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JOURNEY THROUGH MOUNT HEBRON

Moshe Hazani

Mount Hebron is no longer what it once was. The hard mountain ridges, the richly growing vineyards, the refreshing wind, the full moon over the vineyards on the middle of the month of Av - all these remain. But the easygoing calm that would once envelop you as you strolled through the gardens, chatting leisurely with the vineyard workers - this has disappeared. Instead of a warm, amicable conversation, you are confronted with closed faces, expressionless eyes. And instead of the clusters of grapes which they always used to load on your car, they now offer a dry response of "Don't know" to your questions and turn away. The hardness of the mountain is not only its ridges now; the people of the mountain, too, possess it.

Last year things were different. It's not that they loved us as a nation; they saw us as the conqueror, certainly. But at the same time, their hatred of the conqueror had no ill effects on the system of interpersonal relationships, with people whom they met in the vineyard or on the streets of Hebron. And for politeness sake, one could still engage in a pleasant conversation while skirting the painful issues. Yet this time my visit could not be seen in such a light; the calm and amiability have gone.

At the western rim of the mountain, starting from Beit Jalla and ending with Tarkumia, a narrow road wends its way among picturesque Arab villages. Following its twists, the traveler sees the settlements of Gush Etzion rising over the left side of the mountain. He soon reaches that accursed spot between Jaba and Zurif where the 35 Hebrew University students were massacred in 1948 as they tried to bring supplies to besieged Gush Etzion - a spot that ought to have been cursed as David cursed the Gilboa.

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Mountains. After this one crosses Zurif, the murderers' village - this too an accursed place. Then comes Haaras, a picturesque village overlooking the coastal plain to the west, through whose vine huts blows a pleasant breeze even during these oppressive hamsin days. Finally one reaches Tarkumia: there you can turn left and climb the mountain slope to Ir Ha'avot, along a path similar to only prettier than Shaar Hagai.

We stopped along the mountain rim - in a village whose name I will not mention - and went in to talk with friends over a cluster of grapes.

As before, the atmosphere was amiable: we are old friends. And like before, the participants in the conversation did not hide their opposition to Israeli rule. But this time one could hear a new tone to their words: they believe in their hearts that they are on the way toward establishing a Palestinian state. When I teased them, asking how they would manage financially since most of them are employed in Israel (Beit Shemesh, for example), they answered: "We'll work in Saudi Arabia;" and pointing to a friend: "Look, he also works there." Before that, he worked in Tel Aviv, where he was trained as a construction foreman; now he was back at his village on a summer visit.

In Hebron we stopped off at a bookshop where the year before we had found revolutionary Palestinian posters. There we saw quite clearly how things had changed since then.

First of all, the military government forbade the distribution of radical anti-Israeli posters. So I was told.

Secondly, the circulation of the posters, instead of decreasing had grown. Only instead of being primitive, direct propaganda, it was now sophisticated and concealed.

Thirdly, there has been a distinct return to Islam, which is also expressed in the posters.

Let us examine a few of these posters which demonstrate, better than any description I could offer, some of the existing views in Judea. Take the poster of the sweet little boy, for example, tears streaming from his eyes: what could be more innocent than this picture?

Actually, it is not innocent in the slightest. My friends tell me that it depicts a child crying over his mother who is lost. Pure and simple. But who is his mother? You guessed it; Palestine. And any Arab who looks at that poster knows it. Thus the message gets across, without any mention of Israel.

We found further sophistication in another poster, distributed also among Jews. I was surprised to discover a drawing by Roberts hanging in various places in Hebron and Jerusalem; it

struck me as odd since Roberts' style is so different from the Oriental style, or from the shmaltz of the previous poster. But it became clear to me that this poster too can be charged with nationalistic baggage: it portrays the Old City, deserted - while in the lower left-hand corner a group of people are raising their eyes toward it. In the center of the picture stand the Dome of the Rock and El-Aksa, the two mosques on the Temple Mount. What does this mean? It means that the people were driven out from their holy places, and they look toward them from a distance with envy and longing! And who is the evictor? You guessed it: the Zionist conqueror.

Thus for the sophistication, which bypasses the prohibition against open incitement.

A separate phenomenon worth noting is the renewal of the Nasser cult. For sure, this cult never entirely disappeared from the West Bank; only now it has gained fresh momentum. Nasser's picture, in color (in the familiar style of Arab colorfulness), decorates almost every bookstall or newspaper stand in the towns along the West Bank. And it is bought up in bulk, particularly during Ramadan when there is increased traffic in the markets. *

Not only this, but you see before you the title page of a pamphlet devoted to the activities of Nasser as President of Egypt. Piles of this pamphlet and others like it, praising his deeds, appear in shops and stalls. What is curious is that the pamphlet is old; it was published shortly after Nasser's death in 1970, in Egypt, where it was quite popular for about 2 or 3 years. Afterwards, it was banned for distribution there - whereas here, among the Arabs of the West Bank, it has gained renewed circulation! The vendors claim that it is purchased in large quantities, and the piles of it attest to their words.

As for my fellow conversationalists, they say that Nasser was better than Sadat. Of course. After all, Sadat made peace with Israel . . .

Here we come to the matter of Islam. The number of posters, pamphlets and books on religious topics had grown tremendously. It is impossible to even try to describe a fraction of them in this brief article, since they would run off the page. Instead I will present here only one of them; in the center we see the mosque of the Dome of the Rock, the Acre (Akko for Israelis - ed.) Mosque and the turrets of the Hebron mosques; and in the background - plundered Old Jerusalem. Please note; the Acre Mosque, which has been under Israel sovereign rule since 1948 - - i. e. before 1967 - - is considered a holy site which must be returned to the rule of the believers! Incidentally, in the lower corners of the poster appear two sweet cherubs, their shmaltzy style interwoven into the Arab style. A synthesis has been reached between shmaltz and the Koran - and it is no wonder that the Arabs adopted the shmaltz of the crying infant as a revolutionary symbol! Shmaltz has been rechanneled to nationalism.

* Ed. Note: Significantly, an Israeli Arab village recently held a Nasser festival, reflecting the spread of this phenomenon.

As we wander through the marketplace, we reach the framemakers' shops. There one finds an endless supply of Moslem posters of various kinds, framed for hanging on the wall as one would hang a picture. With my own eyes I saw piles upon piles of framed posters, filling almost the entire space of the shop. The demand is tremendous, and the supply - almost industrial. And the posters' content? Totally innocent: merely Moslem; but Islam, too, has been rechanneled to nationalism - this I saw in a poster depicting the plundered mosques of Jerusalem, Hebron and . . . Acre.

This is the revival of Islam, in the form of Palestinian nationalism.

We returned from Mount Hebron bearing our pain with us. We are strangers in the Hebron region - - the very land where David established his kingdom, and we feel the wave of nationalism rising among the mountain Arabs, spreading from the educated of Hebron to the remote villagers along the mountain rim. And we ask ourselves, what is the use of a law prohibiting identification with hostile organizations, if this identification can be channeled into tracks so sophisticated that nothing can be done against it? Is it really impossible to keep Roberts' pictures from being sold on the street or to prevent an Arab from identifying with them as he would like to in his heart?

One thing is clear: Arab unity is gaining strength - and if we wish to deal with it while there is still time, we must do so with at least the same degree of sophistication that the Arabs themselves have adopted.

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