

June 26, 1992

YOU'RE QUITE WRONG, MR. GORBACHEV

NEXT to the Yom Kippur fast, the most widely observed holyday happening in the Jewish calendar is no doubt the Passover seder. Even many semi-assimilated Jews participate in the ceremony without fail. Thus, century after century, the Jewish people recalls its escape from Egyptian enslavement three and a half millennia ago.

At the center of the seder, however, it is the story of the enslavement itself which is recounted. The long answer to the Four Questions on the whys and wherefores of the Passover festivities begins with the simple statement "We were slaves unto Pharaoh." Does this annual harking back mean that we are a backward-looking people? Mr Gorbachev, ex-president of the former Soviet Union, evidently thinks that we are, and he disapproves. Not 3,500, nor 2,000, nor 100 years - Gorbachev expects the Jewish people to erase from its memory the treatment meted out to us by the Soviet power for three-quarters of a century down to four or five years ago.

During his recent visit to Israel, he was challenged by a Russian-born Israeli journalist who charged that the Soviet Union had conducted a "criminal" policy toward Israel. Gorbachev (as reported in *The Jerusalem Post*, June 19) sharply replied that there was no point in looking backwards. Gorbachev did not decline the invitation to visit Yad Vashem.

Was it out of mere politeness that he did not say there, too, that "there is no point in looking backwards"? Or is it only the Soviet chapter in our history that should be erased from our memory? Perhaps he simply does not realize the shape, dimensions and texture of the behavior toward the Jewish people by the Communist regime of which he was the last ruler. Its crime was two-pronged. The Soviet government, from the '50s onwards, was a prime factor in encouraging the Arab states to launch their wars of annihilation against Israel - and in providing them with arms for that purpose.

They did not hide their guilt. Blatant was their part in promoting the attacks on Israel in 1967 and 1973. They did not create the Arab movement for the destruction of the Jewish State, but they gave it teeth.

The Soviet government was the most active promoter (apart from the Arab states) of Arab terror against Israel. There were training facilities throughout the Soviet empire, and arms aplenty flowed to the PLO, backed by absolute diplomatic support and a barrage of Nazi-type propaganda, day after day. In every conceivable way - except for actual participation in physical attack - the Soviet government allied itself to Israel's mortal enemies.

And who but the USSR built up the tremendous arsenal in Southern Lebanon designed for a planned massive army-style attack by the PLO - the arsenal uncovered by the IDF in its timely invasion in 1982? The other prong of the crime operated throughout the whole of the Soviet period. Its central objective was evidently cultural extinction, the obliteration from human memory of the Jewish ethos - of Jewish history, of Jewish values, of Jewish identity. Perhaps Gorbachev does not know that Jewish studies were forbidden, that teaching or studying Hebrew was a punishable offense, that Zionism was a crime to be paid for by banishment to Siberia (whence the criminal either returned or did not).

CONTRARY to Gorbachev's advice, the evils visited upon the Jewish people by the Soviet regime must not be forgotten. They must be remembered and recalled - but not only as a function of national self-respect. The Soviet experience must be embodied in the warp and woof of Israeli foreign policy.

It is essential to take into account that Soviet policy was based on a monstrously distorted projection of the Jewish image, of Israel and of the dispute with the Arabs. The vast majority of Russians were never exposed to any corrective to this projection. Not to put too fine a point on it, it may be taken for granted that in Russia (and indeed in the other provinces of the former Soviet Union) the people, from the leaders downward, are ignorant of even the elementary facts of the dispute.

They know only the Arab build-up of grotesque fabrication of its history. They have been taught year after year about a predatory power called Israel (run, what is more, by villainous Jews), which oppresses a poor "Palestinian" people whose land it has stolen. The mere establishment of diplomatic relations, over the development of economic cooperation, will not alter that monstrous image.

It is the duty of the Israeli government to press for a complete revision of Russian education on the subject. A vivid illustration of the problem and the need for tackling it was provided earlier this month by the experience of a group of senior Russian generals whose visit to Israel was sponsored by the Washington Center for International Security. Taken on a helicopter tour and briefing by IDF officers, the Russian visitors were flabbergasted by the discovery that Israel was not the size of, say, Ukraine.

They could not believe their eyes when they saw Israel's waistline and, in the background, the Samarian highland which they, like everybody else in the Soviet Union, had been taught Israel must "return" to the Arabs. They now, they declared, had very much to learn, and not only about topography. This should be a keynote in the new era of Israel's relations with Russia - a massive campaign of information among the policy-making echelons and throughout the media; and a demand for cooperation in such an educative campaign by the Russian government.

This condition is vital for the creation of a mutually respectful and fruitful relationship.