

{MAY 7 2005}

“AREN’T YOU ASHAMED?”

The car stopped for a moment. An elderly lady pushed her head out of the window and shouted; “Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? Today is Holocaust Day, and you are demonstrating for Arabs?!”

The cause of her anger was a large group of demonstrators opposite the Ministry of Defense in Tel-Aviv, last Thursday, the official Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel. Many things happened on that day.

Thousands of Israelis flew to Poland, to take part in the annual “March of Life” between the two death camps whose very names inspire dread: Auschwitz and Birkenau.

In Auschwitz, an official ceremony was held. Ariel Sharon made a political speech to promote his political agenda. He reminded the Israelis how the world had kept silent during the Holocaust, and asserted that now, too, we should not trust the world. Elie Wiesel, the inevitable Holocaust cultist, with his inevitable tortured expression, delivered his inevitable speech. For the guests of honor, places of honor were reserved, according to rank, in the first rows of the white plastic chairs.

It was another official ceremony, much like hundreds of other official ceremonies held for some purpose and on some subject or other, an occasion for politicians to utter their platitudes. The real content, the world-embracing human lesson of the Holocaust, was lost between the ceremonies and the words.

At the same time, another group of 7000 Israelis left for Moscow. Not to celebrate the victory over the Nazis 60 years ago, in which the Red Army played such an important role, nor to thank the veterans for liberating the death camps and putting an end to the extermination. No, they were accompanying a basketball team.

Israel is a global basketball power. The victories of its teams abroad fill the average Israeli with national pride. The match in Moscow was very important, and while it went on, life in this country almost came to a standstill. Everybody was following the game on State Television.

Is the preoccupation with basketball on Holocaust Day, of all days, proper? On the

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face of it, no. The Holocaust was the defining event in the Jewish history of the last century, and perhaps of all times. It was a warning to all humanity. Is it fitting to be occupied with a sports event on such a day?

My answer is yes. I am not a very enthusiastic sports fan. But sport, too, symbolizes the fact that the Jews have survived the Holocaust, that Jewish life is thriving in many places around the world. Adolf Hitler swore to eradicate "World Jewry" once and for all, together with the "Asiatic Hordes" of Russia. And here, 60 years after his sordid end in the Berlin Bunker, Israeli sportsmen compete in Moscow. One can be happy about that.

At the very same time, the spontaneous demonstration in front of the Defense Ministry in Tel-Aviv was taking place. Its purpose was to protest the killing of two Palestinian boys, aged 14 and 15, at Beit Likiya village, during a demonstration against the Fence.

Beit Likiya lies some kilometers south of Bil'in, the site of the large demonstration I reported on last week. The circumstances are similar: the land of Beit Likiya is also being stolen by the Fence. The bulldozers work from morning to night and their rattle, rather like a continuous burst of heavy-machine-gun fire, resonates around all the villages in the vicinity.

The villagers know that beyond this fence, on their land, their source of livelihood for many generations, new neighborhoods of the nearby settlement will be built. Like the villagers of Bil'in, they protest every day. Men, women and children march towards the armed soldiers, with blaring loudspeakers, lying down on the ground, chaining themselves to their olive trees, and sometimes the youngsters of the village throw stones and are brutally driven away by the soldiers.

When Jewish Israelis take part in the demonstrations, the soldiers generally use tear gas, stun grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets, and now also salt-bullets. When there are no Jews around, they may use live ammunition, too.

This time, a group of soldiers stood facing the village boys, who threw stones. Nobody was seriously hurt. Nobody's life was in danger. But the commander, a lieutenant, fired live rounds. Two boys were killed.

One of the boys was wounded only in the thigh. The wound was probably not mortal, but the boy was left to bleed to death. The army did not treat him, as it would have treated a wounded soldier. It seems that an ambulance from the village was not able to approach.

Within a few hours, Israeli peace activists mounted a protest. The call was transmitted by word of mouth, by phone and e-mail. About 250 men and women gathered in front of the Defense Ministry, many young people, not a few elderly ones,

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among them some from the Holocaust generation. Some of the drivers using this central Tel-Aviv artery raised their thumbs or sounded their horn in support. Others disapproved, like the shouting woman.

How can one demonstrate for Arabs, especially on Holocaust Day?

Well, it's a good question. And there is a good answer.

The answer expresses one of the lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust, a lesson that should be raised like a banner on Holocaust Day:

That decent persons must come to the aid of a persecuted minority.

That loyalty to your country does not justify agreement with the occupation of another country and the oppression of another people.

That you must not accept an ideology telling you that you belong to a master nation, to a superior race, to a chosen people - and that other people are inferior and subhuman.

The use of lethal force on Palestinian demonstrators, even when they throw stones, expresses abysmal contempt for the life of non-Jews. That same officer would not have fired on Jewish demonstrators in similar circumstances. The thought would not even have crossed his mind. But Palestinians, and Arabs generally, are not considered full human beings.

Opening live fire on unarmed 14 and 15- year old boys shows a deeply-rooted racist mentality. The boys' age was clear to the officer who shot them. They could not have "endangered his life", as he claims, if they had not been quite close. He certainly would have found other ways to drive them off if they had been the children of orthodox Jews or settlers.

The protection of children is a profound human instinct. A person must be a hatred-ridden racist, or have a twisted mind, for this instinct to be put out of action, whatever the origin of the boys.

There is no more appropriate day to protest against such an act, and the mental attitudes lurking behind it, than Holocaust Day.

That morning, the newspaper Haaretz presented its readers with a nice gift: every copy of the paper came with a large national flag attached. One woman took this flag, painted a blood-red stain on it and held it aloft throughout the demonstration.

Should she be ashamed of herself? On the contrary. I think that she expressed the spirit of Holocaust Day better than any other person in Israel or at the Auschwitz ceremony.