently) in a box to Beirut. Vanunu succeeded in conveying this to the media by writing it on the palm of his hand and waving on the way to court.

This infuriated Horev and Co. even more. For many years they kept Vanunu in prison in total isolation. Now that he has completed his whole sentence, they do not want to release him. And if the court does not allow them to keep him in prison, they want to prevent him from going abroad or speaking to journalists.

Why? The argument is that even now, 20 years later, he may be in possession of information that could endanger the state.

By the way, a similar argument is used by the American security agencies for refusing to release Jonathan Pollard, who spied for Israel and received a life sentence. They believe that Pollard knows the identity of an Israeli mole in the highest circles of the American administration, who told Pollard which documents to steal and transfer to Israel.

Tannenbaum, Vanunu, Pollard ? all these are intriguing stories, useful for increasing the circulation and ratings of the media. And, more importantly, they distract attention from the real dangers that threaten us: the building of the monstrous wall in the occupied territories, Sharon's plan to annex more than half of the West Bank, the ongoing effort to destroy the Palestinian Authority, the daily bloody cycle of targeted killings ? suicide bombings ? assassinations, murder and revenge, and the destruction of all chances for peace.

Who wants to think about that? Who wants to deal with it? It is much more pleasant to sing and dance around the fir tree: "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum..."