

Injustice, Prejudice, and Peace

■ Katya Gibel-Azoulay

The announcements for the Tikkun Israel Conference which took place in Jerusalem in late June featured the following question: "The Peace Movement... it has the best ideas, but it can't win the support to implement them. Why?" Let me suggest five obstacles, in the search for an answer.

Moral myopia is not only a disease that permitted half the world to care only about gulags while totally ignoring apartheid, and the other half of the world to care only about the oppression of third world people while blinding itself to the inhumanity being practiced in the name of Marxism. Moral myopia is also what makes it possible for some Israelis represented at the Tikkun conference to show compassion for the plight of Arab Palestinians but to have no patience for the concerns of Arab Jews.

Elitism on the Left is not unique to Israel. Those familiar with American political movements of the sixties, remember the New Left's failure to attract working class white, black, Latino and ethnic support. It was a decade permeated with male chauvinism. Similar failures in countries where so-called socialist revolutions were victorious were exemplified by leaders who thought they had all the answers and could learn nothing from the people they presumed to lead - an attitude which inevitably led them to betray their promises and principles.

Among the listed participants in the discussions on social issues, was a Knesset member who, when asked in an interview in the now defunct Israeli weekly, *Koteret Rashit* (11/86), "Don't you represent the problem of the Left: so Ashkenazi, so intellectual," responded: "What should I do - grow a mustache and wear a large gold Chai?" (the reference is to MK Dedi Zucker - ed.). Some years earlier, in my presence, he had rejected a suggestion to organize in poorer, larger Oriental neighborhoods: "I'm Polish, I have an M.A., what do I have in common with those people?"

Another participant was horrified when approached by a resident of Jerusalem's much

maligned Neve Yaacov neighborhood about the possibility of organizing for the peace camp there. Her comment: we don't go to those places. The kind of elitist hypocrisy responsible for drawing fictitious red lines between neighborhoods like Ramat Eshkol and French Hill, where the peace camp did organize, and neighborhoods like Neve Yaacov and Pisgat Zeev, where they did not, is here exposed. All four Northeast Jerusalem neighborhoods are to Palestinians "occupied territory"; to most Jewish Israelis, even in the peace camp, they are part of united Jerusalem. But the first two are predominantly Ashkenazi and middle-class, while the latter two are neither. These two personalities highlight why too often in Israel, as elsewhere, people supposedly providing solutions are the biggest problem.

A second example of why "the Left" has failed to win greater support is the area of education. Twenty-five years ago, Israeli leaders were beginning to talk about the failure of Israeli education, particularly as it related to the children of immigrants from Afro-Asian countries, and especially those of North African origin, the largest group of whom were Moroccan. At that time, the Establishment blamed this group's "lower cultural values" and "Levantine" ways for the failure. As one who was a proud member of Hashomer Hatzair, I must nevertheless point out that from 1948-1977 the Israeli Establishment was Labor and the Left. In 1966, approximately 59 percent of Israeli Jewish children entering kindergarten were of Afro-Asian origin, but less than three percent were in graduate school. And you know what? The ratios have hardly changed in 1991.

This is not the distant past which can be forgotten by the victims as we move happily ahead. Refusing to discuss the ethnic issue honestly won't make it disappear. On June 14, 1991, the Jerusalem weekly *Kol Ha'ir* featured an article on one of Jerusalem's most selective and prestigious high schools which had been forced to integrate. Teachers and students were quoted, insisting that integration had lowered the school from its former prestigious position. The terminology used to describe relations in the school reflects the tradition of ugly prejudice referred to above.

The subject of conferences - who gets invited and why - is a third obstacle which must be con-

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fronted. The theme of the Tikkun conference is one which the established "peace movement" in Israel would not ordinarily have undertaken. Unfortunately, Tikkun editor, Michael Lerner, was poorly advised. The organizers will claim that they went to great lengths to involve Mizrachi intellectuals and activists. The fact is there is a long list of writers, journalists, politicians, actors, academics, and social activists who should have been, but were not, invited. Could it be that the independent and outspoken stance of these personalities, their vision of Israel as part of the Middle East - and not as a second-rate Switzerland - may have much more to do with their absence than any excuses later offered?

While more international conferences may not be what is needed to achieve our goals, it is nevertheless to be hoped that when planned in the future consideration will be given to the possibility of meetings in Cairo, Casablanca, or Toledo, rather than Brussels, Geneva, or Washington. The main language does not have to be English. If western language is used as a common denominator, why not give equal time to French, the age-old lingua franca of international diplomacy, and, incidentally, one in which many Palestinians and Israelis of North African and Middle Eastern background feel at ease?

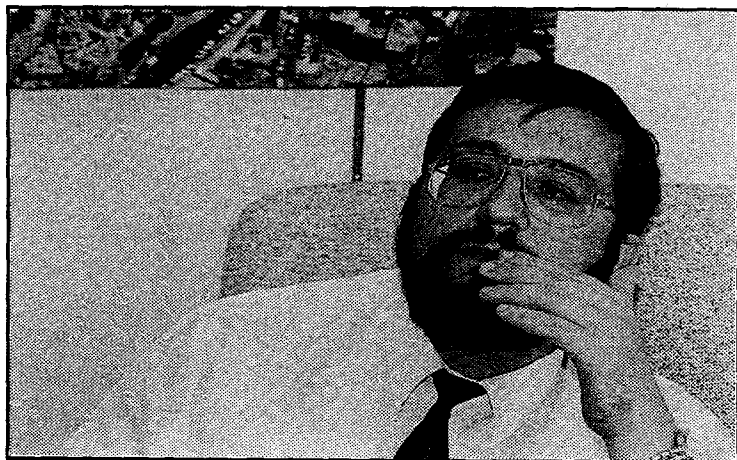
Let me conclude with this: the phenomenon of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, the first well-organized and successful political party of Sephardim in the history of Israel, and the miracle of Operation Solomon, which finally brought home the bulk of Ethiopian Jewry - have become interwoven. Absorption Minister Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz's bombastic denunciation of kibbutzim as a proper haven for the Jewishly committed Ethiopian immigrants brought down on his head a wave of verbal hostility in the Knesset unprecedented even in a chamber

that has seen many vicious personal attacks. (One of the founders of Shas, Peretz left the party after it supported Labor's successful bid to topple the national unity government in March 1990, and now forms an independent one-man faction in the Knesset - ed.). Prominent Shas leader, Interior Minister Rabbi Arieh Deri, is currently under investigation for corruption. Shas, which won six seats in the present Knesset, is not only a party of the ultra-Orthodox; it is a party where Moroccan Torah scholars are prominent. However, the source of Shas's strength among its heavily North African constituency is its network of schools.

The problem of education in Israel is acute for parents of limited means. Free public education in Israel is a myth: parents pay 300-1,000 NIS a year per child - for everything ranging from textbooks to mandatory class trips, not to speak of the necessity for expensive private tutoring if one wishes to prepare children for the matriculation exam, without which university education is inaccessible. Even for parents who are not ultra-Orthodox, perhaps not even very observant, but who want their child to receive the best possible education at the least possible cost - with long school days, free transportation, and lunch - Shas has provided a desperately needed alternative. Thus for many Oriental Jews, Rabbi Peretz's offensive theological positions pale when compared to the volume and size of the attack on a leader they view as their own.

If Shas Interior Minister Deri is found guilty he should be punished. But the point is he has already been charged, prosecuted, and found guilty by the media. Some may recall that there was once a congressman from Harlem, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell. The majority of black Americans rallied behind him because of his genuine achievements on their behalf, and their knowledge that his guilt was far less than that of many of his white peers. They understood that he was pushed out of Congress because the prejudice of the time could not bear a strong black man in power. This story has much to do with Rabbis Deri and Peretz. Of course, no simple parallels can be drawn, but the lesson is that all prejudice - whenever and in whatever form it appears - must be rooted up before society can move forward.

What does this list of injustice and prejudice have to do with strategies for peace? The first step in formulating any new strategy must be an admission on the part of the current leaders of the peace camp and the progressive movement that more than innocent mistakes were made in the past. They must accept responsibility for a cultural chauvinism that alienated masses of people. We *can* overcome, we *can* have peace, we *can* have a healthy society. But only if those who created the gap now make the effort to humbly bridge it. □



Shas Interior Minister Arieh Deri - found guilty by the media?