

{NOVEMBER 12, 2005}

A GREAT MIRACLE

North African immigrants on the periphery of French cities are torching them. North African immigrants on the periphery of Israel this week carried out a democratic revolution in our country.

In the Labor Party primaries, the members of “Eastern” descent voted massively for Amir Peretz and defeated Shimon Peres, who enjoyed the support of the upper class, mostly Ashkenazi, party members.

(“Eastern” is the now generally accepted term for Jews from Arab and other Muslim countries and their descendents, who used to be called, erroneously, “Sephardim”. The “Ashkenazim” are immigrants from European countries and their descendents, named for the Medieval Hebrew appellation for Germany.)

A week ago, this column called upon the Labor Party voters to elect Peretz. “Haaretz” published that article on election day. If it convinced even one person to change his or her vote, I am glad. Because the election of Peretz is, in my view, an event that far transcends party affairs. It may well change the future of the country.

I REMEMBER a debate that took place shortly after the 1982 Lebanon war. Some dozens of veterans of the radical Israeli peace movements gathered on the roof of a Tel-Aviv building and discussed the possibility of creating a new peace party, after the dissolution of the Sheli Party (which I had represented for some years in the Knesset).

I said that we would not succeed in effecting a real change if we did not reach the Eastern Jewish public. To this community, the peace camp looks like an Ashkenazi affair, belonging to the upper socio-economic strata. In our demonstrations, one hardly sees any Eastern faces. We have failed to reach half the Israeli population. As long as this situation prevails, there will be no peace.

Since then, 23 years have passed and the situation has not changed. The masses of the Eastern public have boycotted the whole Israeli “Left”. They particularly loathed the Labor Party, which in their eyes represented all the bad things: discrimination against the towns and neighborhoods where the Eastern public is concentrated,

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disdain for social values, support for an economic policy that makes the rich richer. They had special contempt for “ethnic politicians”, seeing them as mercenaries of the Ashkenazi elite.

The peace camp is identified with the “Left”. When, once a year, a hundred thousand people congregate (like this evening) in Tel-Aviv’s Rabin Square to commemorate the slain leader, the Eastern people are conspicuous by their absence (apart from members of the leftist youth movements.) Arguments often heard are “You are concerned only with the Arabs, not with us!” or “Ramallah is more important to you than Ramleh!” (Ramleh is an Israeli town mainly populated by North African immigrants.) The whole idea of peace is somehow considered an elitist, Ashkenazi affair, which does not concern the inhabitants of the Eastern towns.

There are several reasons for the deep-seated hatred felt by many Eastern people, even of the second and third generation, for the Labor Party. One of them is the feeling that North African immigrants in the 1950s were received in Israel with contempt by the establishment, which at the time entirely belonged to the Labor Party. The immigrants were expected to give up their cultural heritage and traditions in the Israeli “melting pot” that imposed a western, secular pattern.

From generation to generation, a (true) story was passed on about the Moroccan immigrants who were driven to a place in the middle of the desert and told to build a new town for themselves. When they refused to get out of the truck, its tipping mechanism was activated and they were literally “poured” out, as if they were a load of sand. Also, the immigrants felt humiliated when, upon arriving in the country, their hair was sprayed with DDT. True, the same happened to immigrants from the European refugee camps, but in the memory of the Eastern immigrants the insult has left an indelible mark.

The Eastern people of the second and third generation believed that the “Left” had created a closed world whose gates were shut to them. This feeling did not disappear when individuals of Eastern origin reached high position, entered the office of the President of the State, became cabinet ministers, professors or successful entrepreneurs. Statistics show that most of the Eastern people are to be found in the lower socio-economic classes, that many of them live below the poverty line and that they are overrepresented in the prisons. As a result, they voted en masse for Likud, which was also for a long time “outside” the establishment. Even to this day, the Likud is perceived as an opposition party – in spite of the fact that it has already been in power for a long time.

THERE ARE, of course, more profound reasons for the tension between the Eastern

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public and the peace camp. Most immigrants from Arab countries did not arrive as Arab-haters – they became Arab-haters here.

This is a well-known phenomenon in many countries: the most discriminated class of the ruling nation provides the most radical enemies of national minorities and foreigners in general. Those who are trampled-upon trample those beneath them. After being robbed of their self-esteem, they can regain some self-respect only by belonging to a “master race”. Thus the poor whites in the United States. The same in France.

Moreover, the Ashkenazi ruling class openly despises the Arab manners, diction and music that the Eastern immigrants brought with them. This overtly racist attitude towards the Arabs became a covert racist attitude towards the Eastern Jews. These reacted defensively by adopting an extreme anti-Arab attitude.

In the discussion 23 years ago I said that no one of us Ashkenazis can effect the necessary change. Only an authentic Eastern leader can imbue the Eastern community with a new spirit. He can remind them that for 1400 years, while European Jews saw pogroms, the Inquisition and the Holocaust, Jews were not persecuted in Muslim countries and, indeed, for long periods in Spain and elsewhere, were partners in a marvelous Muslim-Jewish symbiosis. Such a leader can give back to his community the pride in its past and the ambition to take up its natural mission of serving as a bridge between the two peoples.

That did not happen in the years that have passed. It can happen now.

THE ELECTION of Amir Peretz completely changes the political scene. For the first time, the Labor party is headed by an authentic representative of the North African community – not an “ethnic” politician, but a national leader who is proud of his roots. And indeed, before the election he declared that “the first thing I shall do after being elected is to organize a mercy killing for the Ethnic Demon.”

For the first time since 1974, the Labor Party is now headed by a person who did not grow up in the army or the defense establishment. His main agenda is social-economic. He puts an end to the abnormal situation that has prevailed in Israel for a long time, when the leaders of the “Left” supported an extremely rightist economic policy. He can put an end to the situation where the huge defense budget, together with the massive investment on the settlements, devour the resources needed for reducing the gap between rich and poor, which is now wider in Israel than in any other developed country.

From the beginning of his career, Peretz has never wavered in his consistent support for Israeli-Palestinian peace. His social message is connected with his peace message,

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which is as it should be.

All this is not yet a reason for dancing for joy in the streets. We may be disappointed. Peretz is facing a daunting series of tasks: to unify his party, to clear away the Peres heritage, to infuse new blood into the party, to win the next general election, to become Prime Minister, to introduce a new social policy, to make peace. He must now prove himself in all of these, phase by phase.

But there is room for optimism. The frozen fronts between the parties have been broken. It is the beginning of a Peretztroika. Whole communities can now change their allegiance. A new political scene can be created, one much more suited to peace-making.

In France, the discriminated North African neighborhoods are going up in flames. In our country, a member of the discriminated North-African community has become candidate for Prime Minister. Six weeks before Hanuka, the Jewish festival with the ancient adage “A Great Miracle Has Happened Here”, we have some reason to be happy.