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REFLECTIONS OF A LEBANON RELIEF OFFICER

Samuel Halperin

July 1, 1982. Our first visit to Lebanon. Naturally we expect scenes of utter and total destruction, primed by the news reports we have seen on television and in the print media. Our eyes reveal a far different picture in Tyre and Sidon. Where in the world are the Lebanese getting so much gasoline that they ride hither and yon, clogging the roads with Mercedes, Porsches and every imaginable type of vehicle? Smiles and waves from the drivers but no yielding right of way or deference merely because we drive in cars bearing Israeli license plates. The Lebanese drive with self-assurance and daring. In other words, driving in "bombed out" South Lebanon can be hazardous to your health--but not because of the war damage we had expected.

After visiting the Lebanese social welfare officials and assorted church dignitaries, we go on our first tour of the bombed and shelled areas of the two southern cities. While the devastation is far less than we had anticipated, it is still substantial. Gaping holes in many high-rise buildings, almost total leveling of some of the older structures which apparently could not withstand concussions from Israeli bombing and shelling. Yet shops are open almost everywhere. Shoes and food are available in great abundance. Merchants on the main streets seem to be doing a brisk business even though most of their plate glass windows have been shattered. And how bad can it really be when you can buy such delicious ice cream in Tyre? That means there is water, electricity, and a reliable milk supply from the hinterlands--hardly what we had expected scarcely three weeks after what the BBC called the "virtual destruction of South Lebanon."

And the beaches! Hundreds of youngsters and youths of military age thronging the coastline from Israel to the very outskirts of Beirut. Don't they know there's a war on?

Today the Port of Tyre reopens with a colorful ceremony arranged by Major Said Sharaf, an enormously talented Israeli Druse assigned to aid the civilian population of South Lebanon. All the leading dignitaries--priests, kadis, mullahs, Israeli army brass, civic leaders--are arrayed at a long ceremonial table with their backs to the shimmering sea. Dozens of fishing boats bedecked with flowers, confetti, streamers, and portraits of Bashir Jemayel adorn most of the boats, reminding us of the presidential elections in less than two weeks. An enormous ceremonial cake is ready to be shared. A Boy Scout band plays gaily, if off-key. All Tyre celebrates the return of normal life to the seafront, especially the hundreds of fishermen whose livelihood has been suspended for over five weeks.

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Earlier, I present a check for \$30,000 to the Mayor of Tyre to help pay for the removal of rubble in Tyre port and at thirty-five other sites in the city. Since rubble had to be bulldozed as a precondition of any reconstruction in the city, we of the Joint are celebrities, at least for a few hours.

To accompany my presentation of our financial contribution, I prepare a few words reminding one and all that this Jewish gift is a partial repayment of the generosity of King Hiram of Tyre who, three thousand years earlier, sent cedar wood from Lebanon for the construction of King Solomon's great Temple in Jerusalem. So, today, we Jews are pleased to be able to return a measure of the generosity shown to the Jewish people by King Hiram...

Just as I am about to offer these words of historical wisdom, the Mayor grabs the check and tells me that this gift is in continuation of the tradition of King Hiram of Tyre who once sent cedar wood to King Solomon in Jerusalem ... I am totally upstaged by the Mayor. Yet it is good to know that, at least for now, both Jews and Lebanese are recalling their long history of peaceful cooperation and sharing.

Later I learned that the AJJDC check was turned over by the Mayor to his brother-in-law who, it turns out, was contractor for the rubble removal. No competitive bidding requirements around here!

The first ship has arrived in newly-reopened Tyre port, loaded with "goods urgently needed for Lebanese reconstruction." The cargo consists exclusively of textiles, color televisions and video recorders.

Most of the Lebanese we talk with--policemen, social workers, hospital staff--regard the Palestinians as "dogs," or worse. They want their "stolen country back." The two most liberal Lebanese I meet live in the outskirts of Beirut, high in the mountains and far from the war still raging in the capital. They are the first Lebanese who do not call for the total expulsion of all Palestinians from their land. As far as they are concerned, "all peaceful Palestinians, all unarmed Palestinians, may remain in Lebanon, but only as workers and technicians, not as landowners or the like." Lebanon needs their labor as hewers of wood and drawers of water, but it is out of the question for Palestinians ever to be Lebanese citizens. I ask whether that prohibition applies to the bulk of the Palestinians who have actually been born in Lebanon. "Of course!" my Lebanese speakers respond. "Palestinians are not Lebanese and they are not entitled to be part of our nation. But if they want to stay here and earn a living and be good workers, like the Armenians, that's another matter. Then they don't have to go drown themselves in the sea or go to Syria or Jordan or wherever they want."

We have been to Ein-El-Hilwe Government Hospital, Sidon, at least six or seven times since July 1. Not until September are there any visible signs of a clean-up and effort to restore normal patient services. The Lebanese medical staff either sip coffee and converse in the doctors' lounge or pursue their own private practices in lucrative outside offices. The Joint purchases five lovely reconditioned kidney dialysis units and transports them into the hospital. The medical director "goes through the roof." He doesn't wish to receive anything from Israel and seems indifferent to those Lebanese who face the choice between death and an arduous trip into Nahariya for weekly or twice-weekly treatment. Beirut is closed off by Israel's siege of the PLO. If Israel is concerned about saving lives, the hospital director seems to feel that it should bear the financial cost and onus of transporting the patients away from his still-closed facility.

In late October, the Lebanese Minister of Health prohibits Lebanese from going to Israel for specialized medical treatment. Only Palestinians may cross the border and then, presumably, at the expense of the Government of Israel. Lebanese needing special medical attention will now have to go to Beirut.

Ein-El-Hilwe and all other government hospitals remain closed to employment of Palestinian doctors and nurses. Palestinian patients are supposed to go to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) clinics or whatever remains of the Palestinian Red Crescent for services. Lebanese government hospitals may be used to treat Palestinians only as "a hospital of last resort." No effort is spared to show the Palestinians the utter contempt with which the Lebanese authorities view them.

We have been working with indefatigable Jacqueline Thibault and the Swiss-based international relief organization Terre des Hommes for almost three months, trying to open the first child nutrition unit in South Lebanon. The Joint has transported the necessary special milks and creams, medicines, a refrigerator and other clinic equipment into Sidon. But the Lebanese hospital director refuses all requests for rooms in the badly-damaged hospital. We offer to pay for all needed renovations, first of rooms in the hospital itself, then in the empty gatehouses and, still later, we offer to erect a prefabricated structure. But the malnourished children to be served will be almost exclusively Palestinians and therefore they are "not wanted" in the corridors of Ein-El-Hilwe. Moreover, if a nutrition center is to open, say the Lebanese authorities, only Lebanese medical personnel may be hired, even though the hospital adjoins the Palestinian refugee camp and the clientele to be served are almost exclusively Palestinians. When no Lebanese are found who are willing to work in this low-status, possibly dangerous nutrition center, Terre des Hommes and AJJDC rent space adjoining the UNRWA clinic across the street from the hospital... Back to apartheid. Lebanon for the Lebanese, UNRWA camps for the Palestinians.

We are unloading six tons of powdered milk in Sidon's military headquarters, later to be transferred to the Terre des Hommes child nutrition center. The Israeli base commander is not very happy with our taking matters into our own hands and dropping several hundred cartons of milk powder and sacks of milk solids on his doorstep. For a time we worry that he'll make us pack it all up again and carry it back to Israel. Security squads in civilian clothing come by and open cartons and bags at random to make certain that we're not placing dynamite under the very eyes of General Maimon and his officers upstairs.

With pleading and cajoling we manage to get six soldiers to help us unload our huge trailer. Suddenly, all work stops as a Lebanese car zooms into the compound bearing an Israeli soldier wounded by an unseen terrorist. Our friend, Dr. Tulchinsky, is summoned to give first aid. Everyone crowds around until the doctor pulls a blanket over the soldier's head, signifying that it's too late. The 50 to 60 soldiers in the courtyard are stunned, as are we and our drivers. All is quiet as the soldiers wander off in their solitary thoughts.

Suddenly, one soldier begins to kick the milk cartons, pounds the sacks of milk and yells, "Go back to America and tell them to stop sending milk to these Palestinian bastards! You see what happens? You give them milk and they grow up strong and then they kill your friends and buddies!" He refuses to help us any more. All but two soldiers follow his example and withdraw from the unloading.

We are in Acre at a breakfast meeting with the representative of the Save the Children Federation of London. JW complains that he has been kept waiting for ten days by the Israeli authorities, cooling his heels and unable to enter Lebanon. He tells us that he has \$120,000 which he would like to commit that very day so that he may return to London. His conversation scourges Arabs, Israeli officialdom, and the philanthropic endeavors of rival aid groups. When we ask what kind of projects STC operates in Lebanon, he has to refer haltingly to a memo in his briefcase, obviously uninformed as to what his organization has been funding over the years. He sets the tone for several subsequent encounters with international relief bureaucrats when he says: "It's important to do good, but it's even more important to be seen doing good."

The next day we take JW in our car and cross over the border into Lebanon. He wears a garish T-shirt stenciled with large letters: "Save the Children!", dark glasses which set him apart from everyone else we are communicating with, and stylish sandals. After helping with introductions we turn him loose in Sidon. One of my colleagues who speaks Arabic later recounts an encounter with JW who is trying to locate local Rotary Club leaders. An Arab says to another Arab: "This Englishman has a lot of money to give away in cooperation with the Rotary Club. Tell him you're with the Rotary Club so he'll give his money to us."

That's the last we see of JW but we hear that he has had a meeting with Archbishop Haddad and said: "I have \$120,000 to spend today, how would you recommend I spend it?" So JW is back in London, probably telling the world how awful things are in Lebanon and how "enormous sums of money are needed to repair the horrific damage caused by Israeli aggression."

Later we learn that there is no connection between U.S. Save The Children Federation and their English namesake. The American operation is headed by Senator Charles Percy's brother-in-law and, we are told, enjoys "special status" with the U.S. Government which has given it substantial grants for a rural credit and agricultural rehabilitation project. Later still we learn that the Lebanese project is run entirely by talented Lebanese with the money being channeled through the conduit of the U.S.-based STC organization. STC apparently offers little in the way of supervision but earns a fat administrative overhead fee from the U.S. Government. "It's important to do good, but it's even more important to be seen doing good." ***

The Joint, together with the Jerusalem Interfaith Committee for Lebanon, is purchasing 1,250 tons of cement to assist 2,500 Palestinian families to rebuild their homes. Minister Ya'acov Meridor, charged with responsibility for aiding Lebanese reconstruction, asks that a label be attached to each bag of cement reading "A Gift of the Government of Jerusalem." Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek and Jerusalem Post Editor Ari Rath, as well as the AJJDC, will have none of it, since there is no Israeli public money involved. That doesn't stop Meridor from inviting journalists and TV cameramen to record "his" distribution of the cement. Israeli information offices at home and abroad also obfuscate the origins of the donated materials. Do Israeli officials act all that differently from those of the Save The Children Federation? ***

Charity is big business. Oxfam and Save The Children literature, posters, and placards are encountered throughout urbanized England, I note on a visit in late July. "There is no limit to the amount of money that is needed in the devastation of Lebanon," proclaim Oxfam banners. This at the very time that we in the AJJDC are experiencing difficulties in finding truly worthwhile projects in South Lebanon on which to spend our relatively small amounts of money. I am reminded of Lyndon Johnson who used to ask Senators he was negotiating with whether they preferred to help solve a problem or to create an issue. I wonder to what extent international aid organizations solve problems and to what extent their vested interest in creating and maintaining crises is more akin to keeping issues alive.

Dr. Avitsur is dead. As the representative of Israel's Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, he has been our principal liaison with the Israeli "Unit to Aid the Civilian Population of South Lebanon." A dedicated social worker with a doctorate from the Sorbonne, a man who cared deeply about helping the Lebanese and Palestinians regain their stability and dignity, Dr. Avitsur is dead. Not by a PLO sniper, or landmine or any enemy hostile action, but in a road accident in mid-afternoon on his way back to Jerusalem from his teaching duties at Bar-Ilan University. His car crossed the road and killed a passenger traveling in the opposite direction. Did Avitsur have a heart attack? We shall never know. But a good man has left us.

Less than 24 hours later, many hundreds of colleagues and friends and family assemble for his funeral. It is amazing how the Israeli grapevine can alert so many in such a short time. Minister of Interior Burg breaks down in tears expressing the heavy loss we all feel. I note that many representatives of international aid organizations, which demonstrate total unwillingness to work together and which delight in criticizing Israeli officialdom, are present at least on this occasion in solidarity with Dr. Avitsur's family.

"It will never happen. They won't let it happen." "They" is the Begin Government. This response is the same whether my appeals for help are addressed to the kibbutz federations or to Palestinian "leaders" in East Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The plight of the Palestinian refugees in the camps of South Lebanon is acknowledged by all as genuine. But cynicism paralyzes constructive action. When assured that the AJJDC could, in fact, deliver badly-needed winter clothing, blankets and kerosene heaters to the Palestinians, the response is one of incredulity, disbelief, distrust: "Everything's political. Begin, Meridor and Company would never let help from us reach the camps." Whether from *Na'amat*, the Labor-oriented women's voluntary social service federation; from *Mapam*, the left-wing political party; Palestinian medical officers in the territories--the response is identical. No less cynically, I begin to wonder: do my unbending listeners secretly think "Let the Palestinians freeze this winter. Then we can blame it all on the Begin Government"? Or is this distrust so deeply ingrained that normally generous humanitarian impulses are totally squelched?

I am in Washington to alert U.S. government agencies and Jewish groups to the possibility of Palestinians freezing in South Lebanon this winter. Everyone listens respectfully. The U.S. bureaucrats in the Agency for International Development and in the Department of State's Office of Refugee Programs know the score. They understand that UNRWA, for a large variety of reasons, is not

performing adequately and that potential disaster looms. But U.S. policy is to work through UNRWA by writing a check for millions, even if private voluntary groups can get the job done quickly, more efficiently, and at far less cost to the taxpayer. One wonders if word of Mr. Reagan's philosophy of utilizing the private sector will ever reach Foggy Bottom....

Israel and the Jewish people have learned, to our great sorrow, how our image and interests suffer from the media's abominable coverage of the Lebanese war. My own experiences with journalists have done nothing to enhance my respect for those who have the responsibility, in H.L. Mencken's view, of reporting the difference between surface appearances and underlying realities.

Once, after spending sixteen hours in Lebanon with two journalists from world-renowned newspaper syndicates, we sat down to review the various Middle East dilemmas. Both reporters (who, it turned out, had been born Jewish) praised the work of voluntary agencies such as our own AJJDC and acknowledged that the government of Israel seemed to be doing a "pretty decent job" of helping civilian populations--both Palestinians and Lebanese--to rehabilitate their lives. They then launched a two-hour tirade against Israeli policy toward Israeli Arabs, Arab governments, Arabs on the West Bank, and the PLO. Two of their statements stand out above the others: (1) When I pointed out that their views seemed to smack of a double standard of judgment, they readily acknowledged this reality. Said one, from the world's leading financial publication: "But we expect the Arabs to act like crazies. That's not permissible for Jews." (2) When I complained that their views showed little awareness of or compassion for the sufferings of Israeli civilians at the hands of PLO terror, both journalists countered that PLO attacks were a "natural response to Israeli provocations" in placing women and children near the exposed Lebanese border. If Israel didn't "insist on settling Kiryat Shmona, Ma'alot and Nahariya, but simply kept its armies in those places, then there wouldn't be any problem with the PLO."

Later, I invited one of the journalists to my apartment, located just four minutes from the old "green line", or 1967 border. As I pointed out when he entered: "I wanted you to see one of the apartments built as a provocation to the Jordanians whose artillery used to sit up there where Gilo now stands."

Travenol of Israel, the local affiliate of the U.S. medical supply firm, sells the Joint five kidney dialysis units, serums, infusions and complete delivery and installation in Sidon for the give-away price of \$7,500. Newsweek (August 25) cites Travenol as an "ironic example" of Israel's commercial exploitation of the Lebanese war: "Travenol... has launched a booming business with the Lebanese clinics overburdened with casualties from Israel's assaults." When Newsweek's interpretations are challenged, a belated private response, dated November 1, concedes that "Travenol was not the best example to cite in making the point" that Israeli firms are allegedly profiting from the war. The American public at large, however, does not see even this partial retraction.

How difficult it is to tell your story and have it come out straight! I fly into Lebanon on a Hercules transport plane with 150 UJA leaders--all big donors who are part of the Prime Minister's second special mission to Lebanon. I brief the assembled representatives on our various works in South Lebanon: I note that AJJDC had purchased Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) on the Palestinian "West Bank" since the disease for which ORS is used--child dysentery--no longer exists in Israel proper and therefore the solution could not be obtained locally. Later,

I read in a Connecticut Jewish newspaper that the Joint had the medicine flown in "from some African country." The story gets magnified in the telling along with a similar story in the same paper alleging that the PLO had murdered 100,000 Christians in Damur. (Damur had a 1975 population of about 25,000 with the number of those slaughtered by the PLO estimated variously between a quarter and a half.) I guess 100,000 is a "nice round number" to be used by "our side" back in the States to counter the horror stories told against Israel by "the other side."

Lebanese social worker AR used to kiss us three times whenever we came across the border to enquire about the needs of his Lebanese social welfare clients. AR invariably offered pots of fine coffee and packages of the finest American filter cigarettes. He and his social work staff would ask about our families, tell us about theirs, and express an interest in visiting Israel and learning more about social services across the southern border.

Not any more. The kisses are replaced by correct and formal handshakes. The coffee and cigarettes are not forthcoming. There is no overt interest expressed in Israel and so, tacitly, we have agreed to postpone any conversation about their coming over to look at counterpart welfare activities in Israel.

What do the Lebanese need from the Joint? "Nothing. We get everything from Beirut from now on." The tone is set from the capital. Relationships must be "cooled" since the Lebanese prime minister threatens Lebanese who "collaborate with Israel" with the loss of their citizenship.

Major Said Sharaf is dead. We had sat in his office only four days earlier planning the distribution of children's boots, kerosene heaters and clothing to the Palestinians of the Tyre region. As commander of the Tyre Israeli Unit to Aid the Civilians of South Lebanon, Sharaf had earned the respect of all factions in his strife-ridden zone of responsibility. It was he who championed the case of Tyre's fishermen and interceded with higher authorities to reopen the port. It was he who organized the gala celebration marking Tyre's return to normalcy in which all religious groups participated. (Himself an Israeli Druse, Sharaf was an ideal mediator.) And it was he who vowed that no Palestinian in his zone would suffer from winter's deprivation due to bureaucratic obstacles; if UNRWA wouldn't or couldn't bring in adequate stocks, clothing and blankets, he would receive them from AJJDC and the people of Israel and see that they reached those in need.

Sharaf had great plans for building a tangible reminder of Israel's presence in Tyre--a day care or community center or senior citizens' meeting place. Those dreams were snuffed out in the natural gas explosion at Tyre's military headquarters on November 11. Like Dr. Avitsur before him, Said Sharaf died in service to others.

Strange how the Israelis are now the Palestinians' best insurance policy... The Palestinians of South Lebanon clearly wish the Israelis to provide a shield against their many hostile neighbors. They openly express fear of the Beirut central government, the Phalange (long before Sabra and Shatilla), Major Sa'ad Haddad's "Christian" militia (most of whom are Shi'ite Moslems), and of their mostly Shi'ite neighbors all around the camps. Avaricious Lebanese landlords who have long rented to Palestinians now demand large increases in rent. Lebanese landowners who have seen the value of their holdings rise dramatically,

particularly since the Israeli invasion, insist that UNRWA contract the size of the refugee camps to their 1948 boundaries, not the pre-June 1982 lines. This will permit local Lebanese clans to regain valuable agricultural land. Local merchants also seem to be price-gouging Palestinians intent on rebuilding their damaged homes. (In the last month alone, the price of galvanized tin roofing sheets has risen from \$3.25 to \$8.50 each, while tax-free Lebanese cement costs the Palestinians 50-60 percent more than the heavily-taxed Israeli product.)

But it is fear of death more than economic difficulties that most worry the Palestinians. With the PLO's protective umbrella shattered and enemies all around, the Palestinians fear for their lives. Thus, they were visibly relieved when Minister Ya'acov Meridor announced that Israel would permit them to rebuild their homes as solid structures, despite the opposition of the Beirut authorities. Cement block homes, they told us, were infinitely preferable to UNRWA's flimsy tents which "burn in the night" and afford no protection against sniper's bullets. So, AJJDC is donating 1,250 tons of cement and 2,500 kerosene heaters, enough to house 2,500 refugee families in the South. With luck from the weather, the Palestinians may make it through the winter.

Will the Palestinians in the camps--mostly women, the very young and very old--be reunited with the remainder of their menfolk? After the Israeli withdrawal, after the coming of spring, then what? The PLO is gone. Some Palestinians say "good riddance," as it misled them. UNRWA is regarded with contempt as an inefficient, even corrupt, entity which provides inadequate services while it fosters dependency and malaise. The Arab world has been shown up as "cowards" or "two-faced liars," say several Palestinians.

"Can we Palestinians make a deal with the Israelis?" I am asked by one elderly man who claimed to have been an auxiliary in the Palestinian Police until he fled to Lebanon in 1948. He says he has clear legal title to 200 dunams near Tiberias. Would the Israelis let him return if he settled for only 25 dunams?

Other Palestinians voice other ideas: Ask the Israelis to stay in South Lebanon indefinitely; "insist on our rights to Lebanese citizenship since we were born here"; emigrate to the New World, and particularly the United States, and try for a new start in life.

But first the Palestinians have to get through the winter and the spring of 1983.....

Dr. Samuel Halperin, a Visiting Fellow of the Jerusalem Center, former president of the Washington-based Institute for Educational Leadership, and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in the Johnson Administration, has been Coordinator of Relief Activities in South Lebanon for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the "Joint") since June 30. At Professor Elazar's invitation, Dr. Halperin set down some of his reflections after five months' work involving more than a dozen trips to South Lebanon.