

{NOVEMBER 13 2004}

REJOICE NOT . . .

Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth, Lest the Lord see it, and it displease him.” This biblical injunction (Proverbs 24:17) is one of the most profound Jewish moral tenets.

In this connection, Israel is very far from being a “Jewish State”, as it likes to define itself. The disgusting filth poured out over Yasser Arafat during the last few days in practically all the Israeli media makes one ashamed to be an Israeli.

The demonization of the Palestinian national leader, which has been the center-piece of Israeli propaganda for decades, continues even after his death. It seems that 37 years as occupiers have bestialized our society and left it bereft even of common decency. Ministers and fishmongers, TV icons and university professors, “leftists” and outright fascists tried to outdo each other in utter vulgarity.

Never was the huge gap in the perceptions of the two peoples more striking than on the day of Arafat’s funeral. While Israeli commentators and “experts on Arab affairs” – almost all of them veterans of the various intelligence agencies – described the late leader as a veritable monster, the epitome of cruelty, viciousness and corruption - a hundred thousand grief-stricken mourners in Ramallah exploded in a burst of emotions that nearly threw the funeral into pandemonium. If the Israeli army had not surrounded and isolated all Palestinian towns that day, more than a million people would have been there.

Gush Shalom, the only Israeli organization that openly mourned alongside the Palestinian people, decided to send a delegation to the funeral. All of us activists, women and men, wore on our breast a big sticker displaying the Israeli and Palestinian flags. The sheer pressure of the multitude split us up among the crowd. Throughout the hours of the funeral, we felt completely safe, even when thousands of shots were fired around us into the air to express grief and bereavement. We encountered hundreds of expressions of gratitude and friendship from Palestinians of all ages and stations in life.

I was in the middle of the melee when the helicopter bearing the coffin arrived from Cairo. Standing beside the grave among the Palestinian ministers, religious dignitaries and diplomats, I was vividly aware of the intense emotions of the huge crowd around us when the helicopter touched down. I remembered the scene of Gamal Abd-al-Nasser's funeral in 1970, when the masses surged forward and literally captured the body of their beloved leader from the soldiers, and felt that this was going to happen here at any moment. And it did.

No Arab leader – and very few world leaders – evoke such profound love and admiration among their people as this man, whom Israelis consider a veritable monster in human form. The Palestinians trusted him, relied on him, let him make all the big decisions that demanded courage, derived from him the strength to defy the intolerable conditions under a brutal occupation. Now, suddenly, incredibly, they found themselves alone, like orphaned waifs, in a world changed by the death of a man who left a huge gap behind him.

What will happen now? Arafat has brought his people from the edge of oblivion to the threshold of independence. But the battle for liberation is still far from over. The new leadership will have to face all the problems that confronted Arafat, without the towering authority of Arafat.

Abu Mazen, Abu-Ala and their colleagues are upright, decent people. I have known them for years, mostly from meetings with Arafat. But they have no deep roots in their people. It may be years before a strong leadership emerges.

At the moment, the Palestinians are united in their resolve to show the world that they can overcome this crisis in a civilized and responsible manner. This could have been a chance for Israel (and the United States, of course) to open a new chapter in relations with the Palestinian people.

What could have been done? Well, there should have been a show of goodwill with such gestures as the mass release of Palestinian prisoners, including the much respected Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti, who has been sentenced to serve five consecutive life sentences. Sieges should have been lifted and army operations at least reduced. Peace negotiations should have been announced for the near future.

The first test was, of course, the funeral itself. Arafat should have been buried in Jerusalem, according to his wishes. His interment in Ramallah will only strengthen the resolve of the Palestinians to fight until they are able to re-bury him there. The Minister of Justice, Tommy Lapid, an extreme rightist posing as a liberal, reached new heights of vulgarity when he declared that "Jewish Kings, not Arab terrorists, are buried in Jerusalem". Well, Menachem Begin, a terrorist who became a "king" and was buried in Jerusalem, could have served as a precedent.

But the most important thing is to enable the Palestinians to hold elections within 60 days of the death of the President, as their constitution demands. Actually, my last conversation with Arafat, a few weeks ago (when, by the way, he looked quite healthy) concerned elections. We agreed that they are impracticable while the Israeli army routinely assassinates potential candidates and makes movement between towns and villages almost impossible. How will candidates – if they remain alive – canvass their voters? How will they distribute material, hold meetings and debate policies, with tanks in the background and helicopter gunships hovering overhead?

This situation must be changed at once. All troops must be withdrawn at least from the areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (so-called Areas A and B, according to the Oslo agreements), freedom of movement restored, the assassination campaign stopped and, most importantly, international observers invited .

Will this happen? Probably not. Ariel Sharon has absolutely no interest in sitting opposite a democratically elected leadership enjoying international legitimacy and respect, perhaps even weakening his control over President Bush and obstructing his plan for the annexation of most of the West Bank . He will do everything to prevent elections, and, of course, blame the Palestinians.

As always, it is advisable to ignore what Sharon says - and pay close attention to what he does.