

CONVERSATION AT THE BEACH

The Face of our Enemy, as Seen from Israel

By Solly Ganor

About half a mile from where I live in Herzliya, on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean, stands an old mosque. It was built during the Middle Ages and a Moslem holy man is buried on that site. The holy man's name was Sidney Ally and that is how the mosque is known to this day. The beach below, stretches all the way to Herzliya to the South, and Netanya to the North.

I often go there for walks because from its heights one has a panoramic view of the sea and the whole area. There is another reason why I go there; from that hill, at certain weather conditions, the Mediterranean turns into a colour of blue that can not be seen anywhere else.

Last Friday, as the wind began blowing from the East, the Medi, as we call our sea, began calming down. It flattened the waves coming ashore until it became as placid as the Kinneret during the summer. It was then that the deep blue colour, as if by a magic wand, emerged from the depth of its waters. It wasn't the first time I saw it and I always witness that phenomenon with rising spirits. "If there is so much beauty in this world, then there is hope for us humans yet." I said to myself.

The silence was interrupted by a noisy bus full of Arab worshipers who arrived to the mosque for their Friday services. They wore the traditional Arab garb, and entered the mosque quietly. Some of them threw me hostile glances. Their arrival brought me back to our desperate conflict with these people for the piece of land we call Israel, and they call Palestine. Only a few years ago at Camp David, we deluded ourselves that they are finally ready for peace; Israel and Palestine living next to each other for the mutual benefit of both peoples. But that was not to be. They are still not ready to relinquish their old dream to oust us out of the Middle East.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I heard a voice behind me speaking English. As I turned around I saw a well dressed young man of about twenty five, looking wistfully at the sea. By his accent and looks I realized that he was an Arab, probably one of the lot that arrived by bus. A quick visual scan of his body assured me that he didn't come to stab me, or blow himself up. I nodded. "Yes it is beautiful". " Well, we have at least one thing in common." I thought.

And then I had a second thought. "Here stands an Arab youth next to me, in the heart of Israel, calmly admiring with me the sea. There was not a shadow of a doubt in his mind that something bad would ever happen to him here in Israel. I tried to imagine myself standing that way in Ramalah, and having that conversation with an Arab youth. Then I remembered a scene filmed by an Italian TV correspondent in Ramalah last year. Two Israelis, who by mistake took a wrong turn, found themselves among a mob of Palestinians. They were brought to the Palestinian police station where they were lynched and their mangled bodies were thrown out of the window, to the cheering crowds below. They kicked them and beat them until they were an unrecognizable mess of flesh."

The Italian TV crew, who filmed that scene, had to run for their lives to escape the mob. Fortunately, they were able to sneak the film out and show it to the world, one of the few films that were

ever shown of the Arab atrocities. But the world isn't interested in Arab atrocities. They are used to them and they don't make good news.

For a while we stood in silence admiring the view. "Didn't you come with the others to pray?" I asked just to make conversation. I was curious about him. Why did he join me? It wasn't just to watch the view, of this I was sure. 'I know what that old fool will say by heart. He is of the old school and preaches moderation. Fortunately, his time is over.'

"You don't think that moderation is a good idea?" What has moderation ever done for us? We have been moderate long enough. We are growing weaker while you have grown stronger. It is time for us to act." I was a little surprised by his belligerent tone right from the start. Usually Arabs are polite in the beginning of a conversation.

"Do you think that you were moderate up to now? Would you call five wars the Arabs launched against us, moderation? I wonder what you would call hostility?" He gave me a sober look.

"Hostility is what you are getting now. Our young people are blowing themselves up in all of your major towns, taking with them hundreds of your Israelis. President Arafat has promised you a million 'Shihads' to march on Jerusalem. The march has already began, and it won't be thanks to Arafat. He is another old bungler. Things are changing. Until now you had the upper hand, but no more! Our "Shihads," are the answer to your atomic bombs. If necessary, one "Shihad" can be an atomic bomb, here in Israel, in America, in Europe, or anywhere the Jews and the Crusaders live. We don't need millions of dollars worth of sophisticated labs and expensive scientists. What we have is cheap and efficient. That is because we are not afraid to die. We have finally found your soft underbelly, your Achilles Heel. You Judeo-Christians worship the sanctity of life, while we don't mind dying for Islam". The last sentence he said with certain pride in his voice.

From the way he expressed himself, I realized that he is a student. As if confirming my thoughts, he told me that he is a student of political science at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"Do all the Arab students studying at the Israeli universities share your views?"

"Absolutely! A few may be oriented towards the West, but the overwhelming majority are for the new emerging Renaissance of Islam." Then he smiled and said, "You might as well enjoy the beautiful view from "Sidney Alley" while you can. You won't be able to do so for long. If I were you, I would pack and leave for safer countries." I gave him a long look.

"Thanks for the advise, but I remember another Arab who gave the same advise to us in 1948, when the British were pulling out. He may have been your grandfather, for all I know. He lived in a village somewhere around here and he was a friend of a Jewish man named Peytan whom I knew as well. Peytan lived in Kefar Shemaryahu across the road. One day the Arab neighbor came visiting Mr. Peytan and strongly advised him to pack and leave. At the same time, he brought out a measuring tape and began to measure the room they were sitting in. "What are you doing?" Asked my friend.

"Look, you are going to lose your house anyway. There is no way that six hundred thousand of you can stand up to the combined might of six Arab regular armies, not to mention our Palestinian battalions. We can actually kill you with our hats!" Yes, that is what he actually said:

"We can kill you with our hats. We have been good friends for a long time. You might as well give me your house rather than to someone you don't know."

"His advice reminded me of your advice. Yet during the 1948 war, that was forced on us by you, your 'grand father', not only didn't he get the house in Kefar Shemaryahu, but he lost his own house and became a refugee. And now he is blaming it on the Jews. Fifty five years later he still sits in the camp. His views haven't changed much. He still wants not only his house back, but he wants the house in Kefar Shemaryahu, of his Jewish friend as well. Will he ever get it? I doubt it."

"Yes, he will get it! And you know why? Because in 1948 they were all cowards! Today, our generation is proving that we are not! Eighteen determined men with carton cutters who were not afraid to die, defied the big American might, causing them thousands of dead and trillions of dollars worth of losses. We found out that we can bring the Western capitalist system to its knees, and we shall do so! It is a shameless selfish system that causes endless human misery around the world, especially in the third world countries and for Islam. It is time for it to go!"

It was obvious from the way he said it that he didn't say it for the first time.

"Communism, Nazism, Fascism, they all were defeated by the Western Democracies. What system do you propose to replace it with?" I asked. I was beginning to get irritated with this young Arab." Islam!" He said fiercely.

"Islam?" I asked. "Islam? What did Islam ever do for the countries under its rule? It brought nothing but poverty and misery to the masses, while bestowing fabulous riches to the rulers. All you have to do is look around you. Israel, that was in 1948 a pauper state, barely able to feed its population, has grown into a modern self sufficient state. We have absorbed a million Jews from the Arab countries, who fled for their lives leaving all they possessed behind, while your Arab brothers with their billions of petro dollars let the Palestinians rot in refugee camps. While we progressed in the last fifty years, the Arab states have only regressed. As a matter of fact, the Arab masses are worse off than when they were under the British or the French rule. How many Nobel prize winners has Islam produced? How many new inventions to benefit mankind? Practically zero! How many Einsteins, Freuds, Salks and Rubinsteins has Islam produced? Zero! From a once vibrant Arab civilization, that gave us Algebra and the concept of the zero, Islam has plunged you into a pit of fanaticism, illiteracy, poverty and corruption, and you would like to force the world into the same abyss?."

For a while he looked at me perturbed. "We all make mistakes. But Islam with all its faults is a thousand times more preferable to the abomination that is the West." He finally said quietly. Then he gave me a fierce look and said: "If you had said in any Arab country about Islam, what you have just said to me, you would be a dead man!" "I am sure I would. And if you had said in any Arab country denouncing their corrupt regimes the way you are denouncing Israel, you would be a dead man too. Yet, here you are, studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, allowing yourself openly to speak of subversion and treason against the State of Israel, without any fear of being arrested, let alone being killed for it. Doesn't it say something to you?"

"Yes, it says that you are weak, and that weakness will be your undoing." He said seriously. "Isn't there a way our two nations could ever come to terms and make peace?" Again he gave me that serious look. "Yes, there is a way. We are not like the Nazis who gave you no other choice but death. We give you the chance to convert to Islam, then you will become a part of us and our people will live in peace."

For a while we stood in silence looking at the sea. "You will never defeat us because we have a secret weapon, the same weapon that saved us from you in 1948." I said. "Yes, and what is that, your atom bomb?" His tone was derisive. "No. In Hebrew it is known as 'Ein Breira'. 'Ein Breira? That is your secret weapon? It means 'there is no other choice'. Why, we too can say the same thing." "But that is not quite true. We have 'no other choice' because you challenge our very existence in this country, whereas we don't

do that. We are quite willing to coexist with you as a Palestinian state and an Israeli state, side by side. You don't. There was nothing more to be said.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon in the West, and the sea lost its deep blue colour. The magic was gone. It was time to go home. "Good bye. I have to go inside the mosque. I promised them a lecture." He said walking away. I could imagine what the lecture was all about.

We didn't offer to shake hands. After all, you don't shake hands with your sworn enemy. I walked home depressed. If there was a way out of this conflict, I didn't see one.