

{SEPTEMBER 4 2004}

# HOW ARE YOU, NON-VIOLENCE?

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**A**t the mass meeting with Arun Gandhi, the grandson of the Mahatma, in Abu-Dis, I observed the faces of the participants. While Gandhi was preaching non-violence, I imagined a debate between two young Palestinians in the audience.

Yussuf: “He is right. The armed intifada has failed.”

Hassan: “On the contrary. Without the actions of the martyrs, the world would have forgotten us long ago.”

Yussuf: “For half a year there were no suicide attacks in Israel, and look what we have achieved!”

Hassan: “We have achieved nothing. On the contrary, the Israeli generals boast that they have defeated us with their targeted assassinations, incursions into our territories and all the other acts of oppression. And all this time they have been enlarging the settlements, putting up new ‘outposts’ and continuing to build the racist wall.”

Yussuf: “You forget that the International Court has declared the wall illegal and the UN General Assembly has confirmed this with a huge majority. All of Europe voted in our favor. We are winning in the arena of world public opinion.”

Hassan: “What is that worth, if in the meantime Sharon does what he wants, goes on keeping Arafat in a cage and spits in the face of Abu-Ala, while Abu-Ala is advocating non-violence?”

Yussuf: “Even the senior jurists in Israel itself warn Sharon that if he goes on like this, the United Nations will end up imposing sanctions on Israel.”

Hassan: “But in the meantime, the opposite is happening. Because of the lull in suicide attacks, the Israeli economy is reviving. Tourism to Israel, that had stopped altogether because of our actions, is starting up again. If the Israelis feel comfortable and are no longer afraid of suicide bombers, why should they talk with us? Why should they give back any territories? Why should they stop enlarging the settlements? They don’t give a damn.”

Yussuf: “We have to win international public opinion. We can do this only by non-

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violence. I admire the martyrs who are ready to die for our people. I am proud that we have such heroes. But they don't get us anywhere. They only provide Sharon with pretexts to oppress us even more."

Hassan: "As if Sharon needs pretexts! He wants to break us, and world public opinion will not lift a finger for us. The treacherous Arab leaders will not do anything for us, either. Only our heroes will save us."

Yussuf: "But Gandhi argues that non-violent methods will be more successful. His grandfather proved this in India."

Hassan: "He doesn't know the Israelis. The Israeli army will open fire on any non-violent Palestinian demonstration that reaches serious proportions."

Yussuf: "Look at the brothers who scaled the wall. That is an example of successful non-violent action, breaking the law of the occupier openly and without fear! "

Hassan: "Don't kid yourself. If Arun Gandhi and the Israelis hadn't been there, the soldiers would have shot and killed them. Later they would have announced that they were wanted terrorists. You remember the beginning of the al-Aksa intifada, when there were unarmed mass demonstrations? The Israeli army brought in snipers and killed the leaders. Please, this is not India, and the Israelis are not Englishmen. They understand only the language of force."

Yussuf: "But that is exactly what they say about us!"

This kind of debate is now going on everywhere in Palestinian society, perhaps in every Palestinian family. The Yussufs have no success in convincing the Hassans, and I am afraid that Gandhi will not succeed either, because they lack the decisive argument. Abu-Mazen, who advocates non-violence, got nothing from Sharon. Half a year without suicide attacks inside Israel have not brought the Palestinians any achievements on the ground.

Therefore, the suicide attack in Beer Sheva, just a week after the Gandhi rally, was to be expected.

As long as the Sharon government, with the active encouragement of President Bush, goes on enlarging the settlements, building the Wall and all the other actions of annexation, there is no way to convince Palestinian public opinion to turn its back on violence. And only a decisive change in Palestinian public opinion can put an end to suicide attacks. No wall will stop people who are ready to die in order to carry out attacks, and the Palestinians have already proved that they have any number of such people.

Ehud Barak, a very violent person, once said that if he had been a young Palestinian, he would have joined a terrorist organization. Obviously, he doesn't believe that non-violence will succeed against the Israeli army. And he should know.

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I was impressed by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He was the greatest liberator of the 20th century, achieving freedom for the whole Indian subcontinent, including present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh. (But Gandhi also said that Hitler should be opposed only by non-violent means, and even his most ardent admirers found it hard to accept that.)

In my youth I joined two very violent organizations (the Irgun and the Israeli army), but after I was wounded near the end of the 1948 war there were several months when the very thought of combat caused me physical nausea. I detest violence in all its forms, but how can it be stopped?

There are people amongst us who are ready for a compromise peace but have been led to believe that “there is no one we can talk with”, because “they” don’t want peace but seek to annihilate us. But we must understand that Palestinian violence, which causes so much bloodshed, is the predictable result of our cutting off every other road in front of them.

I am convinced that it is possible to put an end to violence in our country - if we offer the Palestinian people an alternative, non-violent way of achieving freedom and justice.

Anyone who believes that a wall will succeed in stopping suicide attacks might as well rely on the amulets of Kabbalist rabbis.