

SYMBOLIC CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

I may be the only one I know who wasn't surprised when Chairman Arafat walked out of the Camp David meeting in September 2000. Prime Minister Barak had offered concessions which were astonishing by any measure, and I am not sure he could have got them through the Knesset -- or through a national referendum -- even if Arafat had accepted them. He offered complete control of the Jordan valley and of neighborhoods in Jerusalem, and shared sovereignty in the Old City and on the Temple Mount. Nobody had ever offered those kind of terms. But to (almost) everybody's astonishment, Arafat turned them down and walked out, with Mrs. Albright chasing after him in her high heels, shouting to close the gate before his car pulled out. But it was too late.

The people who were not surprised were the ones who realized that this dispute was not about real estate at all. I have put this argument before, and have found it useful enough to repeat again this year. I have argued that there are two kinds of conflict. One is what -- for lack of a better word -- I call practical. These are the disputes for which you go to a lawyer, to court or to arbitration. Disputes about money, debt, crime, property, abuse, inheritance, contract, violence, etc. One pays a fine, or goes to jail, or reaches a compromise (or cuts the baby in half) in the resolution of practical conflict. The point is that there is a resolution, a solution, which, by hook or by crook, satisfies the parties involved. And that's the end of it.

Symbolic conflict is different. There is no compromise in symbolic conflict. It is a zero-sum game. One side wins when the other side loses. One is alive when the other is dead. But Americans -- who at heart don't really understand un-solvable conflicts and think that everything can be solved by good will, fancy engineering, and a lot of money -- are in fact in the middle of a symbolic conflict right now. It's about abortion. There is no compromise on the issue of abortion because abortion is an issue of faith. Either you may or you may not. Non-compromisable. And abortion is not the only symbolic conflict Americans have known. Women's suffrage and Prohibition were two others. Both of them ended when one side collapsed.

And then there was the most terrible of American symbolic conflicts, slavery. By 1860 it is arguable that slavery was hardly an economic issue any more. The real issue was symbolic; when Thomas Jefferson said that all men are created equal, did he mean black men too? Do they have inalienable human rights? Whatever Jefferson's own private answer, this was a classic symbolic conflict. It was not capable of compromise. And indeed slavery ended only after a dreadful civil war when one side crushed the other.

That's symbolic conflict. No compromise. And therefore the bottom line of our talk is that there will never be "peace" between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East -- never -- just as there will be never be peace between the Right-to-Life and Pro-Choice. The best one can hope for -- in the Middle East as in America -- is to accomplish what America does seem to have accomplished on the issue of abortion: to remove the violence from the equation. American society can live with basic, profound, un-bridgeable differences on the issue of abortion provided the sides agree, as they have, that violence is not a legitimate weapon in the political argument. That's not peace. It's no-war, but I will certainly settle for that in the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

There are in fact practical issues which can be negotiated between Israelis and Palestinians. There are issues of water and sewerage, and borders, check posts, telephones, workers, money, taxes, and things like that. But the heart of the argument is symbolic.

Legitimacy

Israel claims to be a legitimate nation. A nation which is there by right, not by favor. Not a 19th century colonial conquest nor a gift from Lord Balfour, the League of Nations, the United Nations, or anybody else. Israel claims legitimacy:

- a) for historical reasons – David Was King in Jerusalem in 1000 BCE, and the Jews as a discrete, identifiable community have been here ever since.
- b) for legal reasons – every inch of land upon which the Jews sat on November 29th 1947, the date of the United Nations partition of Palestine, had been purchased for full value from its legal owners, and
- c) for what can only be called religious reasons. You don't have to be a religious maniac to believe that there is something more than the national revival of the Jewish people involved in the re-establishment of Israel. There is a wide-spread feeling that in returning to their land, the Jews are fulfilling some part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. That is religious Zionism – unintelligible, of course, to anyone who doesn't believe it – but very commonly held nonetheless. Not only among the Jews, by the way. Religious Zionism is not only a Jewish phenomenon. It is basic to the whole world-view of evangelical Christianity, especially after 1967 when we came back also to the Old City. The End-Time scenario requires Israel to be back in its Land and its Temple (the symbol of Redemption), and you only need to listen to Oral Roberts, to Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and the others to see what I mean. They need us there, because without us the End-Time scenario can't play out. So they are all Zionists.

[Someone sent me a recording of Oral Roberts' Salute to Israel for its 50th anniversary. 20 minutes into it I started to feel sorry for the Arabs!]

The Arabs deny the legitimacy of Israel's existence. Israel for the Arabs is a result of 19th century colonialism. These blond Germans came in to steal their land, like they did during the Crusades. Palestinians are the original settlers of the land. ("Jesus was a Palestinian peasant"). They deny Israeli history, and even Israeli archaeology. They work instead at creating a Palestinian claim and a Palestinian history for the land. This is actually a fairly difficult enterprise, inasmuch as there is no history for it; as recently as the 1940s Arab spokesmen were arguing that there is no such thing as a separate Palestinian people and that the attempt to divide the Arabs of Greater Syria by making one was a Zionist plot of divide and conquer.

And there's certainly no ancient history either. They attempted to connect with the Canaanites of old; I remember a ceremony in Sebaste with "Canaanite priests" in white robes but that didn't work because Canaanite religion was pagan and the Arabs are all Muslims now! So they have serious problems in creating this Palestinian identity, because it is a nationalism without roots.

Palestinian or not, the Arabs have a metaphysical problem with the existence of Israel -- of any non-Muslim sovereignty -- in the "Sea of Islam", from the Indus river to the straits of Gibraltar. There were always minority people in the Islamic world, but minority sovereignties are not supposed to happen. A non-Muslim sovereignty in the Middle East is somehow against the laws of God or of Nature. Thus the war against the Jews in Israel is the same as the war against the Christians in Lebanon and in Ethiopia -- all minority sovereignties -- and between the Muslim north and Christian/Animist south in Sudan, and the religious and secular parties in Egypt and Algeria, etc.

On the other hand, the Arabs are emboldened by a wave of triumphalist Islam now sweeping the world. Islam is indeed the fastest growing religion on earth. They function in the belief that they are the future while we are the past. Growing, spreading, aggressive Islam is in fact responsible for most of the problems in the world in this generation: from Indonesia, through India & Pakistan, Afghanistan, into the Balkans in Bosnia and Kosovo, in Africa in the Sudan, Egypt, and Algeria, and into western Europe too. All this is background for Camp David.

To the Heart of the Matter

Barak and Arafat reached the heart of their symbolic conflict at Camp David in September, 2000. Barak had offered un-precedented concessions, but three main issues could not be resolved.

a) Barak demanded in return a declaration that the war was over. Arafat was simply incapable of giving such a declaration; the war with a non-Muslim, illegitimate, colonialist usurper in the Sea of Islam can NEVER be over.

b) Arafat demanded the "right" of return for refugees of 1948. Israel could not agree to that. Not because we would have been flooded with a million Arabs who hate us. It could not have agreed even if were decided that only 3 people would actually ever come back. Because to agree to the "right" of return (as distinct from family reunions, etc, which have been happening all the time) would be for Israel to admit responsibility for the events of 1948 which made them refugees in the first place. Israel of course adamantly denies this responsibility; it was attacked by armies out to destroy it, and to admit responsibility for the refugees created by Arab aggression would be to concede that the state was born in sin and guilt.

c) Arafat demanded complete sovereignty over the Temple Mount. Not shared --- Arabs above the platform, Jews below -- as Barak had suggested. But Israel could never have agreed to that. To give over the Temple Mount, symbolically, would be to deny the possibility of the Redemption. The vision of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah -- not to mention the Revelation of John -- cannot be made real if we turn over the Temple to the Muslims. We would have defied prophecy and stymied the progress towards Redemption. This would be an offense not only for the Jews, but for all religious Zionists. 5 million evangelical Christians would have said, "Look, the Jews have killed Christ again."

Time for a Change of Tactics

So negotiations broke down -- they had to break down -- and Arafat left before Mrs. Albright could close the gate. Then the change of tactics was inevitable; if he couldn't get what he wanted by negotiation he would go back to a weapon that had served him very well indeed in the past, to violence. And the violence erupted right on cue. It had nothing to do with Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount that Thursday (that was only a pretext, as the Palestinians themselves said afterwards). But on the riots began on Sunday, the 2nd day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, on cue, and have continued for 15 months.

The practical results have been complete failure for Arafat. The Israeli government has not budged, and all the Palestinians have to show for their trouble is unimagined misery and a thousand people killed. Israel has reacted forcefully -- but indeed avoided massacre -- while suffering casualties from suicide bombers. Israel was (still is) hanging in there. But the whole scenario changed with the disaster at the World Trade Center in New York on September 11th.

Circles Inside Circles

Relations between Jews and Arabs in the Land of Israel for the past 100 years have traditionally been a function of -- a reflection of -- a larger struggle between greater powers. At the turn of the 20th century the dispute was between the Europeans and the Ottoman Turks. Later the Jewish-Arab conflict was reflected in rivalry/dislike/distrust between the British and the French. Then between the French and the Americans. Then between the Americans and the Russians. Circles inside circles; one party being the patron of one of the combatants, the other of the other.

Then the Soviet Union collapsed, and a new and unprecedented situation existed for 20 years from the 1980s. There was now only one power, America, and whether and how much America influenced Israeli-Arab relations depended largely on the character of the President and his ambitions to leave a legacy of some sort. Then came war. The world went to war after September 11th, and once again we find ourselves in what had been the normal status of our conflict with the

Arabs. Now once again the Israel – Palestinian struggle is part of larger struggle: the West against the Arabs. Our small war has once again been dwarfed by a much larger war.

For the time being, the Arab world is quiet, cowed by the massive display of American and European military might in Afghanistan. (Who says there is no military solution to terror?!) That probably won't last for long, however, and then we and the Palestinians will be back in the old mold. Not England against France, or the US against the USSR: Now it's the west against the Islam. The events of September 11th have brought home the nature of terror – which we have known about for years, of course – to the American people, who didn't know about it hardly at all. The Middle East has come to the Middle West, with a bang!

So the world is at war, and nobody important is really complaining about Israel's way of dealing with Palestinian terror. For now the competing pressures are in fact between the US Administration and itself; the State Department on one side, everybody else on the other. Hard to tell whether President Bush and Secretary of State Powell are really in a confrontation mode (that would be bad news) or are just playing good cop/bad cop with us (that would be good news). In any event, when someone there decides that the Coalition against Terror cannot tolerate fractious conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the pressure will return, in spades, and we will be in real trouble.