

{MAY 29 2004}

TOMMY'S GRANNY

Sometimes a person “buys his world in one moment,” as the ancient Hebrew saying goes. This was done by the Minister of Justice, Yosef (“Tommy”) Lapid, when he uttered the words: “This old woman reminds me of my grandmother!”

This old woman, an inhabitant of the Rafah refugee camp whose house was demolished by the Israeli army, was immortalized by the camera while rummaging through the ruins of her home in a desperate search for her medicine. Two days later, journalists found her at the same place, still looking for her medicine under the debris.

Tommy's grandmother perished in the Holocaust. He was born in a Hungarian region in the north of Yugoslavia and survived the Holocaust in the Budapest ghetto. When he mentioned “my grandmother”, it was quite clear that he meant a victim of the Holocaust.

The phrase kicked up a storm. It may well have been the straw that broke the camel's back and induced the government to call a halt to the ongoing atrocity in Rafah.

Of course, the situation was ripe for that. The pictures of the killing and destruction in the poor town filled the TV news bulletins and newspaper pages throughout the world. The Al Jazeera TV station showed them several times every hour to tens of millions in the Arab world. In the Western world, too, the screens were full of them. The accumulated impact was terrible – the Israeli army was shown as an inhuman machine that destroyed the lives of hundreds of families without even noticing. The picture of a small boy struggling with a huge suitcase in an attempt to save some of his family's belongings says more than a thousands words from the official army liar.

The tank that was filmed shooting at unarmed protesters, who marched and clapped their hands in unison, brought the glass to overflowing. The pretexts and explanations by the official propaganda mercenaries only made things worse. One could sense the world shuddering.

But the military and political leadership was action-drunk. They announced that the operation would continue on an even larger scale. Forces amounting to a reinforced

army division were concentrated to deliver the coup de grace to Rafah. The intention – as testified by Lapid himself – was to demolish 3000 homes.

It seems that the Americans were active behind the scenes. George Bush is having enough trouble with Iraq. His policy is collapsing. The pictures from Rafah blackened still further the image of the Americans, Sharon's friends and partners, in the eyes of the Iraqis, whose heart goes out to the Palestinians. For the first time, the US representative abstained from vetoing a Security Council resolution criticizing Israel (even if in ridiculously moderate language). Undoubtedly, telephone conversations were held in basic American, rebuking Sharon much more harshly.

Inside Israel, too, the opposition gathered momentum. Day after day the radical peace organizations (almost alone, unfortunately) confronted the police in the cities and even broke through a roadblock on the border to the Gaza Strip. The Israeli media could not ignore these demonstrations anymore and grudgingly devoted some seconds to them. (Al Jazeera showed them for ten minutes, repeated again and again).

In the country's leadership the conviction gained ground that the military operation was a dismal failure. Apart from satisfying the thirst for revenge, no actual objective was achieved. Some tunnels were indeed discovered (two according to one version, four according to another) – but, for that, a few companies would have been enough. The “wanted” men got out of the area when they saw the preparations for the gigantic operation. The division sowed death and destruction without achieving anything.

In this situation, Lapid's utterance broke the dam. The action was stopped in the middle.

As could be expected, rightists attacked Lapid violently. How dare he offend the memory of the Holocaust victims? How can one make such a comparison? This is a vile manipulation by Lapid of his being a Holocaust survivor! (In Israel, it is customary that only rightists have the right to warn of a Second Holocaust, so they can compare Arafat to Hitler and the Palestinians to the Nazis.)

Lapid tried desperately to defend himself. He had no intention of making a comparison, God forbid. He had not mentioned the Holocaust at all. Besides, his second grandmother did survive the Holocaust.

So why did he utter the words in the first place? Cynics found many explanations: Lapid is a masterful demagogue. For years he has appeared in a TV talk-show and become famous for his abusive attacks on leftists, Arabs, orthodox Jews, oriental Jews and poor people. One remembers, for example, an unemployed blond woman who appeared on his talk-show and complained about her miserable circumstances. Lapid interrupted her rudely: “So where did you get the money to dye your hair?”

According to the cynics, Lapid feels that the wind is changing and so he is adapting

himself. He wants to prove that he is not Sharon's poodle, as many believe. He wants to shake off his responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Sharon government.

All this may well be true, but I feel that the phrase about the grandmother escaped him in a moment of real agitation, without calculation. Underneath all the diverse strata of Lapid's personality, the woman in Rafah touched the deepest of all. Buried beneath the politician and the TV entertainer there is the child from the Holocaust, and it is he that broke through at that moment.

There are moments in the life of a human being, when his most hidden quality is exposed, free from interests and calculations. I believe this is what happened at that moment.

The influence of the Holocaust on the character of the survivors, their children and children's children, is a complex phenomenon. Once, a high-school principal gave me the compositions written by his pupils, boys and girls, after a visit to Auschwitz. The reactions divided into two groups.

Most of the pupils wrote something like: "After seeing what the Nazis did to the Jews, my conclusion is that the defense of Israel and the Jewish people is the highest commandment, and for this end, everything is permitted."

A minority of the pupils wrote something like: "After seeing what the Nazis did to the Jews, my conclusion is that the Jewish State must be more humane than any other and set an example of how to behave towards minorities, so that this can never happen again."

It seems that in the heart of Tommy Lapid both these reactions exist side by side. In ordinary times, the first reaction manifests itself in his behavior. But it must be said in his favor that, in a moment of truth, a moment of profound agitation, the second reaction got the upper hand.

"Tommy's grandmother" became a symbol this week. Let's hope that it becomes a signpost.