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Ariel Sharon: The War Criminal Takes Over

By Rabbi Michael Lerner, RabbiLerner@tikkun.org Wednesday, February 07, 2001

Many American Jews are responding to the election of Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel with sadness, mourning and disgust. When Ariel Sharon was forced to resign from his position as Defense Minister during the Lebanon War, most Israelis felt that they had finally rid themselves of a man whose record of violence could no longer be ignored. Though his troops only supervised but didn't personally do the shooting of the hundreds of civilians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, the Israeli public knew of his many other acts of terror (including massacres of civilian Bedouins in the Sinai).

By standards now being applied in Kosovo and Serbia, Ariel Sharon should have been brought to trial for war crimes. Instead, he now has been elected Prime Minister.

Outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak would like to blame this all on the Palestinians and their failure to accept his generous offers. But the reality is that Barak's offers were mean-spirited and limited. Barak was elected in a euphoria of hope for peace- and he had a mandate to move ahead decisively. Had he announced an unequivocal intention to dismantle the West Bank settlements, allow for a limited number of Palestinian refugees to return each year, and create a climate of real cooperation to provide Palestinians with the economic infrastructure to make a Palestinian state viable, Barak could have built his electoral mandate into a permanent peace force.

Barak could have appealed to traditional Jewish values like the Torah's unequivocal commandment to "Love the stranger." He could have urged Israelis as a patriotic duty to begin to create dialogue groups with Palestinians and Israeli Arabs and to explore other paths for people-to-people reconciliation. Israeli idealism would have responded had it been tapped.

Instead, Barak played to his Right. He insisted that he would never compromise on Jerusalem or dismantle settlements. He did nothing to prepare the population for concessions he would eventually find necessary to make or to build reconciliation..

Nor were his peace offers as generous as the media sometimes portrays. Even his last offer would have left 200,000 settlers, fully armed and hostile to Palestinians, on the West Bank.

Israeli Arabs contributed mightily to Barak's electoral victory last time, but Barak refused to give them even a single seat in his cabinet on the grounds that having such an Arab would "discredit" his government. When Israeli Arabs protested the massive use of force to repress their Palestinian brothers and sisters rioting in outrage after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount last September, dozens were wounded, thousands faced pogroms from angry Jewish crowds wondering through and stoning their homes, and at least 17 were killed by Israeli bullets.--yet Barak could only find the courage to apologize for this in the last three days of the election when he finally realized how much he had lost his own base of support. No wonder why so many found it hard to rally to his support.

The path that Israel is following is no surprise. Countries that seek to maintain by force the occupation over another people will eventually drift toward repressive or even fascistic leadership. Half way measures of the sort offered by Barak cannot work. Either Israel ends the Occupation, dismantles the settlements, and gets out of the West Bank, or it will drift to the Right until it has the likes of Ariel Sharon at its helm. But with Sharon, Israel could follow a path designed to provoke a wave of ethnic cleansing much like that which caused the Palestinian refugee problem in the first place.

George Bush senior was the only U.S. President to have the courage to stand up to the "Israel-right or wrong" lobby that claims to speak for most American Jews. Bush Sr. told them to stop expanding

settlements or lose US "loan guarantees" for money Israel sought to resettle Soviet Jews. When Israeli Prime Minister Shamir refused, Bush stuck to his guns, and the result was to create economic pressures inside Israel which helped elect pro-peace prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1992.

It seems unlikely that George W. will have similar courage or vision. Ironically, standing up to Israel and insisting that it dismantle the settlements, get out of the West Bank and Gaza, and accept publicly part of the responsibility for having caused the Palestinian refugee problem (and state its willingness to take back a portion of those refugees small enough to not upset the Jewish character of Israel) is the most pro-Jewish thing he could do, though many Jews wouldn't read it that way.

The truth is that Judaism and the Jewish people are suffering from the impact of the Occupation. The mean-spiritedness in Israel that leads to a Sharon landslide makes many younger Israelis wish to leave Israel and settle in the U.S., and many young American Jews to say "my parents were Jewish" rather than claim an identity defined by Israelis as oppressors and people who think that power is more important than love.

When the American Jewish establishment rallies around such an Israel, they do more to drive young Jews into assimilation than any fear of anti-Semitism could ever do.

So, many American Jews greet the election of Ariel Sharon with great sadness and mourning-mourning for Israel and mourning for the soul of the Jewish people. With Ariel Sharon leading Israel, the world will be a scarier place for everyone.

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