

{JUNE 25, 2005}

THE DAY AFTER

This week, the country was shocked by a terrifying train accident. A heavy truck was crossing the tracks as a train approached at high speed. The locomotive driver saw the truck but could not stop in time. The truck driver saw the train but couldn't get off the track in time. Result: many killed, many hurt, a scene of destruction.

Something similar to this accident is looming now, with the Gush Katif withdrawal drawing near. The settlers' train is rapidly approaching the fateful junction. Only by a miracle can the settlers brake in time. Only by a miracle will the fatal crash be avoided.

As things look now, it seems probable that the crash will bring about the greatest change in the history of Israel since the 1967 war.

The settlers cannot and do not want to stop. They are lusting for battle. They are sure of their power. Many years of secret cooperation have convinced them that the ruling group of the state, army officers and civil servants, are with them. They treat the opposite camp with contempt. They despise the democratic majority much as the fascist dictators of the 30s despised the "degenerate and rotten" democracies.

Even if the settlers wanted to stop their train, like that unfortunate locomotive driver, they would not be able to do so. It is in the nature of fanatical movements that they spawn groups that are more fanatical, which in turn give birth to groups that are even more extreme. They cannot rein in their offspring, and the fringe elements dictate the pace. Somebody will start the violence, somebody will open fire. The thousands of admirers of Yigal Amir, Rabin's assassin, are thirsting for their share of glory.

The democratic majority is indeed feeble and piteous. It watches events like the crowd at a football game. The struggle for the future of the state and its inhabitants has become a spectator sport. But that can also change quite suddenly, if things happen that shock the ordinary Israeli out of his lazy equanimity. When the first soldier is killed by a settler, for example.

What then? Suddenly the Israeli, who has been dozing in front the TV set, a beer

glass in one hand and the other in a bag of nuts, will be wide awake. He will realize that this is not a soccer match, that it concerns him and his family. That a gang of messianic rabbis and nationalist thugs is taking control of his life and turning his country into a Jewish Taliban state.

True, it may not happen. After the assassination of Rabin by a messianic rightist who was a disciple of the settlers and a student at the religious Bar-Ilan University, there was an opportunity to break the fatal hold of the extreme right on the state. It did not happen. Shimon Peres, in his folly, prevented an immediate showdown at the polls. The majority let itself be seduced by the siren call for “conciliation”, a trap set by the right-wing in order to escape its destruction.

But, the way it looks now, there is a high probability that the clash will indeed take place. Who will win?

The forces are not equal.

On the one side, there is a delirious minority in a trance, with an inspiring nationalist-messianic ideology and a strong, united leadership.

This camp has a standing army and ample reserve forces that can be called up at a moment's notice. In the settlements there are some 200 thousand men and women, old people and children, a great many of whom (including children and even babies) are available for action at all times. Many of them are ex-soldiers, and most of them are armed to the teeth. In the “arrangement yeshivot”, the Habad institutions and other religious seminaries, there is additional manpower, ready to be mobilized. A significant number of individuals are ready to rush to their help.

On the other side, no organization and no leadership. People congregate and complain in their living rooms on Friday nights, they wallow in a warm and comfortable jacuzzi of despair. People like myself, who have spent years in a vain effort to get them into the streets, to organize demonstrations, to stiffen their spine and arouse their spirit, certainly entertain no exaggerated hopes.

But a democratic public can surprise, as the rightist dictators found out in World War II. Ariel Sharon discovered this after the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, when hundreds of thousands of “apathetic” people streamed into the square in a storm of emotions.

If this happens again, the democratic majority will win. The settlers' darkest nightmare will become reality: the call for the removal of the Gush Katif settlements will develop into a campaign for the evacuation of the settlements from the West Bank. Effective American pressure, too, could suddenly materialize. In such a whirlwind, Sharon's intentions and plans and tricks – and perhaps the man himself, too – will become irrelevant. The dynamism of the process will carry him along like a piece of

driftwood before the tsunami.

That may happen. But it is far from assured. The locomotive driver may still stop at the last moment. Democracy may still manage to get off the tracks. It may end the way the Weimar Republic ended. The “disengagement” may still be postponed. Maybe.

Only one thing is certain: that nothing is certain. Nobody can predict the situation on the Day After.

But we are not sitting in a theater, waiting for the fifth act in order to find out how the play will end. Every person in Israel is an actor in this piece, both by his actions and inactions, whether he wants it or not.

People with a developed democratic consciousness - peace activists, human rights activists, social activists, activists of democratic associations - have an important task in this drama. Their task is to arouse the majority from its sleep, to get them into the streets, to strengthen their resolve to defend democracy and to stand up against the attack of the nationalist-messianic right. They have to hold up, high and shining, the alternative, the other option, so that it is before the eyes of the majority at all times.

For example: In the streets, a War of the Colors is now being waged. The settlers, who have adopted the color orange, have not succeeded in “painting the country orange”, as they have boasted, but orange ribbons do fly from many car antennas. On the other side, there have been several initiatives to fly another ribbon, but, as so often happens with democrats, everything was done without organization and without the minimum cooperation, here blue ribbons, there blue-white ribbons, there green ones. A mess.

But this is, perhaps, the first sign. The democratic public rises slowly. It’s always like that. One has to push.

My nose detects a change. It is an intoxicating smell, like the scent of oleander and margosa now flooding our streets.

I have a sharpened sense of smell for big changes. At the age of 10, I experience a total change in my life: country, climate, language, culture, name and character - everything changed. Since then, I have been open to drastic changes and am ready for them at every moment. I experienced such changes at least two more times: the 1948 war with the founding of Israel and the 1967 war with the creation of the Israeli Empire. It may well be that my nose picks up an approaching change earlier than many others, just as certain animals sensed the approaching tsunami before human beings.

There is the chance of a new start in Israel, far beyond the “disengagement” tricks and Sharon’s ploys. There is a possibility that the Day After may open great new possibilities, those that many have already despaired of: a readiness to end the occupation, to achieve peace with a measure of reconciliation and mutual respect, and, most important of all: to renew the face of Israel itself as a democratic, liberal, secular

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and egalitarian state.

Of course, that will not fall from heaven. It depends, more than on anything else, on our belief that this day can indeed come.

As we used to sing: “Don’t say: the day will come / Bring the day!”