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The Boss Has Gone Mad

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169 YEARS before the Gaza War, Heinrich Heine wrote a premonitory poem of 12 lines, under the title “To Edom”. The German-Jewish poet was talking about Germany, or perhaps all the nations of Christian Europe. This is what he wrote (in my rough translation):

“For a thousand years and more / We have had an understanding / You allow me to breathe / I accept your crazy raging // Sometimes, when the days get darker / Strange moods come upon you / Till you decorate your claws / With the lifeblood from my veins // Now our friendship is firmer / Getting stronger by the day / Since the raging started in me / Daily more and more like you.”

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Zionism, which arose some 50 years after this was written, is fully realizing this prophesy. We Israelis have become a nation like all nations, and the memory of the Holocaust causes us, from time to time, to behave like the worst of them. Only a few of us know this poem, but Israel as a whole lives it out.

In this war, politicians and generals have repeatedly quoted the words: “The boss has gone mad!” originally shouted by vegetable vendors in the market, in the sense of “The boss has gone crazy and is selling the tomatoes at a loss!” But in the course of time the jest has turned into a deadly doctrine that often appears in Israeli public discourse: in order to deter our enemies, we must behave like madmen, go on the rampage, kill and destroy mercilessly.

In this war, this has become political and military dogma: only if we kill “them” disproportionately, killing a thousand of “them” for ten of “ours”, will they understand that it’s not worth it to mess with us. It will be “seared into their consciousness” (a favorite Israeli phrase these days). After this, they will think twice before launching another Qassam rocket against us, even in response to what we do, whatever that may be.

It is impossible to understand the viciousness of this war without taking into account the historical background: the feeling of victimhood after all that has been done to the Jews throughout the ages, and the conviction that after the Holocaust, we have the right to do anything, absolutely anything, to defend ourselves, without any inhibitions due to law or morality.

WHEN THE killing and destruction in Gaza were at their height, something happened in faraway America that was not connected with the war, but was very much connected with it. The Israeli film “Waltz with Bashir” was awarded a prestigious prize. The media reported it with much joy and pride, but somehow carefully managed not to mention the subject of the film. That by itself was an interesting phenomenon: saluting the success of a film while ignoring its contents.

The subject of this outstanding film is one of the darkest chapters in our history: the Sabra and Shatila massacre. In the course of Lebanon War I, a Christian Lebanese militia carried out, under the auspices of the Israeli army, a heinous massacre of hundreds of helpless Palestinian refugees who were trapped in their camp, men, women, children and old people. The film describes this atrocity with meticulous accuracy, including our part in it.

All this was not even mentioned in the news about the award. At the festive ceremony, the director of the film did not avail himself of the opportunity to protest against the events in Gaza. It is hard to say how many women and children were killed while this ceremony was going on – but it is clear that the massacre in Gaza is much worse than that

1982 event, which moved 400 thousand Israelis to leave their homes and hold a spontaneous mass protest in Tel-Aviv. This time, only 10 thousand stood up to be counted.

The official Israeli Board of Inquiry that investigated the Sabra massacre found that the Israeli government bore “indirect responsibility” for the atrocity. Several senior officials and officers were suspended. One of them was the division commander, Amos Yaron. Not one of the other accused, from the Minister of Defense, Ariel Sharon, to the Chief of Staff, Rafael Eitan, spoke a word of regret, but Yaron did express remorse in a speech to his officers, and admitted: “Our sensitivities have been blunted”.

BLUNTED SENSITIVITIES are very evident in the Gaza War.

Lebanon War I lasted for 18 years and more than 500 of our soldiers died. The planners of Lebanon War II decided to avoid such a long war and such heavy Israeli casualties. They invented the “mad boss” principle: demolishing whole neighborhoods, devastating areas, destroying infrastructures. In 33 days of war, some 1000 Lebanese, almost all of them civilians, were killed – a record already broken in this war by the 17th day. Yet in that war our army suffered casualties on the ground, and public opinion, which in the beginning supported the war with the same enthusiasm as this time, changed rapidly.

The smoke from Lebanon War II is hanging over the Gaza war. Everybody in Israel swore to learn its lessons. And the main lesson was: not to risk the life of even one single soldier. A war without casualties (on our side). The method: to use the overwhelming firepower of our army to pulverize everything standing in its way and to kill everybody moving in the area. To kill not only the fighters on the other side, but every human being who might possibly turn out to harbor hostile intentions, even if they are obviously an ambulance attendant, a driver in a food convoy or a doctor saving lives. To destroy every building from which our troops could conceivably be shot at – even a school full of refugees, the sick and the wounded. To bomb and shell whole neighborhoods, buildings, mosques, schools, UN food convoys, even ruins under which the injured are buried.

The media devoted several hours to the fall of a Qassam missile on a home in Ashkelon, in which three residents suffered from shock, and did not waste many words on the forty women and children killed in a UN school, from which “we were shot at” – an assertion that was quickly exposed as a blatant lie.

The firepower was also used to sow terror – shelling everything from a hospital to a vast UN food depot, from a press vantage point to the mosques. The standard pretext: “we were shot at from there”.

This would have been impossible, had not the whole country been infected with blunted sensitivities. People are no longer shocked by the sight of a mutilated baby, nor by children left for days with the corpse of their mother, because the army did not let them leave their ruined home. It seems that almost nobody cares anymore: not the soldiers, not the pilots, not the media people, not the politicians, not the generals. A moral insanity, whose primary exponent is Ehud Barak. Though even he may be upstaged by Tzipi Livni, who smiled while talking about the ghastly events.

Even Heinrich Heine could not have imagined that.

THE LAST DAYS were dominated by the “Obama effect”.

We are on board an airplane, and suddenly a huge black mountain appears out of the clouds. In the cockpit, panic breaks out: How to avoid a collision?

The planners of the war chose the timing with care: during the holidays, when everybody was on vacation, and while President Bush was still around. But they somehow forgot to take into consideration a fateful date: next Tuesday Barack Obama will enter the White House.

This date is now casting a huge shadow on events. The Israeli Barak understands that if the American Barack gets angry, that would mean disaster. Conclusion: the horrors of Gaza must stop before the inauguration. This week that determined all political and military decisions. Not “the number of rockets”, not “victory”, not “breaking Hamas”.

WHEN THERE is a ceasefire, the first question will be: Who won?

In Israel, all the talk is about the “picture of victory” – not victory itself, but the “picture”. That is essential, in order to convince the Israeli public that the whole business has been worthwhile. At this moment, all the thousands of media people, to the very last one, have been mobilized to paint such a “picture”. The other side, of course, will paint a different one.

The Israeli leaders will boast of two “achievements”: the end of the rockets and the sealing of the Gaza-Egypt border (the co-called “Philadelphi route”. Dubious achievements: the launching of the Qassams could have been prevented without a murderous war, if our government had been ready to negotiate with Hamas after they won the Palestinian elections. The tunnels under the Egyptian border would not have been dug in the first place, if our government had not imposed the deadly blockade on the Strip.

But the main achievement of the war planners lies in the very barbarity of their plan: the atrocities will have, in their view, a deterrent effect that will hold for a long time.

Hamas, on the other side, will assert that their survival in the face of the mighty Israeli war machine, a tiny David against a giant Goliath, is by itself a huge victory. According to the classic military definition, the winner in a battle is the army that remains on the battlefield when it's over. Hamas remains. The Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip still stands, in spite of all the efforts to eliminate it. That is a significant achievement.

Hamas will also point out that the Israeli army was not eager to enter the Palestinian towns, in which their fighters were entrenched. And indeed: the army told the government that the conquest of Gaza city could cost the lives of about 200 soldiers, and no politician was ready for that on the eve of elections.

The very fact that a guerrilla force of a few thousand lightly armed fighters held out for long weeks against one of the world's mightiest armies with enormous firepower, will look to millions of Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims, and not only to them, like an unqualified victory.

In the end, an agreement will be concluded that will include the obvious terms. No country can tolerate its inhabitants being exposed to rocket fire from beyond the border, and no population can tolerate a choking blockade. Therefore (1) Hamas will have to give up the launching of missiles, (2) Israel will have to open wide the crossings between the Gaza Strip and the outside world, and (3) the entry of arms into the Strip will be stopped (as far as possible), as demanded by Israel. All this could have happened without war, if our government had not boycotted Hamas.

HOWEVER, THE worst results of this war are still invisible and will make themselves felt only in years to come: Israel has imprinted on world consciousness a terrible image of itself. Billions of people have seen us as a blood-dripping monster. They will never again see Israel as a state that seeks justice, progress and peace. The American Declaration of Independence speaks with approval of “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind”. That is a wise

principle.

Even worse is the impact on hundreds of millions of Arabs around us: not only will they see the Hamas fighters as the heroes of the Arab nation, but they will also see their own regimes in their nakedness: cringing, ignominious, corrupt and treacherous.

The Arab defeat in the 1948 war brought in its wake the fall of almost all the existing Arab regimes and the ascent of a new generation of nationalist leaders, exemplified by Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. The 2009 war may bring about the fall of the current crop of Arab regimes and the ascent of a new generation of leaders – Islamic fundamentalists who hate Israel and all the West..

In coming years it will become apparent that this war was sheer madness. The boss has indeed gone mad – in the original sense of the word.

Uri Avnery

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