

{APRIL 9 2005}

DON'T SHOOT THE CROUPIER!

As a decent person, I am supposed to feel compassion for the Gush Katif settlers. To embrace them. To shed a tear for their plight. And indeed, there are grounds for compassion. Human beings uprooted from the soil where they have been living for decades. Middle-aged people compelled to start their lives all over again. Children born there obliged to move to schools in other places. People who have flourishing businesses having to construct new livelihoods, under who knows what conditions.

But however much I try, I really cannot feel much pity for them.

First of all, a matter of proportion. I myself have experienced such a trauma. And like me, millions of other immigrants who have come to this country in the last hundred years – immigrants from Russia, Poland, Germany, the Arab countries, the former Soviet Union. All of them have been through this experience, and almost all of them in much, much harder circumstances.

My father was 45 years old when he fled from Germany, together with his 39-year old wife and their four children. They were cut off from family and friends, settled in a far-away country and had to get used to another language, a foreign landscape, a very different climate, a different culture, a different society, different customs. Nobody gave them a cent, neither as compensation nor as assistance. Both, father and mother, affluent people in their homeland, had to support all of us by hard manual labor, to which they were quite unused. We lived in abject poverty.

Compared to that, the “suffering” of the settlers is a picnic.

We hear heart-rending cries about the “uprooting of Jews from the Land of Israel”. That is a quite mendacious slogan. Assuming the Gush Katif is indeed a part of Eretz Israel (and that is debatable) – the places to which they are asked to move are also very much in Israel. Ashkelon is an Israeli town, and so are Ashdod and Tel-Aviv. The expanses of the Galilee and the Negev are calling them, and there are no landscapes more Israeli than these.

From the sound of their pitiful outcries, one might get the impression that they are

being exiled to desolate lands beyond the Mountains of Darkness. But the distance from the soon-to-be-evacuated West Bank settlement Ganim to the Israeli town of Affule is like that between the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens in New York City. The distance between Berlin and Hamburg is much greater, as is that between London and Liverpool. How many people make a similar move every year?

One must remember that they have already done this once, with joy and enthusiasm, when they left Hertzlia, Jerusalem, Beth-Alpha and other places to go to the settlements.

“Jews evict Jews!” the settlers whimper. “In a democratic country, citizens are not forced to leave their homes!” Is that really so?

How many villages were displaced in Egypt in order to build the Aswan dam? OK, Egypt is no democracy. But in the democratic United States, how many dozens of towns and villages had to make way for the Tennessee dam? Every government displaces townships if the public interest demands it.

But it is not for these reasons that I find it hard to activate my ducts of compassion. The main reason is different.

Every settler without exception knew that he or she was moving to an area conquered in war, where another people lives, and which, moreover, was never annexed to Israel (unlike the Jerusalem area and the Golan Heights). In other words: he wagered on his future.

This week, government attorneys pointed out in the Supreme Court that every contract for the sale or rental of land in the occupied territories included a clause explicitly stating its temporary nature. That goes without saying: according to international law, Israel holds these territories by “belligerent occupation”, which is temporary by nature and exists only as long as the military government does. When peace comes, the military government disappears together with all its laws and decisions.

As far as the settlers are concerned, all of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are a huge Las Vegas. They cannot even say that they were not forewarned: my friends and I told them so from the very beginning of the occupation, both in the Knesset and in the media.

For many who came, the so-called “quality of life settlers”, it was a very attractive bet. Young couples, without the means to buy a house in Israel, could build a dream villa on their own plot in “the territories”, almost without any investment, or with a sum that would have been hardly enough for two rooms in some Israeli slum. Everything was almost free: generous infrastructure, spacious gardens for the children, beautiful landscape (with a view of picturesque Arab villages). Quality of life.

Entrepreneurs, who did not have the money to start a business in Israel, could do so in Gush Katif. Land in abundance for hothouses. Palestinian workers who had to labor for a pittance, since the occupation blocked all other possibilities of earning a living for their families. Or Thai workers imported from abroad, who were ready to work 12 hours a day for very low wages. Since Israeli law did not apply to Gush Katif, there was no nonsense like a minimum wage, annual vacations, sickness benefits or severance indemnities.

How wonderful to be an Israeli patriot in a place where Israeli laws do not apply!

Many exploiters now wrap themselves in the national flag in an attempt to save their privileges. But there is also, of course, a hard core of real nationalist-messianic ideologues. They settled there in order to take possession of "Greater Eretz-Israel" (or rather, in Hebrew, "The Whole of Eretz Israel") and prevent the Palestinian people from ever attaining their freedom in a state of their own. These settlers never hid their aim to uproot the Palestinian population and replace them with a Jewish one.

"This is not an evacuation, this is a transfer!" they now shout without any shame, using the accepted code word for ethnic cleansing. "Transfer"? But their own aim from the very beginning was to transfer the Palestinians! "Uprooting"? But they wanted to uproot the Palestinians, and they worked untiringly to achieve this. For many of them, that is even seen as a religious commandment.

"The government sent us there, and now it wants to expel us!"

Well, first of all, we never heard of anybody being forced to move to the occupied territories. Successive governments encouraged them, violated the law with a wink, robbed the public in order to pour the money into the settlements. True. But nobody was forced to go there. Soldiers get orders and have no alternative but to obey. Every settler had an alternative.

Secondly, he who appoints has the right to dismiss. He who sends has the right to recall. If the settlers are but emissaries, they can be sent here and there.

And, as far as simple human compassion is concerned - the settlers demand it from us, but never seem to feel it for anyone else. There is something disgusting about their inability to see the Other. It's a kind of emotional insanity: The mass expulsion of Arabs is OK. The expulsion of some thousands of Jews within the country is a "second Holocaust". The "uprooting of Jews" from 20-30 year old settlements is a horrendous crime. The uprooting of 750 thousand Palestinians, who have been living on their land for hundreds or thousands of years, was a just act of the "most moral army in the world". One has to pity a Jewish child who will be compelled, together with his pals, to get used to a new school, but why waste pity on an Arab child who was born and grew up in a squalid, poverty-stricken refugee camp?

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Not to mention the acts of the settlers in Hebron, Yitzhar, Tapukh and many other places: shooting inhabitants, carrying out pogroms in the villages, forcibly taking over the land, destroying wells, spraying fields with poison, uprooting olive trees and stealing their fruit, and so on.

For all these reasons, it is very difficult to pity them. The “quality of life” and the “messianic vision” settlers - both have placed big bets. They wagered on their future. They bet and lost.

As did the million French settlers in Algeria, who were kicked out and returned to France, all within a few weeks, when the country attained its independence.

In spite of all this, I do not object to paying them generous compensation. On the contrary, immediately after the Oslo agreement I took part in addressing a public appeal of Gush Shalom to the then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, calling on him to start immediately paying generous compensation to settlers who were ready to leave voluntarily.

Rabin refused. Worse, he continued to enlarge the settlements at a furious pace, as did all his successors. Even those settlers who were ready to leave were unable to do so and were practically imprisoned in their settlements, since they could not sell their homes and start life anew somewhere else. As a matter of fact, this remains their situation to this very day.

We said generous compensation. But what is “owed” to them?

A gambler who has lost his money at roulette cannot expect compensation. As a measure of generosity, and in order to smooth their return home, it would be wise to pay the settlers the money they invested in the first place, and that is precious little. And again, out of generosity, I am in favor of paying to help them start a new life in Israel. As a humanitarian gesture, and also as a hint to the West Bank settlers that it would be worth their while to go home as soon as possible.

For Ariel Sharon, who has pushed the settlers, spoiled them and paved their way, it must be difficult to utter the words. But we, the citizens of Israel, can say: Comrades, you have wagered in a big way and lost.

It is human for you to shout and to tear at your hair. But there is no point trying to kill the croupier. You must get over your compulsion to gamble.

And if we, the citizens of Israel, are ready to pay you from our own pocket generous compensation for the jettons you have lost, you might at least have the grace to say “thank you”.