

What Israel must do

By Chaim Yavin | September 24, 2005

The Boston Globe

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/09/24/what_israel_must_do/

JUST BEFORE the Israeli exit from Gaza, a television station in Israel aired my series "The Land of the Settlers," a personal documentary about the West Bank and Gaza, the result of two and a half years of research and interviews with hundreds of settlers and Palestinians. The message of the series was: If we want peace, we have to dismantle the settlements.

It created an uproar. The settlers demanded my resignation, while others said the series was an eye-opener. For most TV viewers in Israel I have been for years the objective anchorman and documentarist, and now people were asking, "Whatever happened to this guy? Where is his objectivity?"

I myself am a settler. I was born in Germany one year before Hitler came to power. When my father saw the Nazi gangs beating the Jews, he decided to immigrate to Palestine. His family tried to dissuade him, arguing that in the Germany of Goethe and Bach nothing could happen to the Jews. My father landed in Palestine, while the rest of his family went to Auschwitz.

One cannot understand the settlements issue without understanding the Israeli Shoa complex. I grew up in Israel, and survived five major wars. One of the worst, for me, was the Six-Day War. In the months preceding it, Israel lived through a nightmare, in total panic. We were sure of a second Shoa.

Then there came the huge victory. I was a radio reporter on my way to the front, when I heard a colleague on the wireless: "I'm touching the stones of the Kotel!" We burst into tears. Out of the fear of annihilation came redemption: We had returned to the Wailing Wall, to Shiloh, to Hebron. We were all settlers, believing that the "Palestinian problem" would somehow disappear.

It didn't. On the contrary, it paved the way for Messianic Zionism, meaning the Land of Israel was given to us by God rather than being a refuge for the Jewish people and a normal state among states. Today, as a result, we have 250,000 settlers on the West Bank, more terrorism, and a question mark on Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state.

In the struggle against suicide terrorism, Israeli soldiers have caused suffering to innocent children, pregnant women, and sick people. While the battle against terror is essential, it creates an unbearable situation for the Palestinian people, who live under military rule, surrounded by fences and roadblocks. Israel's enemies compare the situation in the occupied territories to the Apartheid regime in South Africa, a comparison that is malicious and totally unjustified: We are not colonialists. We have a justified claim to this land. But we cannot fulfill our prayers. For we cannot be oppressors.

Israelis have begun to understand this. We must evacuate the occupied territories or

else continue to live in an endless state of war and bloodshed. No state, let alone Israel -- a democracy -- can exist like that forever.

Ariel Sharon, father of all settlements, got us out of Gaza. The Palestinians are now masters of part of their homeland, a first step toward full independence. It is up to them to prove they can run a state of their own. As a first step, they must stop terrorism. Without it there will be no peace.

But even without war, by keeping all the settlements, Israel is in danger of willing itself to death, being forced into a bi-national state, which means the end of the Jewish state. David Ben-Gurion understood this 60 years ago, when he stopped the Israeli army from conquering the West Bank. In addressing the Knesset on April 4, 1949, he said:

"The IDF can conquer the entire area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. But what kind of a state would we have? We would have an Arab majority in the Knesset. Between the land of Israel in its entirety and a Jewish state - we chose a Jewish state". I am an ardent Zionist, I love Israel, am proud of it, but also very much worried what will become of it. I think the time has come for us to redefine Zionism. In simple terms: What sort of a state do we want?

My answer is: Let's not base our existence on the acquisition of more and more land, but on building, within recognized borders, a better society, based on true Jewish and universal values: justice, equality, culture, education, human rights.

We must not presume to be -- in Ben-Gurion's words -- "A Light unto Nations": Suffice it if we become a normal, peace-loving state among the other states in the Middle East. I believe it can be achieved.

Chaim Yavin is a news anchorman in Israel, where he has directed more than 80 television documentaries .

© Copyright 2005 Globe Newspaper Company.