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Democracy and the Jewish Presence

One of the gross impertinences of Israel's political life is the repeated assertion by the opponents of Jewish settlement in Judea, Samaria and Gaza that the proponents of settlement (and specifically Gush Emunim) represent a minority. A concomitant phenomenon is the antisettlement groups' pretence that they are the knights of democracy.

Government as a reflection of the results of free elections may be an imperfect system, but it is the best so far evolved by the democratic intelligence. Under this system, it is the right of the government to govern for as long as it commands a parliamentary majority; and it is pledged to fulfil its undertakings to the electors. It is the electors' right to insist on the fulfilment of its pledges.

The 1977 election brought to power a coalition of parties basically identified with the programme of Gush Emunim. The Prime Minister, when he proclaimed that there would be many Elon Morehs, was giving expression to the election undertaking of the Likud to encourage settlement in all parts of Eretz Yisrael.

His subsequent devious performance, breaking pledges and even specific promises to the would-be settlers of Gush Emunim, does not lessen the force of his obligation. Nothing, therefore, could be more legitimate than pressure on the Government to carry out the mandate on which it was elected. In fact, Gush Emunim is defending a crucial principle of democratic government.

Some of its opponents are no less capable than the Gush of massing large gatherings, or of buying space in newspapers. It is also true that their demonstrations (designed to encourage the government to betray its pledges and take orders from foreign potentates) consistently gain them much publicity and applause from ill-wishers of Israel abroad. This does not alter their minority status in Israel. To change that, they must win the next election.

The opposition to a Jewish presence in Judea, Samaria and Gaza has enveloped itself in a monstrous web of woolly thinking and "conventional lies". It has been orchestrated energetically by the American administration, aided generously by the complete absence of any Israeli information campaign.

The central theme of opposition, and a favourite Washington incantation, is that "settlements are an obstacle to peace". Sadat recently has taken up this tune, and Jews in Israel mindlessly echo it (and even chant it in demonstrations in the public squares.)

Even those who are prepared to give all of Judea and Samaria and Gaza — should surely in all logic ask themselves why the presence even of 100,000 Jews (so far there are less than 15,000) in the midst of a population of a million Arabs, should be an "obstacle to peace" if the Arabs want peace with Israel and not peace without Israel. To this, of course, there is not even a remotely plausible answer. Nor is there an intelligent answer to the question as to how it is that

only when there was no Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria — in 1948 and 1967 — Jordan made war on Israel.

Egypt, we are constantly reminded, actually has signed a peace treaty with Israel. The establishment of settlements in Samaria did not prevent its signature.

To which peace then are Carter and Sadat, and their Israeli echoes, referring? Presumably to peace with Jordan, with the “Palestinian people”.

No Arab on either side of the Jordan has suggested that they are prepared to make peace with Israel if she stops establishing settlements.

Nor, indeed, has Sadat. He insists on non-establishment of settlements as one of a number of conditions which Israel must fulfill before there can be any hope at all — not indeed of peace, but of negotiations. Basic to these conditions is a prior undertaking by Israel of a complete withdrawal from these areas — including eastern Jerusalem. Then — so Sadat hopes — the Palestinians *may* agree to talk to the Israelis about a transitional period of autonomy before the takeover.

Sadat has also made it plain that in no circumstances will any Arab agree to a single Jew’s living anywhere on the “West Bank” or Gaza. All existing Jewish communities will have to disappear. They are all, all obstacles to the kind of peace the Arabs are planning for Israel.

The Americans too have made clear that their objective is precisely the same — a complete Israeli withdrawal. Their present campaign against Jewish settlements is simply a corollary of that policy. Fundamentally it has nothing to do with peace (to which one must, of course, pay lip service); it has much to do with the need to toe the line drawn by the Saudi oil-suppliers.

The truth is very simple; it stares us in the face. If Israel were foolish enough to give up the idea of establishing communities beyond the 1949 “death trap” the immediate consequence would be the orchestration of the demand that she now undertake to remove all the other “obstacles to peace”. For has it not been established by all the experts that peace will not be attained except by the “solution of the Palestinian problem?”

Neither the government nor the opposition appears to be aware of the scope, the significance and the thrust of the campaign now in progress against Israel. The many voices now raised in support, or in recognition, or in calls for recognition, of the PLO inevitably reflect a legitimization not only of its terrorism, but of its objective — the dissolution of Israel. Even the repetition (however parrot-like) of the “axiom” that peace inexorably requires the solution of the “Palestinian problem” — represents (even if often unwittingly) an endorsement of that purpose.

What is the Palestinian problem in fact? It is the failure of the Arab nation to destroy Israel. The so-called “legitimate rights” which “must be restored” flow fundamentally from the “right” to replace Israel by an Arab state. Only a fortnight ago, this essential was elegantly restated by one of the “moderate” members of the PLO Central Committee, Mahmoud Abbas.

“The essence of these rights,” he said, “is the non-acceptance of Israel. There is no alternative to the PLO solution of a secular democratic state”.

The first practical element central to the solution of the Palestinian problem is the specifically and repeatedly stated “right of return”. What is the right of return? It is the right of the “refugees” to go back to what they claim were their homes: in Jaffa, in Lod, Ramla, Haifa, Acre.

The perpetuation of the refugee problem was originally designed and indeed proclaimed to be the weapon whereby, through the return of the “refugees”, the Jewish State would be destroyed. This vision is shared by all the Arabs. By the decisions of the Rabat conference of 1974, all the Arab states are formally pledged to help the PLO achieve the Palestinian objectives. President Sadat, while negotiating “peace” with Israel, took care to proclaim that Egypt would fulfil her obligations under those decisions. With the power of oil behind them, the Arabs are confident that their moment is approaching. President Carter, now apparently subservient to every Arab demand, recently endorsed specifically the “right of return” — adding only that, of course, all the Arabs want is that Israel should recognize the right; they would not take advantage of it...

The Camp David agreement, in its utter irresponsibility, has given tremendous impetus to these Arab hopes. The shrinking of Israel to the 1949 armistice lines has become a practical possibility; and the next stage envisaged is the “right of return”. Those who now oppose Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria and Gaza should realize that the threat to Israel’s life now lies heavy on the horizon. Quite apart from the question of the Jewish right to Eretz Yisrael, to surrender now to the demands of the enemy and to abandon Judea, Samaria and Gaza means to surrender still more of Israel’s vital defence.