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Uri Avnery

Israël. Gandhi's Wisdom

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SURFING THE television channels, I came across an interview with the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi on an American network (Fox – would you believe it).

“My grandfather told us to love the enemy even while fighting him,” he said, “he fought against the British resolutely, but loved the British.” (I quote from memory.)

My immediate reaction was baloney, the pious wish of do-gooders! But then I suddenly remembered that in my youth I had felt exactly the same, when I joined the Irgun at the age of 15. I liked the English (as we called all the British), the English language and English culture, and I was ready to put my life on the line in order to drive the English out of our country. When I said so to the Irgun's recruitment committee, while sitting with a bright light shining in my eyes, I was almost rejected.

But the grandson's words set me to thinking more seriously. Can one make peace with an opponent while hating him? Is peace possible at all without a positive attitude towards the other side?

ON THE face of it, the answer is “yes”. Self-styled “realists” and “pragmatists” will say that peace is a matter of political interests, that feelings should not be involved. (Such “realists” are people who cannot imagine another reality, and such “pragmatists” are people who cannot think in the longer term.)

As is well-know, one makes peace with enemies. One makes peace in order to stop a war. War is the realm of hate, it dehumanizes the foe. In every war, the enemy is portrayed as sub-human, evil and cruel by nature.

Peace is supposed to terminate the war, but does not promise to change the attitude towards yesterday's enemy. We stop killing him, but that does not mean that we start loving him. When we reach the conclusion that it is in our interest to stop the war rather than to go on with it, this does not mean that our attitude towards the enemy has changed.

We have here an inbuilt paradox: the thought of peace arises while the war is still going on. It follows that peace is planned by those who are still at war, who are still in the grip of the war mentality. That can twist their thinking.

The result can be a monster, like the infamous Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. It trampled on the vanquished Germany, robbed her and, worst of all, humiliated her. Many historians believe that this treaty bears much of the blame for the outbreak of World War II, which was even more devastating. (As a child I grew up in Germany under the dark shadow of the Versailles treaty, so I know what I am talking about.)

MAHATMA GANDHI understood this. He was not only a very moral person, but also a very wise one (if there really is any difference). I did not agree with his opposition to resisting Nazi Germany by force, but I always admired his genius as the leader of Indian liberation. He realized that the main task of a liberation leader is to shape the mentality of the people he wishes to liberate. When hundreds of millions of Indians were confronting a few tens of thousands of Britons, the main problem was not to defeat the British, but to get the Indians themselves to want liberation and a life

in freedom and harmony. To make peace without hatred, without a longing for revenge, with an open heart, ready to be reconciled with yesterday's enemy.

Gandhi himself was only partially successful in this. But his wisdom illuminated the path of many. It shaped people like Nelson Mandela, who established peace without hatred and without revenge, and Martin Luther King, who called for reconciliation between black and white. We, too, have much to learn from this wisdom.

THIS WEEK, an expert on the analysis of public opinion polls appeared on an Israeli TV talk show. Prof. Tamar Harman did not analyze one or another of the polls, but the totality of the polls over decades.

Prof. Harman confirmed statistically what we all feel in our daily lives: that there is a continuous, long-term movement in Israel from the concepts of the Right to the concepts of the Left. The two-state solution is now accepted by a large majority. The great majority also accept that the border must be based on the Green Line, with swaps of territory that will leave the large settlement blocs in Israel. The public accepts that the other settlements must be evacuated. It even accepts that the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem must be part of the future Palestinian state. The expert's conclusion: this is an on-going, dynamic process. Public opinion is continuing to move in this direction.

I remember far-away days in the early 1950s, when we first brought up this solution. In Israel and the whole world there were not a hundred people who supported this idea. (The 1947 UN resolution, which proposed exactly that, had been wiped from the public consciousness by the war, after which Palestine was divided between Israel, Jordan and Egypt.) As late as 1970 I wandered through the corridors of power in Washington DC, from the White House to the State Department, searching in vain for even one important statesman who would support it. The Israeli public opposed it almost unanimously, and so did the PLO, which even published a special book under the title "Uri Avnery and neo-Zionism".

Now this plan is supported by a world-wide consensus, which includes all the member states of the Arab League. And, according to the professor, the Israeli consensus too. Our extreme Right is now accusing Binyamin Netanyahu, in speech and writing, of executing what they call the "Avnery design".

So I should have been very satisfied, happy to view the news programs which speak about "two states for two peoples" as self-evident truth.

So why am I not satisfied? Am I a professional grumbler?

I examined myself, and I believe that I have identified the source of my dissatisfaction.

WHEN THEY speak today about "two states for two peoples", it is almost always bound up with the idea of "separation". As Ehud Barak put it, in his unique style: "We shall be here and they shall be there." It connects with his image of Israel as "a villa in the jungle". All around us are wild beasts, eager to devour us, and we in the villa must put up an iron wall to protect ourselves.

That's the way this idea is being sold to the masses. It gathers popularity because it promises a final and total separation. Let them get out of our sight. Let them have a state, for God's sake, and leave us alone. The "two-state solution" will be realized, we shall live in the "Nation-State of the Jewish People" which will be a part of the West, and "they" will live in a state which will be part of the Arab world. Between us there will be a high wall, part of the wall between the two civilizations.

Somehow it all reminds me of the words Theodor Herzl wrote 114 years ago in his book "The Jewish State": "In Palestine...we shall be for Europe a part of the wall against Asia, we shall serve as a vanguard of civilization against barbarism."

THAT WAS not the idea in the minds of the handful of people who advocated the two-state solution from the beginning. They were animated by two interconnected tendencies: the love of the country (meaning all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan) and the desire for reconciliation between its two peoples.

I know that many will be shocked by the words "love of the country". Like many other things, they have been hijacked and taken hostage by the extreme Right. We have let them.

My generation, which crisscrossed the country well before the state came into being, did not treat Jericho, Hebron and Nablus as abroad. We loved them. We were excited by them. I still love them today. With some, like the late leftist writer Amos Kenan, this love had become almost an obsession.

The settlers, who endlessly declaim their love for the country, love it the way a rapist loves his victim. They violate the country and want to dominate it by force. This is visibly expressed in the architecture of their fortresses on the tops of the hills, fortified neighborhoods with Swiss tile-covered roofs. They don't love the real country, the villages with their minarets, the stone houses with their arched windows nestling on the hillsides and merging with the landscape, the terraces cultivated to the last centimeter, the wadis and the olive groves. They dream about another land and want to build it on the ruins of the beloved country. Kenan put it simply: "The State of Israel is destroying the Land of Israel".

Beyond romanticism, which has its own validity, we wanted to reunite the torn country in the only way possible: through the partnership of the two peoples that love it. These two national entities, with all their similarity, are different in culture, religion, traditions, language, script, ways of life, social structure, economic development. Our life experience, and the experience of the entire world, in this generation more than in any other, has shown that such different peoples cannot live in one state. (The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Cyprus, and perhaps also Belgium, Canada, Iraq.) Therefore, the necessity arises to live in two states, side by side (with the possibility of a future federation).

When we reached this conclusion at the end of the 1948 war, we shaped the two-state solution not as a plan for separation, but on the contrary, as a plan for unity. For decades we talked about two states with an open border between them, a joint economy and free movement of people and goods.

These were the central motifs in all the plans for the "two-state solution". Until the so-called "realists" arrived and took the body without the soul, reducing the living plan to a heap of dry bones. On the left, too, many were ready to adopt the separation agenda, in the belief that this pseudo-pragmatist approach would be easier to sell to the masses. But in the moment of truth, this approach failed. The "peace talks" collapsed.

I propose to return to Gandhi's wisdom. It is impossible to move masses of people without a vision. Peace is not just an absence of hostilities, not the product of a labyrinth of walls and fences. Neither is it a utopia of "the wolf dwelling with the lamb". It is a real state of reconciliation, of partnership between peoples and between human beings, who respect each other, who are ready to satisfy each other's interests, to trade with each other, to create social relationships and – who knows – here and there even to like each other.

In essence: two states, one common future.