

{SEPTEMBER 17, 2005}

JOHA'S NAIL

One day Joha, the hero of popular Arab humor, sold his home. The price he demanded was ridiculously low and he had only one condition: “on one of the walls there is a nail that I am much attached to. I don’t want to sell it.” The buyer readily agreed. Who cares about a nail?

After some days, Joha came to the house and hung his coat on the nail. After that he brought his bed and started to sleep there. “The nail is so dear to me, that I can’t bear sleeping away from it,” he explained. Another time he brought his family to visit the nail and had a party there. In the end, the new owner couldn’t bear it anymore and bought the nail for a price many times higher than he had paid for the home itself.

Maybe the leaders of Israel do not know the story, but their behavior certainly resembles it.

It started with the peace agreement with Egypt. Israel agreed to clear out of all of Sinai. Between Menahem Begin and Anwar Sadat, warm feelings started to develop. And then the nail appeared: Israel refused to give up Taba, a tiny piece of land bordering the Gulf of Aqaba. Relations soured, a round of bitter quarrels ensued and in the end it took international arbitration to decide what was clear from the beginning: Taba belongs to Egypt and was finally returned to it. Nowadays masses of Israeli gamblers go there to rid themselves of their money.

The story repeated itself in Lebanon. First the government decided to keep a very big nail: the “security strip,” which caused a long and bloody guerilla war. In the end we were compelled to leave it – in a move that resembled flight – and kept only a small nail: the “Shebaa farms.” This gives Hizballah a reason for not disarming and to warm up the border from time to time, at its pleasure.

If one prefers a Polish story to an Arab one, one can mention the lady who asked her dentist to take out all her rotten teeth, except one – just to remind her how much it hurt.

Now we have withdrawn from the Gaza Strip. We have given up all the territory, driven out all the settlers, demolished all the settlements. We have left only one nail on

the wall: the synagogues.

These were not, God forbid, hallowed buildings from antiquity, precious remnants from the past. Nothing but buildings put up quite recently for praying and holding meetings, from which all religious accessories had already been removed. The army proposed to destroy them along with all the other houses there, and that is what the government decided.

But after the farce of the “uprooting of the settlers” had come to an end, after the last weeper had shed his tears on the shirt of a policeman in front of a TV camera, after the last army officer had embraced a nationalist thug in accordance with orders, the settlement rabbis suddenly remembered that the synagogue buildings are sacred. They used God as a political instrument, as they had done before with the babies.

The Likud ministers, who do not fear God the way they fear their party Central Committee, changed their opinion with lightning speed and decided that it is forbidden to destroy the synagogues. The government changed its position at the last moment, without informing the Palestinian leadership and without prior consultation with it. They did not even bother to inform the Supreme Court, which had already ruled that the synagogues could be destroyed.

That was a mean act, pure and simple. It left the Palestinians on the horns of a dilemma: either to devote thousands of soldiers to the guarding of empty buildings from here to eternity or let the excited masses storm these hated symbols of the occupation that had turned their lives into hell.

As far as Sharon is concerned, the exercise was a huge success: the world saw the “crazed Palestinian mob” burning “the houses of worship,” in a kind of prefabricated Kristallnacht, made in Israel. President Bush condemned the “burning of the synagogues,” President Moshe Katzav of Israel was upset by the “desecration of the Holy Jewish Sites,” the Israeli public was even more strengthened in its belief that the Arabs are subhuman barbarians, proving again that we have nobody to talk with.

That was not the only nail that the Israeli Joha left in the wall.

Another nail was the demolition of the Rafah border crossing. That also came as a surprise, without prior dialogue with the Palestinians. Since the Israeli government claims that the occupation of the Gaza Strip has come to an end and it is relieved of its responsibility for the million and a half inhabitants there, it means that we have closed a border between two foreign territories: the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

This, of course, was not effective for a single moment. What happened resembled the events after the fall of the Berlin Wall that had cut the two parts of the city off from each other, just like the wall Israel built in Rafah: relatives who had not seen each other for decades ran and embraced and multitudes streamed to the other side in order to

see, shop cheaply and vent their excitement. Israel won again: the Egyptians have proven their ineffectiveness, the Palestinian authorities have shown that they cannot be relied upon and the masses have proven that they are wild and disorderly.

If the Egyptians had intervened violently, they would have shown themselves to be enemies of the Palestinian people. If the Palestinian policemen had shot at their own people, they would have lost any moral authority. It is clear that no Israeli iron wall can cut Gaza off from Sinai. The matter can be settled only through sensible arrangements.

And there are more nails: the Gaza harbor, the building of which Israel is trying to prevent, and the Gaza airport, the operation of which Israel is trying to obstruct. All this to prevent the “smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip” – a transparent pretext for leaving the Strip cut off from the world and continuing the occupation by other means.

Now that the “disengagement” is finished, as it seems, one can pass unequivocal judgment: The entire operation was incredibly stupid.

It was foolish because it was unilateral. It did not make cooperation possible, except on the lowest level of a cease-fire while the withdrawal was going on. The withdrawal could have been used for the building of psychological and political bridges between the two peoples. It could have convinced the Gaza population that it is now worthwhile to live in peace with us. This would have isolated the radical organizations, helped the Palestinian leadership and increased the security of the Israeli towns and villages adjoining the Strip.

If the whole operation had been carried out from the beginning in the spirit of a dialogue between equals, binding agreements could have been reached concerning the crossing between the Strip and Egypt, international supervision for preventing the illicit transfer of arms, the status of the synagogues, the sea and air connections, and all the rest. But Sharon did not want a dialogue with the Palestinians that could have become, God forbid, the precedent for a dialogue about the future of the West Bank.

Instead, everything was done in an atmosphere of distrust and enmity. Israeli officers and politicians – without exception – continued to behave and talk like military governors, using the language of threats and arrogance. Their behavior proved that the occupation is not really over – not in Gaza, and even less in the West Bank.

The Palestinian Joha is a cunning fellow. The Israeli Joha is just crude.