

{JULY 2, 2005}

ARIK'S HORROR SHOW

All the world saw the horror on TV: a Palestinian boy lying on the ground, unconscious. An Israeli soldier bending over him, not knowing what to do. A settler coming up from behind and throwing a stone at the head of the injured Palestinian. Another settler dropping a big stone on him at point-blank range. A bearded medic, also a settler, approaches the wounded boy, hesitates, and then goes away without treating him, pursued by the chants of a chorus of settler boys and girls: “Let him die! Let him die!”

Before that, the settlers occupied a Palestinian house on the Gaza Strip sea shore and established an “outpost” there. It was a pretty, new three-story building, whose owners had not yet moved in. On the outer wall a huge slogan was painted: “Mohammed is a Swine!” It referred to the Prophet.

A battle of stones ensued between the occupiers and the Palestinians in the adjacent houses. Some soldiers were caught in the middle, fired into the air over the heads of the Palestinians and did not do anything against the rioters.

Two days before, army bulldozers had been sent to destroy some empty, derelict structures put up ages ago by the Egyptians. A group of extreme-right boys and girls climbed on the bulldozers, broke off parts, kicked the heads of the soldiers trying to remove them, cursed and taunted the soldiers, who stood by helplessly. (Two years ago, the 23-year old American peace activist Rachel Corrie was crushed to death by such a bulldozer, when she tried to stop it from destroying a Palestinian home.)

The rampage reached its climax last Wednesday, when the settlers again blocked Israel’s main arteries. The evening before, one of the chief rioters, one Shabtai Shiran, who introduced himself as “Chief-of-Staff North” of the hooligans, appeared on television. He was interviewed live and at length as a respected guest, giving out orders for paralyzing the country, as if he were a government spokesman. He was not arrested at the door of the studio for terrorism, incitement and conspiracy to commit a crime, but on the contrary, was invited to appear again the next evening to boast of his “victory”.

On the morning of road-blocking day, the police made a discovery on Road No. 1 (the main Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem artery): puddles of oil and metal nails designed to puncture tires. On this road, the speed limit is 110 km/h, and many drivers exceed that. By a miracle, a disaster was avoided. But the whole country gave in to the terrorism: most drivers postponed their journeys, traffic on the roads was light, like on Shabbat.

During the day, the settlers blocked the roads in many places. The Police removed them with their bare hands. Only at one place was a water cannon used, but the weak stream was too feeble to wash away a single rioter. Still, it looked good on TV.

Not in a single one of these riots did the police use the means that are routinely used against non-violent left-wing protesters: clubs, tear gas, rubber-coated bullets and, lately, salt bullets. I can testify from my own experience at demonstrations that nobody remains where they are when tear gas grenades are shot at them.

Just as a reminder: five years ago, groups of Arab citizens tried to block some roads in the North of Israel, in a spontaneous reaction to the killing of Palestinians on the Temple Mount. In order to “protect the freedom of traffic on the roads”, the police opened fire with live ammunition and 13 citizens were killed. But they, of course, were Arabs.

It would have been quite easy to put an end to all the riots this week. In the few instances where the authorities decided to remove the rioters, it was accomplished without problem.

For example, the day after the attempted lynching of the Palestinian boy (who is recovering now), police removed the thugs from the near-by hotel. The rioters had sworn to fight to the death. They were removed within 30 minutes without a single person being hurt. Their big-mouthed leaders had disappeared before it all started.

Why were the riots not put down everywhere? There is no escaping the simple conclusion: Ariel Sharon did not want this. On the contrary: it is in his interest that the TV screens in Israel and all over the world show the scenes of the terrible riots. That's how he sows in the heads of the viewers the natural question, which a Tel-Aviv taxi driver asked me, and which was repeated by all the journalists who interviewed me during the week: “If the evacuation of a few small settlements causes such a huge uproar – how can one even dream of removing the big settlements in the West Bank?”

The same question is being posed in connection with the economic price of the “disengagement”. The Minister of Finance is now talking about “eight to ten billion Shekels”. That means five million (5,000,000) Shekels - or about 1.1 million dollars - per family. Almost every day, the payoff extorted by the evacuees goes up. A plot of land. A new villa. Until then, a “mobile villa” that will remain their property. Compensation for lost livelihood. Participation in the costs of the move. More land for agriculturists, two

or three times larger than the plot they are leaving.

By any account, if the settlers just got back what they had in fact invested, even ten times over, it would amount only to a small fraction of these sums.

All this is being promised to evacuees who are about to settle in Israel, at a distance of some 30 kilometers from their present abodes. This week, they were promised a separate regional council. This would not only be the sole regional council set up along ideological lines, but also assure sinecures for dozens of settlers, who will become employees of this council. In the West Bank many hundreds of settlers, including almost all their leaders, live at our expense, from fictitious jobs on the regional councils.

Here, too, the innocent citizen will ask: If the removal of 1700 settlers' families cost us eight billion Shekels, how much will it cost to move the 40,000 families from the West Bank settlements?

This week's performances are only a dress rehearsal for the great Horror Show that is planned in seven weeks time, when the evacuation is due to take place.

It has already been announced that huge forces will take part in the action. Three thousand media people from all over the world will provide the international echo. The event will be presented as a giant operation, Ariel Sharon will appear as one of history's great heroes, Hercules and Samson rolled into one. After such an immense effort, who will demand that he take upon himself the impossible task of removing the West Bank settlements?

Sharon himself does not hide his intentions. Quite the contrary, he announces them at the top of his voice. In two policy speeches this week, he defined them in identical words, but the superficial media were so fascinated by his denouncement of the hooligans that they did not pay any attention to the key sentence.

Sharon said that the withdrawal from Gaza is necessary so that we can concentrate on the main effort, to ensure Israeli dominance "in Galilee and the Negev, Greater Jerusalem, the settlement blocs and the security zones."

One has to put the eight Hebrew words on the map in order to get a clear picture.

"Galilee and the Negev" were included for decoration only. They have been part of Israel since the foundation of the state, and a campaign for their "Judaization" has been going on for decades. About half of Galilee's citizens are Arab, and the situation in the Negev is similar.

The term "Greater Jerusalem" is used to include not only all the Arab neighborhoods in the east of the city, but also the settlement Ma'aleh-Adumim and the territories lying between it and Jerusalem proper, referred to as E-1.

The "settlement blocs" include not only the enlarged Gush Etzion, Ariel, Upper

Modi'in, Betar and Ma'aleh-Adumim blocs, but also any area that may be so defined in the future, such as Kiryat Arba and the South Hebron area.

But the most important words are "security zones". In Sharon's lexicon, these include not only the whole of the Jordan Valley and the "Back of the Mountain" (the eastern slopes of the central Palestinian mountain range), but also the East-West and North-South axes on which he himself has been cultivating the settlements throughout the years.

This sentence confirms again what Sharon has said often enough in the past: that he intends to annex 58% of the West Bank, so that the Palestinian state, to which he might or might not agree, will cover about 10% of the area of Palestine as it existed before 1948.

The current Arik's Horror Show is designed to promote this vision, which he conceives as his life's work. The settlers, who curse him and threaten his life, are only playing the role which he has allotted them. Right from the beginning of his career he has been convinced that God (or fate) has chosen him for this historic task.

The task of the Israeli peace camp is to abort this vision, by using the dynamics of the crisis to open the road to the solution of the conflict. The settlements are the main obstacle to the attainment of a compromise between the two nations. Without Sharon intending this, his Horror Show is causing the Israeli public to turn against the settlers, resulting in the isolation of the whole settler community. We have to make sure that this wave will not dissipate after the completion of the Gaza withdrawal, but on the contrary, will grow in size and strength until it sweeps away the whole infrastructure of occupation in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

If this happens, the great Horror Show will have positive results in the end, and not at all those expected by Sharon.