

“We have a very inadequate leadership.”



Interview with Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom, Jerusalem.

What do you think of Israel’s handling of the Gazean freedom flotillas?

Pretty bad. Excessive use of force. We have known this for a long time when it comes to demonstrations by Palestinians. This time it was an excessive and inappropriate use of force against Europeans and Internationals. There was a time, seven years ago, when Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurdall were killed. The people today did not do anything illegal. They tried to get into Gaza. These are terrible moments in Israeli society.

Do you think the Israeli government will get away with the murder of nine Turkish citizens?

Getting away with, depends on what kind of international penalty or repercussions there will be. The worsening of relations with Turkey is a major mistake in terms of Israeli priorities and whether the people behind this decision will be prosecuted. I sort of doubt it. May be finally Israelis will be held accountable for crimes on the international levels. One of the likely repercussions from the global exposure of Israel’s harsh treatment (of Gaza) may be some easing of the blockade. The United States is serious when declaring that the situation in Gaza is unacceptable. One may wonder again whether Obama is just talking or whether will be actions. We will have to wait and see.

In the view of the lame US American reaction concerning the murder of nine civilians and seeing how Vice President Joe Biden during his last visit to Israel was treated, can one expect some US pressure on Israel? Biden went out of his way, declaring in Israel as a Vice President of the United States of America: “Good to be at home”. This quote was not mentioned in the US media. On one hand, Obama said that the treatment was an offence to his country; on the other hand, there was the enormous pressure by public interest groups to downplay this incident as a disagreement among friends. Taking all this into account, do you think the US will come up with a tougher approach towards the Israeli government?

I think that the political courage Obama displayed in the beginning, as he tried to change the policies of the Clinton and Bush periods, have given way to reluctance. Once again in the case of the Gaza boats, you hear a more explicit statement from the White House, but I don’t know whether it will remain consistent. Personally I am very glad that the US joined the other 188 UN members in a vote to create a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. It is a departure from former US policy, which was completely supportive of Israel’s nuclear policy. It is a step away from that. My feelings are that Israel’s reckless reaction to the boats should make a lot of people very nervous, as well as the fact that Israel continues to possess atomic bombs. These are poor policy by Israel in terms of responding to a non-threat in case of the boats. Just imagine the reaction if there would have been a real threat from Iran. Bibi (Netanyahu) is talking about this for 15 years. It is his motto to beat this drum. It fits into the Israeli mentality that we are the victims, that we are threatened and all this stuff. The Israeli push to impose sanctions against Iran has suffered now a blow by this overreaction to the boats.

Let us get a little bit into psychology and look at the bombing of Lebanon in 2006, the “massacre” in Gaza in 2008 and 2009, and the recent attack against the International Solidarity Movement. Why does the Israeli government react to every crisis with such a great verocity?

The idea of always using force and to be the first of using force as a last resort, has to do with the identities of those who are in charge, the group of seven who make the decisions (the so-called security cabinet L. W.). Of those seven three were military commanders: Netanyahu, Yaalon, Barak, Lieberman and Yihai are off-the-wall: they are people to whom you don't want to give any power. We have a very inadequate leadership.

Has the reliance on force anything to do with the holocaust trauma?

There is an abnormal amount of fear. I think of the fear that is being manufactured from above. By this fear, any anger regarding what we suffered in the holocaust is redirected from Christian Europe to the Muslim Middle East. I think this is a manipulation. But I think also that Israelis are really afraid. The Palestinian resistance, which has also taken violent forms has been a catastrophe because it hardened Israeli attitude. Israelis are thus afraid to make any change, such as to relinquish any piece of land or accord the Palestinians any geographic advantage, even if they have a bad conscience.

Do you think it is a good thing to keep the holocaust trauma as a political tool Israeli society or raising kids with these horrors?

I think you don't can ignore the holocaust.

Surely not.

But I think Israelis teach the wrong lessons. The first of these wrong lessons is that the holocaust means “never again” to the Jews. It should be never again, period.

You certainly know Yehuda Elkana's famous essay “The necessity to forget”, published in the Israeli daily “Haaretz” in March 2, 1988. Avi Melzer just published it again in the latest edition of “Der Semit”.

Good – good, good! It is an amazing piece.

I just read it before I came here. Elkana said that the Israeli should “learn to forget”. And he continued saying that it is “the greatest threat to the future of the state of Israel”. What do you think of it?

We have so many educational challenges. Israeli schools take upon themselves the obligation of raising soldiers. The schools have produced soldiers and it failed. I was involved in the early years of Yesh Gvul (There is a limit), which supported soldiers who refused to serve in Lebanon. I had to face the problem myself serving in Lebanon. I came to the conclusion that it is the government's job to convince its citizenry if it's going to fight a war, that it's a necessary war. We have to believe in the necessity of the war. When the government fails, you can't punish a person. It's the government's failure to convince them. The job of an educator is to help the students make good decisions based on morality and values and not blindly follow orders.

Do you accept Elkana's recommendation?

Programmatically it's impossible. You can't forget the holocaust. It is a wish, he is saying. The holocaust hangs around our neck, but educationally, it must be dealt with it properly, not allow manipulation. We have to universalize it and stop saying: We are the victim and no one else is a victim. On the way to Germany I read a newspaper. A soldier was quoted as saying "they are lynching us". First of all, not a single soldier was killed. They captured three soldiers, they didn't kill them. They interviewed this captain R. in hospital. They did not give his full name. He was saying that everybody who approached us wanted to kill us. This is a very subjective notion. This is the mentality of "they are all against us". Although you are heavily armed, you board a ship illegally and then say they want to kill us. How do you imagine the other person feels?

You are still a member of the organization "Rabbis for Human Rights"?

I am the loyal opposition. I am in it and I don't agree with much of it.

What is the difference between this organization and the other Jewish religious authorities? Why do you need a special organization that takes care of human rights? What about the official Jewish religious establishment? Don't they care about Palestinian human rights? Don't they live up to the Jewish humanitarian tradition to care about the other in one's midst?

It should be. But obviously there was a need to make a statement. We are rabbis for human rights because the rabbinical establishment was not responding to this need. In fact, what it usually does, it serves Jewish interests. You can say in a vulgar sense that the rabbis were cheerleaders. During the attack against Gaza the army rabbis brought in other rabbis to whip up the troops' spirits, to tell the troops not to be merciful, to be brutal. Literally, this has been documented and reported. I think it takes some serious redirecting of their priorities to change the message. Meanwhile, the Rabbis of Human Rights is a very small minority. There are many Israelis nevertheless, who are delighted or relieved that there is such a voice.

Isn't there any criticism of the Israeli public towards statements of incitement against the Palestinian people made by "religious" officials?

People should remember that Israel is a very fragmented society. What unifies the Israeli public is the fear of Palestinians, a certain notion of selfishness, that this is ours, they shouldn't be here, or they shouldn't be given something at our expense. But internally there are deep divisions. One is the division between religious and non-religious society and plenty of issues that cause anger and resentment towards rabbis such as the fact that marriage is a religious monopoly. You can only marry according to religious law, otherwise you have to go to Cyprus for a civil marriage. A Rabbi of Reform Judaism is not allowed to wed couples. Such a marriage is invalid.

Is the work of the Rabbis for Human Rights confined to Israel proper or is it aimed towards the Occupied Palestinian Territories? Are Rabbis for Human Rights just the good conscience of the Israeli society?

It started as a reaction towards the violation of human rights. Rabin gave the order to break the bones of the demonstrators in 1988. The intifada was what prompted us to stand up. We were also concerned with internal social and economic injustice, which had nothing to do with

Palestinians, but the organization's fame remains linked to the mistreatment of Palestinians because everybody says he or she is against poverty. For rabbis to speak about the rights of Palestinians is unusual when everything is polarized and Judaism is seen as revolving around the protection of Jewish privilege and not about the divine spark in human beings.

Do you consider Rabbis for Human Rights a Zionist organization?

It is definitely a Zionist organization. I think I am the only rabbi who has come out of the closet and says: I am not Zionist. It does not mean anything. It is anachronistic, it's problematic, it's a nice idea but it cannot be applied today without bringing with it discrimination and other abuses.

Do you consider yourself a non-Zionist, or an anti-Zionist?

It depends on my mood. I relate to my Zionist past as something which was naive. I am a little bit angry with my parents who raised me as a Zionist. They know that. I look at Zionism right now as a phase in Jewish life which I hope will be relegated to past and will not continue. And believe that some time in the future, hopefully not too long, Israelis will find the notion of Zionism to be not very useful or practical or helpful in solving their problems.

But the whole edifice of the state is constructed around this ideology. There are many critics of Zionism who just say that you have to get rid of Zionism, which will make it much easier to make peace with the Palestinians. They argue that Israel has to become a normal Western democratic state and must abolish all the laws that privilege Jewish Israelis over all non-Jews. None of the serious Zionist critics deny Israel's right to exist, what they call into question is its Zionist character. For them the "dezionization" is the prerequisite for peace and peaceful coexistence in the region. Do you agree with these critics?

I think Zionism was fade as a unifying principle in Israel. Israeli Jewish population is split in two: the Zionist population and the non-Zionists or post-Zionists. The national religious public, who we call the "knitted kippah" public, I don't see shedding off Zionism. Zionism stands for many different things. For example, it allows for such brutalities like the invasion of Gaza. In the secular part of Israeli society I see a gradual abandonment of Zionism. The schism of society has already begun. The Zionist dream is like the Islamic notion of this land as an Islamic possession. You feel it inside your heart and you raise your children that way. But what about the state? How is he going to function? The state of the Jewish people is something that is gone, it continuously creates friction between Jews and Palestinians. I want my Judaism to be established by my education and my culture and not by a state.

Critics argue that Israel can live without Zionism. It is like the ideology of capitalism. Originally, the idea of capitalism was derived from Protestantism. It's value system is not needed for the functioning of the Western capitalist system anymore. The system runs by itself. Israel is 62 years old, it is well established in the international system, it has a huge military juggernaut, and it is extremely powerful. Does it still need the ideological Zionist fabric?

I agree with you that Israel is viable without Zionism and it would be much better off if Jews and Palestinians in Israel would work together in partnership and not have a situation where the Palestinians, who are 20 per cent of Israeli population, always feel marginalized and disenfranchised by calling Israel a Jewish state. I think that part of what's needed to heal

Israel is to get rid of the huge military you mentioned as a sign of strength. I think it's a sign of weakness, it's a sign of insecurity. This was exemplified by Israel's reaction towards the flotilla.

You are also involved in the inter-religious dialogue. Is this a trilateral debate? Or are these just Israeli intellectuals meeting and talking to their European counterparts? I think nobody cares in Israel about inter-religious dialogue. Is this impression correct?

Basically, I agree what you are saying. It does not reflect the grass roots. Don't forget that the overwhelming majority of religious Jews are very right-wing in their outlook. They are not interested in it. They see it (inter-religious dialogue) as a kind of betrayal of their principles anyway. People who come to the inter-religious dialogue from the Jewish side tend to be liberal Jews or even people who aren't even religious. You see mainly European and American Christians and on the Muslim side mainly sufis but they don't represent the Muslim population. They represent a kind of New age thing, which is sweet. You do not talk about a meeting of equals. The Jewish side is dominant. The activities are very marginal. The saddest thing about inter-religious dialogue is that although it has the facade of being open spiritual, it is actually something that avoids really important moral issues because it is again structurally dominated by Jews with Palestinian tokenism. You come there as a token person, not really free to speak your mind. It is not the Judaism for which we took pride for thousands of years. It is what Marc Ellis calls "Constantinian Judaism". Real Jewish life is about bringing in Sabbath. My Jewish life today was somehow trying to correct the drift of Judaism towards the overuse of force. What a difference. Religiously, the "us" was defined to keep the Sabbath. Today, the "us" is the help we ask for to help us come back to ourselves and behave like Mensch, like people and not like barbarians. What a different Judaism is this?

What is your solution to the conflict? Should it be a Jewish state besides a Palestinian state? Should it be a bi-national state? What do you think would be the best for both peoples?

The overwhelming majority of Israelis is for the continuation of Israel as a Jewish state. In reality it is not a Jewish state at all, neither in terms of its behavior, nor in terms of the prospects of remaining Jewish under conditions of democracy. There is an equal number of Jews and Palestinians in the area Israel controls. The Jews who invest their hope in continued Jewish domination are betraying Jewish morality. I think living together in one state is a better way to approach things than the dream and attempts to create two states. A two state solution is a delusion. A stable peace would require the right of return of the refugees. That brings us into a minority. For me it would be just fine.

Mr. Milgrom, thanks for the interview.

Jeremy Milgrom is a member of "Rabbis for Human Rights" and a participant in the inter-religious dialogue in Israel. He lives in Jerusalem.

The interview was conducted by Ludwig Watzal, Journalist, Bonn, Germany.
Foto: Sylvia Tari, Cologne.

An abbreviated version under the title "An Israel Beyond Zionism? Was published in counterpunch <http://www.counterpunch.org/watzal06222010.html>
The original version also here: <http://between-the-lines-ludwig-watzal.blogspot.com/2010/06/we-have-very-inadequate-leadership.html>