

16 March 1984

Brutalization of society

WHO WOULD have believed, as recently as five years ago, that a group of Orthodox Jews headed by the chief rabbi of the town, would be capable of marching belligerently into a café on a Shabbat morning, to violate the Sabbath with their own hands, breaking furniture, smashing windows and tearing doors from their hinges?

The café, it appears, is a quiet venue in Petah Tikva for elderly people who, after attending morning synagogue services, get together for a glass of tea and a game of dominoes. The incursion of the Orthodox group was evidently intended, however, less as a protest against the café's being open than against the previous evening's cinema show in the town.

The Orthodox group has a case for its opposition to the opening of the cinema. The mayor's permit to the cinema owner had not yet received the necessary Minister of Interior ratification, and, after all, there is the gentlemen's agreement – between the Orthodox community and the non-Orthodox population on the *status quo*. That agreement provides for the maintenance of that degree of public observance of the Sabbath that obtained in the days of the British Mandate. The claim, stridently put forward by the self-appointed (and selective) “defenders of civil rights,” that everybody has an absolute right to do whatever he pleases on the Sabbath, is without moral foundation. It is in fact a claim to the right to destroy the *status quo* agreement which predicated mutual concessions.

That is why, for example, it is agreed that we can watch football on Shabbat (in Petah Tikva as elsewhere) – no doubt causing sorrow to many more observant people – but also why there is almost no regular public transport. Despite its anomalies – some amusing, some irritating tone side or the other – a minimum of goodwill is enough to ensure its peaceful maintenance. (In England, you can go to a cinema on Sunday, but the law does not permit theatre performances – to the chagrin of many theatre-goers.)

The provocative opening of a cinema on Friday night in Petah Tikva, where cinemas provide entertainment every other night of the week and where there was not even any serious public demand, is no way to keep the peace.

However, the outrageous behaviour of the “invaders” of the café is significant of another trend developing in Israel. It is a sign of a kind of brutalization of our society. Brutalization is one of the hallmarks of our age, and television has brought some of its most extreme manifestations from all over the world into our living rooms as a fact of life. Yet there is one Israeli phenomenon that could have been prevented but for the partisan calculations of the political leadership of the nation.

LAST WEEK a member of the committee directing the strike of hospital workers claimed that he was reproached by a doctor at his hospital for causing suffering to sick people. He retorted, “You doctors taught us new norms of behaviour.”

Who, indeed, would have believed, even five years ago, that professional healers would be prepared, however justified their grievances over salaries, to let this affect the helpless human beings in their care?

In the spring of 1983, the doctors in all the medical services, throwing aside the norms of civilized behaviour, and the constraints of the specific oath taken on entering

the profession, held to ransom the utterly innocent community of the sick. True, many of the individual doctors were opposed to this behaviour, many succeeded in evading the orders of the strike leaders, and the committee did permit treatment where life was in danger. Who can tell (the doctors know *they* cannot tell) how much suffering and pain were caused, how much damage was done, how many lives were shortened by their three-month-long strike? Many or most of the doctors probably look back in genuine distress at that chapter in their lives. But not the least of their sins, as members of an elitist profession, was to ignore the inevitable power of their example.

TWO WEEKS ago the Tel Aviv firemen went on strike. All but one of their machines were immobilized. Questioned on the radio, one of their spokesmen nonchalantly confirmed that if a call for help came while that one machine was engaged elsewhere, nobody would go out to the second fire. Fortunately the strike was brief. Now we have the strike of non-medical hospital staff. They claim that they are entitled to the same pay as Kupat Holim Clalit sick fund workers. The closing of clinics and the restriction of services in the wards are justified in their eyes by their suddenly discovered plight. After five days, they announced, they would walk out of the hospitals altogether, presumably leaving patients without any attention at all. They did not reach the point of carrying out this threat. They were stopped by a court order, which – at least temporarily – sent them back to work. Maybe they would not have implemented the threat. But that hospital workers should allow it to pass their lips is a grave indictment, not only of these workers, but primarily of those who have allowed labour relations to reach this pass.

THE CHRONIC incidence of strikes in the public services has been allowed to spread, and is treated as though it were an irreversible act of God. The strikes' victims are always the innocent. At first only the national economy and the quality of life (E A1, electricity, broadcasting) were affected. Now we have direct disregard of the health and safety of specific people.

The trades unions and labour leaders have behaved throughout as though these specialist groups of strikers are in the same position as the original heroic pioneers of the strike: the oppressed, overworked, underpaid workers in the 19th century's predatory capitalistic society (where there were no public services); and that their "right to strike" overrules every right of everybody else.

This is grotesque. Israeli workers are not oppressed. There is no reason, in equity or logic or by any civilized norms, why they should not submit their disputes to the judicial process – just as every other dispute in the state is not settled by brute force.

The Histadrut leaders, when asked why they refuse to promote the idea of compulsory arbitration, claim they are against it because "it won't work." When asked why it "won't work," their answer is "because we are against it."

They do, it is true, sometimes also add that compulsory arbitration is "fascist." Why it is fascist they cannot explain. They do not explain why a ruling by an Israeli panel of judges is fascist, while the imposition of a solution by one party holding the other party by the throat is democratic. They also do not explain why in Britain (with its entrenched respect for the strike), it was possible to apply compulsory arbitration (with trades union sanction) throughout World War II and, because of the economic crisis, for seven years thereafter.

Is Israel, spending one-third of its national budget on security, less on a war basis than Britain was? Does Israel's economic situation not demand industrial and social tranquility as much as Britain's did?

The real reason for the Labour Party and trades union leaders' attitude is palpably not their concern for "poor workers whose only weapon is the strike" but simply their fear of antagonizing the beneficiaries of the strike system. When in power they shied away from what they saw as the formidable task of re-educating their constituency. They have presumably hoped the Likud would do the job by carrying out its electoral promise to institute national arbitration in essential services.

The Likud leaders, impressed by Labour's fears of resistance to legislative measures and by Labour's own threat to organize resistance to prospective Likud legislation, have lacked the civic courage to implement their undertakings.

THEY ARE wrong in their fears. The bulk of the people who surely have suffered enough from the strike weapon, will be responsive to a lucid exposition of the same alternative of arbitration – grounded in the fairness and judicial capacity of Israel's judges.

Reader's letter, 30 March 1984

THE BRUTALIZATION OF SOCIETY

To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post

Sir, – Mr. Shmuel Katz complains bitterly, and with much justification, of the "Brutalization of [Israeli] society" (March 16). He is particularly indignant at the behaviour of the doctors who, setting a pattern for others, willingly inflicted suffering on an innocent population in the name of their own private benefit and interest.

But it was not the doctors who "taught us new norms of behaviour," as Mr. Katz believes. No one group can claim exclusive responsibility for the brutalization of our society. But if Mr. Katz is truly interested in fixing blame where it belongs, I suggest he begin with the policy of occupation and settlement he so righteously propounds. Where will we find a better example of the willing infliction of inconvenience, humiliation and suffering on a principally innocent civilian population than in our protracted occupation of other people's territory, the daily interference in their lives, the confiscation and settlement of their land?

Together with the rest of us, Mr. Katz is simply learning the lesson his own enthusiasms have always taught: a society that brutalizes another people will inevitably brutalize its own.

WILLIAM FREEDMAN

Haifa.