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Great silence



"To strip man of his freedom is not to believe in man" — Elie Wiesel (Parade Magazine; Dec 27, 87)

Mr. Wiesel was the first Nobel laureate I met. We exchanged handshakes the night Washington's Arena Stage premiered his first play. *The Madness of God* dealt with Soviet oppression of Jews. My review transcended the drama to a consideration of the communist tyranny of a people. From the author, there was a brief note, in formal English, thanking me for translating his message for those in my audience who might not be aware of the extent of Moscow's brutal suppression of human and religious rights in that post-Stalin era.

The Baltimore doctor who headed the Maryland Zionist organization at the time (1974) was more abundant in his praise. He hailed my writing for its contribution to a greater understanding and support for *aliyah* — the right of every Jew to make the sacred flight to the new homeland in Israel. The Hebrew word was new to me. But I still support the right of any people to choose freedom over tyranny.

In theory, Mr. Wiesel agrees. The same magazine article quoted above carried his thought: "When a people loses its freedom, it has a right, a duty, to employ every possible means to win it back." In practice, the Nobel laureate has sought to limit his words, to exclude the Palestinians, by seeking to justify the means used by occupation security forces to grind down their uprising.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the Baltimore doctor, if he lived in Frederick today and read my columns, would be distressed at what he would consider my transformation. He might even join those who have written Letters to the Editor, branding me an enemy of Israel and anti-Semitic. But I have not changed. My views remain constant. I am obliged to condemn tyranny — without regard to the tyrants' race, color or creed. I do not enjoy the luxury of trimming my views because they are unpopular and bring me under personal attack.

My closest colleagues question why I continue to devote space to the cause of the Palestinians. They argue that the readership interest is slight. They believe that I damage my acceptance and credibility unnecessarily. In truth, they appear to view my writings on the Palestinian cause as eccentricities, in no way constructive to my mandate as a

columnist for the Frederick newspapers.

Since I am a lousy bookkeeper, I cannot report the number of times I have stated that the greatest danger to world peace lies in the Middle East. Here would be cause enough for me to keep the region in the consciousness of readers.

The mixture of petroleum and nuclear weaponry poses an inevitable hazard to the health of all mankind, given the assurance of tribal warfare which resulted from the fractionalizing that resulted from the deaths of the last Islamic empire and European colonialism. Israel sprang up from those deaths, no less than from the murders in Nazi concentration camps.

The region's great volatility arises from the Arabs' monopoly of oil resources, while Israel rules the

military arena.

Until modern times, the schism of power would have found simple resolution in the imposition of a *pax Israeli* in the Middle East. But this era's international morality, enforced by the competition between two superpowers, no longer accommodates history's mandate that "Might makes right."

Witness the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and U.S. failure in Vietnam. More pertinent in this case was the debacle suffered by Israel, among its own citizens, in the collapsed invasion of Lebanon. And make no mistake: the roots of today's Palestinian uprising lie firmly planted in that 1982 debacle.

The defeat of Israeli superhawks' plans to widen their domination made people in the West Bank and Gaza realize there was a limit to the occupation authority's power. They began to lose their sense of passive resignation. The tempo of demonstrations and willing deaths increased long before last December's official start date for today's *intifada*.

The only real difference was, exactly as Israel's apologists claim, that the world media decided to fasten their attention on "the Palestinian problem" at that particular time. On the other hand, the media "brownout" has been restored. Deaths and brutalities in the occupied territories have been relegated to brief notices in the back pages. Still

the uprising goes on.

This past Wednesday three more Palestinians died and another 14 were beaten severely. Recently, guards shot down unarmed protesters among men imprisoned without trial or any other legal process. Deportations and destruction of family homes continue. Such matters have become routine and no longer meaningful news.

But the most breathtaking event for me was the Israeli ban on a coalition of Palestinian welfare and charitable agencies, the equivalent of our United Givers Fund. The coalition attempted to fill the gap left in the occupied territories by the lack of social services provided by the government which retained inside Israel \$30 million in taxes paid by West Bank and Gaza residents. The estimate, by the way, came from an institute headed by a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, who is no Arab.

On this second day of classes in Frederick County, all Palestinian schools in remain closed. They were opened only briefly in the spring. Children are being deprived of education because of their religion, their nationality and their place of residence.

Fifty years ago another people faced attempted genocide. My youth gave me no voice in that age. In my time I cannot be silent, if for no other reason than the deafening silence that comes off greater men who have larger audiences. This was the real lesson of the Holocaust. I remember, if my betters have forgotten.

I cannot explain Elie Wiesel's abandonment of the principles he preaches. But his words apply no less to Palestinians than to the Soviet Jews for whom they were intended. All human beings are entitled to live in self-dignity and freedom, exactly as the Nobel laureate proclaimed.