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LIVING IN A BUBBLE

A few days ago, the State of Israel celebrated its 56th anniversary according to the Hebrew (lunar) calendar. A chance to escape from reality for a day, at a time when the whole country was braced for suicide-bombings to avenge the assassination of Sheik Ahmed Yassin and Dr. Abd-al-Aziz al-Rantissi. A day of nostalgia for the Israel of the early years, the years of innocence and youth. There were speeches, spectacles, fireworks. The solemn voice of Amikam Gurewitz recited the memorial prayer for the fallen soldiers of all our wars in decades-old tradition. Bereaved parents relive their pain. Groups of soldiers, male and female, exchange flags. Boys and girls dance the old and half-forgotten folk dances. The media full of the heroic deeds of our soldiers facing a cruel enemy, the sacrifices of the pioneers, the selfless idealism of the founders. A lot of speeches about democracy and the hope for peace.

Not a word about the Palestinians, God forbid! Not a word about the transformation of the glorious Israeli Defense Army into a blood-stained colonial police force. No mention that the celebrated Air Force which destroyed the air forces of three Arab states in a few hours in 1967, has now become a specialist in extra-judicial executions, often killing not only the targeted Palestinian militants but also their wives and children, as well as random bystanders.

Israel looked into its magic mirror and saw a beautiful state that arose from the embers of the Holocaust and transformed a downtrodden and persecuted people into a proud and mighty nation, with brilliant achievements in all spheres of endeavor. How wonderful!

In a few days, the Palestinians will commemorate the catastrophe that befell them 56 years ago, according to the general (solar) calendar.

It will be a day of mourning, of longing, and anger about all that happened and is still happening. There will be demonstrations, speeches, shooting in the air. Everybody will remember the Naqbah, the catastrophe, when half the Palestinian people were expelled from their homes and fields by a cruel enemy. Many of them are still languishing in miserable refugee camps, where they survive by the grace of

international institutions that provide them with food and education.

The refugees will remember with longing the 450 villages that were conquered by the enemy and razed to the ground, each of which lives on in their imagination as a little paradise, surrounded by lush fields and plantations. They will yearn for the streets of Haifa and Jaffa, Ramle and Bir-Saba, the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Katamon and Talbieh, all of them the epitome of beauty and perfection.

The Palestinians will look into the magic mirror of the past and they will see a people that lived idyllically on their land until the appearance of cruel foreigners who condemned them to a life of humiliation and misery, oppression and exile, with no redemption in sight.

These two events may look as if they happened on two different planets, say on Mars and Saturn. But both happened on our small planet, in one small country.

The two events are, actually, one and the same event.

It is natural that two peoples at war will view the events in different and contradictory ways. But war is generally an exceptional state that lasts only a few years. Before and after the war there is peace, and in a state of peace the normal life and new contacts cause bitter memories to fade and differences between the perceptions to narrow.

In World War II the Germans conquered France and imposed a cruel occupation regime. One need only recall the wholesale slaughter of hostages. But less than ten years later, Frenchmen created the vision of a unified Europe, based on a French-German alliance, and since then the borders have all but disappeared, a common currency has been created and friendship is blossoming. There is hardly any difference of opinion about what happened between the two peoples in the past.

During the same war, the Germans killed a third of the Jewish people with slave labor, starvation, mass execution and the gas chambers. This is a crime without parallel in modern history, as far as its character and methods are concerned. But less than ten years after the crematoria of Auschwitz had cooled, an agreement was already signed between Germany and Israel, which called itself "the state of the survivors". Now Germany and Israel try to outdo each other in commemorating the Holocaust.

Nothing like that is happening with the two peoples in this country. The war between them is not an extraordinary state, but has become normality. All the toxins produced by war - fear, hatred, prejudices - continue to poison the minds of the new generation, the fifth that has been born into this war, a generation whose entire mental world is shaped by the war.

Thus each of the two peoples lives sealed in its closed bubble, cut off from the other,

and, indeed, from the world at large. Inside its bubble, each people cultivates their grievances, the conviction of being the ultimate victim, the memory of the injustices done to them, the anger at the other, cruel, murderous and detestable people. Each side believes that absolute justice is on its side, and hence in the absolute injustice of the other side.

This bubble is a prison, closed and secured by more than walls and barbed wire. Israelis and Palestinians are hostages of their mental worlds. They are unable to see each other, unable to see the world as it is. They see only the mirror, the magic mirror that shows them what they want to see.

For both, the bubble is a vital need. It is a means of self-protection which provides them with mental security, the certainty in the rightness of their cause and a sense of orientation. The world outside is cold and hostile, inside the bubble there is warmth and a sense of belonging. Anyone who tries to break the bubble will be exposed to a wave of hatred and anger that may be lethal.

This does not apply only to what is happening now. It concerns everything that has happened between the two peoples in the last 120 years, since the beginning of the Zionist enterprise in this country. Every event, large or small, without exception, appears in the collective memory of the two peoples in a different and contrary fashion. As a result, everything that is said now, everything that is proposed by one side sounds different, suspicious and menacing to the other. Every negotiation becomes a battle, every summit meeting only increases the mutual hatred.

A vicious circle is operating: without removing the bubbles there can be no peace, without peace it is impossible to remove the bubbles.

And a personal note: I became convinced many years ago that this vicious circle not only must, but can be broken. Since then I have been trying to build a joint, common Israeli-Palestinian narrative that incorporates the narratives of both peoples, not by contriving an artificial compromise but by seeking the truth. I have already written books and essays about this. This week a booklet called "Truth Against Truth" has been published by Gush Shalom. In it we have tried to outline a common narrative of the conflict, taking into account the viewpoints of both sides.

It has become clear to me that without a sincere endeavor by each side to become fully aware of the viewpoint of the other, no effort to achieve real peace between the two peoples will bear fruit.