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MYTH OF THE 'BILLIONS'

ISRAEL has paid a heavy price for the obstinate rejection by its political leaders of a rational game plan for fighting the propaganda war being waged against us for the last 25 years. The result has been the striking success of Arab fabrication and a fantastic rewriting of history which by constant repetition and dissemination has sunk deep into the public mind throughout the world - including the Jewish mind. The present Likud government, while faithful to the barren tradition of its predecessors in this field, has established its own level of incompetence in a crucial area in which the main assault comes from within the nation.

The government has stood by in apparent helplessness while the Labor Party and, with their specialized ferocity, the fringe groups at its "left," have built up a tremendous charge, plausible-sounding to the ignorant, against its crucial "settlement" policy - that is, the ABC of Zionism, Yishuv Eretz Yisrael. It would be superfluous to describe here the ugly impact of this campaign in Israel and even more so abroad - the atmosphere of hatred and ridicule built up by a resolute unscrupulous army of propagandists. The story spread by the opposition, gleefully embraced by all the elements hostile to Israel abroad, and unhappily accepted as truth by many friends, is that the Likud government has poured billions upon billions of dollars into Judea, Samaria and Gaza and has thereby denied the nation resources required to combat unemployment and reduced the nation's capacity to absorb immigrants.

This story has naturally been grist to the mills of all the ideological opponents of "settlements" (who look to the day when Israel will withdraw from Judea and Samaria) - and is used as a most handy political weapon in the international arena against Israel. The story is completely, utterly false. There has been no pouring of billions.

The government's outlays in Judea, Samaria and Gaza have been, by any standard, rational and economically unexceptionable. The hostile propaganda reached new heights in 1991 in the context of the immigration problem. In that year, as emerges starkly from an authoritative, detailed analysis by Professor Ezra Sohar - to be published in the May issue of Nativ - the total investment of the government in Judea, Samaria and Gaza amounts to no more than NIS 745 million.

The breakdown is as follows: NIS 100m. on infrastructure; NIS 400m. on building (an estimate by Professor Sohar based on the difference between the cost - NIS 970m. - and the revenue already accrued from the sale of houses built), NIS 125m. for caravans; NIS 30 million for roads and NIS 90 million in subsidies for industry. That is, about 1 per cent of the national budget for 1991.

THE essential central fact about housing in Judea, Samaria and Gaza is that the persistent charge of free dwelling is simply a myth. The criteria for aid in these locations are the same as in the whole of Israel. It has three categories of development areas.

Only in one of them, designated 'Alef' are the residents exempt from participation in development. In area 'Bet' residents contribute one-half. In area 'Gimel', residents pay the whole development cost.

Area Gimel contains 60 percent of the population. Aid in building costs is provided

according to the criteria for the rest of Israel. Thus in Area Bet, where there is a grant of about 25 percent, Ariel or Efrat (for example) are treated like Acre or Afula or Tiberias.

Another myth that should be exploded relates to the quantity of building. In 1991, the Housing Ministry built altogether 83,000 units. Of these, 8,100, less than 10 percent, were built in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

And nowhere has the incitement factor been more prominent than on the subject of road-building. Judea, Samaria and Gaza are responsible - so goes this chapter of the myth - for the road accidents in Israel. "Adequate roads are not built in Israel because all the money goes to 'the territories.'" In 1991, the Housing Ministry's NIS 30 million was matched by NIS 28 million from the Transport Ministry.

The total of NIS 58 million represents 6.34 percent of the total expenditure on roads in Israel; and the tragic fact, says Sohar, is that the percentage of road accidents in Judea, Samaria and Gaza is much higher than the national average. The reason: bad or inadequate roads. Labor leader Yitzhak Rabin has evidently allowed himself to be seduced into believing that by promising a flood of money that will follow a 'freezing' of the settlements, he will win the election in June.

If the Likud wakes up from its inertia and uses all the means of communication to reveal to the public the truth about the "billions," Rabin's promise may well boomerang. It will be clear that he is either ignorant of what is going on around him, and does not know that the story of billions is a hoax, or he is deliberately joining in the big bluff. Does Rabin even now realize all the implications of the loose talk about "freezing" the settlements? If he wins the election and does indeed "freeze" - or announce the "freezing" - he will have won a tremendous victory, both for Bush and for his anti-Israel, pro-Arab policy; and a great victory for the Arabs.

To them, a freeze of the settlements would mean a first step toward eliminating Jews altogether from Judea, Samaria and Gaza. It would be hailed as a vindication of their intransigence and their terror; and a signal victory in the battle they see themselves waging to encompass: the elimination of Israel, period. Freezing the settlements will not bring Rabin money either for combating unemployment or for speeding immigration.

That must be found elsewhere. But it could mark a turning point in Zionist history. With its far-reaching dangerous implication it should not be made a plank in a heated election campaign.