

{AUGUST 20, 2005}

THIS WAS THE DAY

August 18th, 2005 – a milestone in the history of the State of Israel. This was the day on which the settlement enterprise in this country went into reverse for the first time.

True, the settlement activity in the West Bank continues at full speed. Ariel Sharon intends to give up the small settlements in the Gaza Strip in order to secure the big settlement blocs in the West Bank.

But this does not diminish the significance of what has happened: it has been proven that settlements can be dismantled and must be dismantled. And important settlements have indeed been dismantled.

The settlement enterprise, that had always gone forwards, only forwards, in a hundred overt and covert ways, has been turned back. For the first time. (Yamit and its settlements were not in Eretz Israel, and therefore their evacuation in 1982 did not constitute an ideological break. But this time it happened in “the Land of our Fathers”.)

A historic event. A message for the future.

This was the day on which the message of the Israeli peace movement finally got through. A great victory, for all to see.

True, it is not us who did it. It was done by a man far removed from us. But, as the Hebrew saying goes: “The work of the righteous is done by others.” Others: meaning those who are not righteous, who may even be wicked.

At the beginning of the settlement activity, during one of my clashes with Golda Meir in the Knesset, I told her: “Every settlement is a land-mine on the road to peace. In due course you will have to remove these mines. And let me tell you, Ma’am, as a former soldier, that the removal of mines is a very unpleasant job indeed.”

If I am angry, profoundly sad and frustrated today, it is because of the price we all have paid for this monstrous “enterprise”. The thousands killed because of it, Israelis and Palestinians. The hundreds of billions of Shekels poured down the drain. The moral decline of our state, the creeping brutalization, the postponement of peace for dozens of years. Anger with the demagogues of all stripes that started and continued

this March of Folly, out of stupidity, blindness, greed, intoxication with power or sheer cynicism. Anger over the suffering and destruction wrought on the Palestinians, whose land and water were stolen, whose houses were destroyed and whose trees were uprooted – all for the “security” of these settlements.

I have also sympathy for the plight of the inhabitants of Gush Katif, who were seduced by the settlers’ leadership and successive Israeli governments to build their life there – seduced either by messianic demagoguery (“It’s God’s will”) or by economic temptations (“A luxury villa surrounded by lawn, where else could you dream of this?”) Many people from the remote townships in the Negev, stricken with poverty and unemployment, succumbed to these temptations. And now it is finished, the sweet dream has evaporated and they have to start their life anew – albeit with generous compensation.

The television networks did us a great favor when they reran, between the scenes of the evacuation, old footage of the founding of these settlements. We heard again the speeches of Ariel Sharon, Joseph Burg, Yitzhak Rabin (yes, he too), Hanan Porat and others – the whole litany of nonsense, deceit and lies.

During the last few years, the peace camp has been seized by a fashion for despair, despondency and depression. I keep repeating: there is no cause for this. In the long run, our approach is winning. Now it must be emphasized: the Israeli public would not have supported this operation, and Sharon would not have been able to carry it out, if we had not prepared public opinion by voicing ideas that were far removed from the national consensus and repeating them countless times over the years.

This was the day when the settlers’ ideology collapsed.

If there is a God in heaven, He did not come to their rescue. The messiah stayed at home. No miracle occurred to save them.

Many of the settlers were so sure that a miracle would indeed happen at the very last moment, that they did not take the trouble to pack their belongings. On television one could see homes where the uneaten meal was still on the table and the family photos on the wall. Sights I remember well from the 1948 war.

All the boasts and bluster of the pair of settlers’ leaders, Wallerstein and Lieberman (who always remind me of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the two villains in “Hamlet”) went up in smoke. The masses did not stream into the streets all over Israel and use their bodies to block the forces sent to empty the settlements. The hundreds of thousands, including the opponents of the disengagement, remained at home, glued to their television sets. The mass refusal of soldiers to obey orders, promised and incited by the rabbis, just did not happen.

At the decisive moment, the reality we always knew about was exposed for all to see:

the messianic-nationalist sect, the leadership of the settlers, is isolated. In their behavior and style, they are foreign to the Israeli spirit. The hundreds of settlers who have lately been seen on television, all the men wearing yarmulkes, all the women wearing long skirts, with their interminable dancing and their endlessly repeated ten slogans, look like the members of a closed sect from another world.

“It looks as if we are not one but two peoples: a people of the settlers and a people of settler-haters!” moaned one of the rabbis when his settlement was emptied. That is accurate. In the confrontation between the lines of soldiers, who were drafted from all strata of society, and the lines of the settlers, it is the soldiers who, in this unique situation, represent the people of Israel, while the settlers embody the negative side of the Jewish ghetto. The unending bouts of collective weeping, the meticulously staged scenes designed to evoke images of pogroms and death marches, the monstrous imitation of the frightened boy with his arms raised from the famous holocaust photo – all these were reminiscent of a world that we thought we had shaken off when we created the State of Israel.

At the moment of truth, the Yesha leaders found that no part of Israeli society stood up for them, except the gangs of male and female pupils of the religious seminaries, who they had sent to Gush Katif. The bedlam they created on the roof of the Kfar Darom synagogue, when they viciously attacked the soldiers, put an end to their hopes of winning public support. But even before that, the settlers had lost the crucial battle for public opinion when their real purpose was revealed: to impose by force a faith-based, messianic, racist, violent, xenophobic regime, with its back to the world at large.

But most importantly, this was the day when a new chance was born for achieving peace in this tortured land.

A great opportunity. Because the Israeli democracy has won a resounding victory. Because it has been proven that settlements can be dismantled without the sky falling. Because the Palestinians have a leadership that wants peace. Because it has been proven that even the radical Palestinian organizations hold their fire when Palestinian public opinion demands it.

But it must be clearly stated: this withdrawal carries with it a great danger: if we stop in the middle of jumping over it, we shall fall into the abyss.

If we do not progress rapidly from here to a settlement with the Palestinian people, Gaza will indeed turn into a platform for missiles – as Binyamin Netanyahu is prophesying (which may well be a self-fulfilling prophecy). In the eyes of the Palestinians, and the entire world, the withdrawal from Gaza is – first of all – a result of the armed Palestinian resistance. If in the coming weeks we make no progress towards a negotiated agreement, a third intifada will surely break out, and the whole

country will go up in flames.

We must immediately start serious negotiations, declaring in advance that within a specific time-span the occupation will end with the establishment of the State of Palestine. All the main elements of the settlement are already known: a solution for Jerusalem in line with the Clinton proposal (“What is Arab will belong to Palestine, what is Jewish will belong to Israel”), withdrawal to the Green Line with an agreed exchange of territories, a solution of the refugee problem in accord with Israel.

This was the day that will go down in history as the day on which a great hope was born.

Not the beginning of the end in the struggle for peace, but certainly the end of the beginning.

A small step towards peace, a giant step for the State of Israel.