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ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN ARABS

A Review of Recent History
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Prologue

Emblazoned on the Ark of Temple Beth Am is the teaching of the Prophet Zechariah, "Not by military power, nor by force, but by My spirit", saith the Lord." My great hero is not the military zealot Bar Kochba but the antimilitaristic prophet Jeremiah. Nonetheless, the writer does not presume to say that war is never justified (certainly it was the only way to deal with Hitler). As I read Jewish history, however, its main emphasis has been on the search for peaceful means to solve disputes of either a personal or international nature. That is why Hillel taught, "Be amongst those who pursue peace...", and Isaiah taught, "Behold the time comes," saith the Lord, "when nations shall beat their swords into ploughs...and shall learn war no more."

History records that from 135 C.E. (A.D.), following the disastrous defeat of the Zealot revolt against Rome, the Jews as a people have in the main practiced the art of pacifism until 1948. That is 1800 years of non-violent reaction to their oppressors, in spite of every conceivable torment. During this era, when Jews were driven from one country to another, they took refuge in their religious studies and in their faith that it was important to God that they maintain their particular religious outlook. Their defense against their attackers was in their allegiance to their tradition, and their weapon was children. No matter how many Jews died in pogroms or by guillotine, there were always more Jews to take their place.

But Adolph Hitler put an end to the Jewish pacifistic pattern of survival. He taught them that there are indeed times when one must strike back or be exterminated. The European Jews who survived Hitler were determined that they would defend themselves in the future - with the same weapons that their attackers used.

Modern History

As the Jews suffered from anti-Semitism in Europe, more and more of them traveled to the ancient Jewish homeland in search of the peace that eluded them. From the time that the Jews left Judea in large numbers (135 C.E.), no other people had established a nation in this harsh land. Clarence Darrow visited Palestine (as the Romans called Israel) in the 1920s and said, "It is a land of sand and stones, and the stones are there to keep the wind from blowing the sand away."

There was never a large population in Palestine down to modern times until the Jews started arriving in large numbers. As the Jews set up towns and villages, the Arabs immigrated in increasing numbers, deriving incidental benefits from the Jewish settlers. With the large influx of Jews fleeing Hitler, the Jewish drive for an independent state in Palestine, the ancient homeland, intensified. The Jews had once been promised all of Palestine (including Transjordan) by Great Britain, the mandate power over Palestine after World War One, as designated by the League of Nations. Britain, however, assigned Transjordan to the Arabs and created an Arab state where there had never been one, ~~out of a part of the land of Palestine.~~

In 1948, the United Nations, following World War II, divided what remained of Palestine between Arabs and Jews. The Jews reluctantly accepted their small partitioned land, because they wanted above all to have an independent state where they would be responsible for their own fate. The Arabs refused to accept their partitioned land, even though it was the second state assigned to them out of the original land of Palestine. Instead, the Arabs chose war, and they attacked the new state of Israel in 1948.

What has followed this initial use of organized force has been a tragedy for all concerned. The Arabs (by which we mean those Arabs who have lived in Palestine plus all the other surrounding Arab states) refused to accept the truce that came out of the war in 1948. There were refugees on both sides from that war and more refugees after each succeeding war, yet the Arabs (with the exception of Egypt) have shown themselves incapable of recognizing the existence of the tiny state of Israel.

The Arabs have said over and over, we can accept the Jews as a minority in a "democratic state" ruled by Arabs. We cannot accept them as an independent state. Even while bemoaning the fate of the Arab refugees, the Arabs have planned war after war against Israel, never accepting any of the blame that their intransigence was a major factor in the existence of refugees at all. The Arabs like to point to Israel's warlike nature and to Israel's hatred of the Arabs. Does this charge ring true? ~~but the Arabs have used every device they could to attack the Israelis and refused to make peace~~

Israel's Search For Peace

Always, Israel has insisted that it is willing to sit down with the Arabs to talk peace. When Sadat came to Jerusalem (a visit arranged by prior talks between him and Israelis), he found that he was a hero amongst the Israelis. The nation that other Arabs accuse of being a warmonger and seeking only the acquisition of land willingly surrendered to the Egyptians the huge Sinai peninsula and its rich oil fields in exchange for a peace pact. Perhaps never before in human history has a nation surrendered hard won land when it had been the victor in the battle. (Has the United States returned Texas to Mexico?).

Within Israel, those Arabs who chose to remain after the war of 1948 have attained a higher standard of living than all other Arabs except those who live in Saudi Arabia and the small Persian Gulf States.

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Jordan with... The so-called West Bank towns in the 1948 war... even as they control... a met... part of the city of Jerusalem. In effect, Jordan had thus owned the land it possessed on the other side of the Jordan River. In the 1967 war, Israel had driven the Jordanians out of Jerusalem.

These Israeli Arabs have all the rights of citizens except the right to carry arms, and this restriction is made necessary by the continued hostility of the surrounding Arab nations. I happened to be in Israel after the "Six Day War" of 1967. The first demand of the defeated Arabs who found themselves now within the Israeli orbit was for higher wages for teachers in the public schools than Jordan was paying them! Defeat for many Arabs has been an improvement in their way of life.

Refugees

The Israelis who defended themselves in the war of 1948 (the war for independence) suffered huge casualties for a tiny nation. They fought with few and inferior weapons. They lost some of the partitioned land to the Arabs, and in the push and pull of battle they gained some.

On both sides, there were a large number of refugees in this war initiated by the Arabs. From this war and the war of 1967 ("The Six Day War"), which was instituted by the blockading of Israeli ports by the Arabs, there were hundreds of thousands of refugees ON BOTH SIDES. The Arabs have made much of their 500,000-600,000 refugees. The Jews have not publicized their refugees as well, but the numbers were approximately equal. The difference is that the Jews eagerly absorbed the Jewish refugees from Arab lands, but the Arabs refused to absorb their own refugees. The result has been that the world is constantly reminded of the Arab refugees, but it does not see the Jewish refugees.

But, some Arabs say, the Palestinian Arabs were driven from THEIR land. It is hard to say, in the light of history, that the Arabs were in Palestine before the Jews, but it is historically true that Jews were in Iraq and Egypt in large numbers BEFORE the Arabs! How tragic it was for Jews to leave Iraq (ancient Babylonia) when they were descendents of those who came to that land in 586 BCE at the time of the Babylonian conquest. Arabs did not come to Iraq in significant numbers until a thousand years later. And how tragic it was for Egyptian Jews to be forced to leave Egypt, as a result of the modern wars, when hundreds of thousands of Jews had lived in Egypt from the sixth century BCE and had helped to establish Alexandria as the New York of ancient times, while the Arabs did not come to Egypt in large numbers until a thousand years later.

So where is the pity for the Jews who had to leave ancestral lands because of the Arab induced wars (which Israel was fortunate enough to win)?

It is of course true that it is a pity that there were any refugees, and the Arab refugees are to be twice pitied; first, because they let the other Arab nations convince them to be the front line of the Arab offensive against Israel, and, secondly, because their brothers, the Arab nations, have refused to absorb them as Israel has absorbed the Jewish refugees. The Arabs would have us believe that the existence of Palestinian Arab refugees is an Israeli problem, but what about Arab culpability in initiating the series of wars? If the Arabs had accepted the U.N. partition plan of 1948, as the Israelis did, there would be no refugees - no Arab refugees, and no Jewish refugees.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.)

If there were no P.L.O., even the Palestine Arab refugee problem would probably have been settled long ago, as the Egyptian-Sinai problem was settled. The P.L.O. is that extremist, terrorist organization which has insisted that the Israelis must be driven into the sea. At times, they have modified this claim to say that they will accept an Israeli minority living within a "democratic" Arab state. What the P.L.O. will not accept is an independent Israel, however tiny. Only yesterday, June 14, 1982, I heard the P.L.O. representative in the U.S. repeat these claims on television, even as the Israeli army surrounds the remnant of the P.L.O. forces in Beirut.

The P.L.O. has continued to strike at Israel down through the years, infiltrating its borders, dropping bombs on innocent people, bombarding the Galilean settlements of Israel. Who can forget the P.L.O. representatives who herded Israeli school children into a large room in a Galilean town and machine gunned them? And who can forget the P.L.O. representatives who stopped a bus on an Israeli road and machine gunned everyone in the bus? Who can forget the "capture" of the Israeli airport in Tel Aviv by P.L.O. inspired terrorists who machine gunned innocent travelers, most of them Christians on their way to Jerusalem?

Israel has not forgotten the P.L.O., nor has it forgotten the history of the wars in other countries instigated by the P.L.O.

The Lebanese Wars

In recent weeks, Americans have had a ringside seat viewing the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Many of us were aghast. We couldn't understand why Israel was doing this to those seemingly helpless Palestine Arabs.

To understand what is happening in Lebanon, we have to know all the history described above, and we have to remind ourselves that this is not the first invasion of Lebanon in recent years. Further, it is quite possible that the Lebanese will regain their independence from the prior invaders, if the Israelis succeed.

How did the P.L.O. come to Lebanon? It is not a happy tale. The P.L.O. road to Lebanon winds through Jordan, for in the 1948 war, Jordan captured the West Bank cities that the U.N. had assigned to the Palestinian Arabs. In effect, the 1948 war provided Jordan with the gain of the territory which should have gone to the Palestinian Arabs, yet no Arab nation complained about this. Almost twenty years later, the Palestinian Arabs with the help of Jordan and the other Arab nations initiated what has come to be called "The Six Day War," in 1967. Up to this time, Arab armies had controlled the West Bank, but now in response to the Arab attack, the Israelis drove the Arab armies out of the West Bank and across the Jordan River. More territory had been gained by the Israelis but only in defense against another Arab attack.

Many of the Palestinian Arabs now fled with their armies across the river into Jordan. They had now twice been the victims of THEIR OWN AGGRESSION.

Now residing in Jordan, the Palestinian Arabs permitted the P.L.O., their extremist group, to gain more and more power. In time, the P.L.O. and King Hussein were engaged in a battle for the control of the government of Jordan. At that time, Hussein did not speak of the "poor refugees." On the contrary, he amassed his total fire power and brought it to bear on the Palestinians. American newspapermen described the battles as "the most vicious we have ever seen, and between brothers!"

Hussein, who had at first been hospitable to the Palestinian Arabs, decided that they were a divisive force and drove them into Lebanon. Lebanon was a peaceful country which maintained a delicate balance between its Christian and Moslem populations. Lebanon had never made war on Israel, and its relationship with that country was relatively good.

In time, the Palestinian Arabs, led by their militaristic leaders in the P.L.O., became a divisive force in Lebanon. They were soon engaged in bitter battles with both Christian and Moslem forces. The Lebanese government fell. The statistics in this war are staggering, fifty thousand killed and a quarter of a million wounded! We Americans have forgotten that gory battle, and all started by the (innocent?) P.L.O.

Ostensibly to help stabilize things, Syria decided to enter the war, and a second invasion of Lebanon in modern times began (The P.L.O. invasion was the first). Amongst Syria's objectives was to seize the land that would give it a position from which it might point long range missiles at Israel. From its vantage point, Israel could see that friendly Lebanon had now become a haven for two of its primary enemies which had started multiple wars against it.

Over recent months, the P.L.O. had been building up its military forces and stockpiling a huge supply of armaments. It has bombarded Israeli cities in the Galilee and sent its terrorists across the long border with Israel. Meanwhile, the P.L.O. has infiltrated the Arab cities of the West Bank and sabotaged the Arab leaders there who sought to cooperate with the Israelis. Revolts against the Israelis in West Bank cities have sharply intensified as the P.L.O. increased its leverage there. And then came the shooting of the Israeli diplomat in London, the second such shooting in recent weeks.

For American Jews, the T.V. portrayal of the Israeli advance into Lebanon has not been easy to take. We still think of Jews as the pacifists who "turned the other cheek" for 1800 years. We did not witness on T.V. the P.L.O. invasion of Lebanon and the 50,000 deaths in that war, nor did we witness the Syrian invasion.

It is not necessary for us to justify the Israeli incursion into Lebanon. As American Jews we do not make decisions for Israelis, and we could not possibly understand what they have been through or why they have to do what they do. We do know that one Israeli life is precious to a people which lost six million to Hitler, so there must have been extreme provocation for what has taken place. Israeli casualties in such a move were inevitable, and Palestinians are not the only ones to die in Lebanon.

We do see now on T.V. that villages in southern Lebanon are being returned to the Christians who were driven out of them by the P.L.O. We see the Christians cheering the Israelis, and we see, surprisingly, Arab Lebanese Moslems who are excited about the prospect of regaining control of their country from the P.L.O. It is perhaps good for the cause of future peace also that Syrian long range missiles have been destroyed in Lebanon.

Maybe when the smoke clears what the Israelis have sought will come true. Lebanon will once again become a country friendly to the Israelis and not a base for terrorists and enemies of Israel.

Meanwhile, maybe the Palestinian Arabs will learn something too, that there is more to be gained by peaceful diplomacy, a la Sadat and Egypt, than by giving power to their military extremists, the P.L.O. Maybe now, in time, we can hope for peaceful solutions on the West Bank. And maybe now, Israelis can read Zechariah once again and enjoy the luxury of trying to fulfill his prophecy, "Not by military power...but by My spirit," saith the Lord."

We pray for that.

* See "The Anguish of the Jews," Father E.H. Flannery, Macmillan Publishers, N.Y. 1965