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STRIKES AND OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS

THE people of Israel, enjoying the good fortune of almost never being subjected to natural disasters like major earthquakes or devastating floods, seems intent on inflicting on itself the tortures of man-made visitations. It tolerates a never-ending series of "strikes" which immobilize large sections of the country, undermine citizens' health, disrupt their careers, perhaps even threaten their lives - and bring down heavy losses on the economy. Strictly speaking, these are not strikes but acts of sabotage and mass-grabs of hostages.

On Monday, a writer for Ma'ariv, Thelma Admon, analyzed with meticulous clarity the inner workings of the brief strike by the Bezek telephone workers. How easy it was for them to act "without hesitation, without reasonable consideration, certainly without compassion," by touching a button or moving a switch, "just to hurt hundreds of thousands of innocent and helpless people." The most serious victims of those three days of enforced disconnection were, of course, the old, the lonely and the sick. The day the newspaper article appeared, so did a glimmer of hope, promising that the months-old strike by the university lecturers might actually be reaching the stage of serious negotiation.

Meanwhile, however, the semester is almost over, and the students, victims of the strike, must envisage the prospect of losing a whole year in their pursuit of a civilian career - after all their years in the armed forces. They are as innocent of the causes of the dispute as hospital patients during strikes by doctors, nurses and hospital staff; as innocent as children during the teachers' strikes - indeed, as innocent as just about all of us who have suffered during the various disputes. Merely to state the incontrovertible facts is to tell a tale of barbarity.

Not the least chilling has been the behavior of the media, and even the reactions of the victims themselves. They have acted as though strikes really are natural disasters, almost acts of God. Time after time after time, during every upheaval, the media devote acres of space and time to covering stories about the sufferers, calculation of economic losses and mutual recriminations by the disputants - and let us not forget the publicized views of lay experts on the rights and the wrongs.

All the while, everybody knows that after days, weeks or months of on-and-off negotiations, one side will weary of the struggle and a "compromise" (sealed by the obligatory clinking of glasses) will be reached.

THE FATALISM of the victim has never been so dramatically emphasized as in the ongoing strike by the university lecturers - ostensibly part of society's intellectual elite. It seems not to have occurred to the students to cry out to the disputants: "For heaven's sake - is this the way to settle a dispute? You might as well fight it out with your fists.

Why can't you submit it, as all such disputes should be submitted, to professionals whose business it is to settle disputes? And while they deliberate, we would get on with our studies." It boggles the mind that year after year, this nation goes on denying itself the one manifest means of relief from the sometimes horrific excesses of strike action in

public services: binding arbitration. Israel has a body of judges as able, and processes of law as fair, as any in the Western world. Some believe they are better than most.

The disputes in our public services aren't half as complicated as the cases our judges regularly deal with. They are, it is true, often bedeviled by the principle that a pay rise in one profession is automatically followed by a parallel rise in one or more other specified professions - the famous "linkage" which thrusts upon the government what it finds an unbearable burden. But as long as this principle exists, it surely makes professional judicial intervention all the more necessary.

In the early 19th century, strike was the only possible weapon of oppressed workers against the guilty, rapacious private employer and terrible work conditions. That was when a fierce struggle brought about the workers' "right to strike." To invoke that right today as justification for holding whole communities of innocent people to ransom is a cynical and cruel travesty - as was brought home forcefully to hundreds of thousands of people in Israel a week ago. Essential reform is the promulgation of a law prohibiting strikes (and lockouts) in public services like health, education, energy, communications (telephone, post, road and rail, radio, television); and the setting up of a Permanent Arbitration Court with the status of a District Court.

And the "linkage" rule must be abolished. Our endemic strike cycle contains a serious civil rights element which has evidently escaped the notice of otherwise active civil rights campaigners. Isn't the suspension of your telephone service a violation of your right to that service? Isn't a teachers' strike a violation of your child's right to his or her education (for which you have paid taxes)? Isn't a hospital strike a violation of a patient's right to adequate and timely medical attention, for which he has paid his dues?