

August 16, 2001

TINKERING WITH 'HASBARA'

Last Monday it seemed that a miracle had occurred. The Jerusalem Post reported on Tuesday, August 7, that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had actually conducted a discussion on hasbara with top officials in the Foreign Ministry and in his own office. He told the meeting that 'Israel should make a point of emphasizing the Jewish right to the land, because it is too often forgotten!'

One hopes Sharon's idea will do some good. It reflects once again, however, the neglect by successive governments, whether Right or Left, of their manifest obligation to create machinery for spreading knowledge of the fundamental fact of our existence in our homeland. Most specifically, they failed to counter the fantastic mendacities of the Arabs with our truth.

Year after year, day and night, the Arabs, with the 'Palestinian' branch as their spearhead, have conducted a many-faceted campaign of denigration throughout the world, openly aiming at the demonization of Israel as a state and of the Jews as a nation. The central message of that campaign is that 'Palestine is our country and the Jews have taken it from us.' On this slogan, the Arabs, over time, built up a completely fabricated history of a Palestinian nation (which never existed) to replace the history of 4,000 years of Jewish association with the Land of Israel. Here is Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, without a blush telling the UN Assembly in November 1974 that Arabs were 'occupied for thousands of years in agriculture and building, in disseminating culture throughout the land, setting up an example of freedom of religion, and serving as a faithful guardian of the holy places of all the faiths.' To balance these fantasies, they have developed an anti-Israel ideology equaling, and perhaps outdoing, in text and caricature the propaganda of the Nazis. From time to time, they turn even to the demonic anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages - as Suha Arafat did in the presence of Hillary Clinton a couple of years ago.

The Arabs' propaganda drumbeat has never ceased, and the governments of Israel have failed even to consider seriously the growing problem of a hostile public opinion throughout the world, where even the most obvious nonsense may be swallowed if it is repeated often enough without challenge.

Not the least serious consequence of our governments' failure is the despair of our friends - non-Jewish as well as Jewish - who are not equipped with the needed authoritative response to the Arab propaganda.

To the aid of the Arabs, moreover, have come a host of allies. Classic anti-Semitism - of course - now posing as 'legitimate' political anti-Zionism; but also a battery of some of the leading media in the world. Examples: The Times of London, The New York Times,

Le Monde, the BBC, CNN, etc. etc. In all of them there are regular distortions or suppression of news - so as to make the Arabs look good and the Jews look bad.

In short, a tremendous problem - and Israel's reply is exemplified by the opinions expressed by two foreign ministers, each in his time responsible for hasbara: Moshe Dayan, who said 'We don't need hasbara. It is important what we do, not what we say,' and Shimon Peres - who believes we shouldn't trouble our heads with history.

The decision taken at Sharon's meeting bears but minimal relation to the magnitude, the depth and diversity of what should be done. It is a tinkering with the problem, a nibble at its edges; it is not even the beginning of a solution.

When Winston Churchill became British prime minister in World War II, he at once tackled the problem of war information - of hasbara. He appointed a minister of information and - over the protest of foreign minister Anthony Eden - a ministry with a worldwide reach was established. Eden did not realize that no Foreign Office is built and specialized and equipped for the very large task of war information. Indeed, no country at war in our time can do without a separate department for information abroad - and Israel least of all.

The task of Israel's hasbara must be tackled not by occasional sudden sallies but by a separate permanent department in the government. It must be headed by a minister dedicated to the task. He can have no other business. In the debates at the cabinet table he must inject an appreciation of the impact of information. His senior staff, which must maintain a 24-hour-a-day service, must be experts on all the subjects which have a bearing on the dispute with the Arabs: Jewish history in Eretz Yisrael, Zionist history and the British Mandate, the history of Arab claims, and more. To ensure the essential volume of its message, in the US, in cooperation with Jewish and pro-Israel Christian bodies a nationwide monitoring organization must be created - and a special program for dealing with what we are told in the grave hasbara, or anti-hasbara, situation in the universities.

It was a positive move by the prime minister to have that discussion last Monday - but it is most desirable that he should ponder the need for solving the major problem that persists because the information seat in his government remains empty.