"Israel's Liberals Must Speak Out for Palestinians."
Boston Globe, November 4, 2000

"A Mile in Palestinian Shoes."
Ottawa Citizen, November 1, 2000

"Jewish Liberals and Voices of Reason."
Baltimore Sun, November 10, 2000.

JAMES RON

A disturbing byproduct of recent Middle East violence is the dramatic decline in independent thinking among Israeli Jews. Even political liberals are being swept up in a tribal, "us against them" mentality, viewing Palestinians as killers and Jews as victims. Indications of heightened Jewish nationalism are everywhere. Israeli reporters once interviewed Palestinians leaders but now rely solely on government sources. Popular dailies once covered both sides but now speak only of Jewish casualties. Jewish liberals once promoted cross-cultural empathy but now concentrate only on the "Arabs" deadly irrationality.

Most worrisome, few newspapers other than Ha'aretz, the Israeli daily, are scrutinizing the roots of Palestinian frustration. Even protests by Palestinian citizens of Israel have provoked little introspection. With barely a murmur of protest, Israeli opinion leaders are slipping into populist stereotypes, viewing Palestinians as murderers bent on evil.

In so doing, however, they fail to note that Palestinians are doing most of the dying and that Palestinians are besieged by tanks. Palestine, not Israel, is being choked by hostile troops, its economy and public life in tatters. By stressing "Arab irrationality," moreover, Israelis fail to consider that Palestinians might have legitimate grievances.

Israel's nationalist groundswell reverses a decade of subtle reform. During the country's first 40 years, Jewish citizens were fed a strict diet of state-controlled broadcasts. Over 70 percent of the public tuned in to government television and radio broadcasts that invariably label ed Palestinian groups "terrorist organizations."

When cable television finally arrived in the early 1990s, many finally gained access to alternative points of view. International news from the BBC, CNN, and Sky News became readily available, and the old views seemed outdated. State officials finally licensed commercial broadcasts, and Israeli reporters grew more daring.

The 1993 Oslo accords hastened the change. For the first time, Jewish-Israeli journalists interviewed Palestinian leaders and entertained alternative historical interpretations. Liberal intellectuals noted the plight of Palestinian refugees and even acknowledged Palestinian suffering. Although Jews still prioritized their own "tribe" over others, their black-and-white world was increasingly shaded with gray.

These important gains are being rolled back, however, and it may take years to repair the damage. In recent conversations with Israeli friends and relatives, it seems clear that the space for independent thought is shrinking. As one Israeli colleague remarked, group-think and a Jewish "mob mentality" are everywhere.

Israelis often complain that Palestinians refuse to recognize the existence of global anti-Semitism, believing that were Palestinians to acknowledge Jewish suffering, they would accept Israel's point of view. But have Israelis ever tried to truly imagine the Palestinian experience? The '90s witnessed some change, but the speed with which those gains are being reversed suggests they were only skin deep.

Jewish nationalism, conversely, is rooted in decades of intense socialization. Growing up in Israel, I was never asked to consider Palestinian life under military occupation. Instead, I was taught to view Palestinians as faceless "security threats" rather than people with emotions, needs and desires. Nationalist education continued during military conscription, where the talk was always of "Arab terrorists," not human beings.

Jewish Israeli liberals who once questioned this harsh approach are now in full retreat. If they fail to resist nationalism's seductive embrace, however, they will consign future generations to unending conflict. To develop a critical consciousness, liberals must try to visualize life in the West Bank or Gaza. Prolonged curfews are common, and Israeli armor encircles Palestinian towns. Every trip involves a myriad of hostile military checkpoints, and fear of Jewish vigilantes is pervasive.

Most important, Palestinians anticipate a major Israeli assault in the coming weeks, fearing that forced depopulations will soon follow. Few have forgotten that in the late '80s, over half the Jewish public supported "Arab transfer," a euphemism for ethnic cleansing.

If liberal Jews could imagine themselves in Palestinian shoes, they might find the strength to resist chauvinism and the government's flirtation with Ariel Sharon, leader of the Likud party. The former general devised Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, planned massive expulsions of Palestinian refugees, shelled urban neighborhoods, and facilitated the Sabra and Shatila massacres. His appointment to Israel's Cabinet would send a terrifying signal.

The parallels between Israel and the former Yugoslavia are unnerving. In the late 1980s, observers warned that Serbian intellectuals, once the most free-thinking in Eastern Europe, were slipping into ethnic nationalism. If Israel is to avoid a similar tragedy, its liberals must speak out now.

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