

The ghetto inside

By Uri Avnery

gush-shalom.org | February 29, 2004

It is easier to get the Jews out of the ghetto than to get the ghetto out of the Jews!" – this dictum of the early Zionists is now assuming a new meaning. Israel is cutting itself off from the world and enclosing itself in a ghetto, and not only physically.

In The Hague, the proceedings of the International Court of Justice on the Separation Wall have started. Sharon's people understand that they have no chance of winning and have decided, therefore, to boycott the session. Instead of arguing their case before the court, they decided to organize a street event, in the spirit of the classic Israeli maxim: "If your case is weak, raise your voice!"

Inside the courtroom, the legal arguments were made. The representatives of Palestine argued that the Wall is unlawful, since it is being erected in the middle of the West Bank. According to them, if Israel fears suicide bombings, it is entitled to put up such a wall on its border, but not in the heart of the occupied territory, where it puts the Palestinian population into prison-like enclaves. Nobody contradicted this argument inside the court.

Outside, Sharon's people organized a colorful spectacle. As a gimmick for the media, they brought a bombed-out bus over from Israel, complete with experts on the gathering of body parts. Also, dozens of family-members of victims of attacks were brought over. The Israeli embassy distributed the photos of the 900 victims, and Jewish students carried them in procession. The message: the Jews are suffering; in Israel, too, they are the victims of pogroms.

Later in the day, the Palestinians organized a counter-spectacle. There, the 3000 Palestinian victims of the intifada were lamented, as well as the sufferings of the Palestinian population under occupation. The residents of The Hague were treated to a kind of World Championship for victims. The world media devoted some minutes to the spectacles, evenly divided between the two parties. But, for them, the main event was the proceedings inside the courtroom.

In Israel, an entirely different picture was presented. In a style reminiscent of the Soviet Union, the media enlisted as one man in the service of the brain-washing. All TV networks, all radio stations, all newspapers, without exception, took part in this national effort. From early morning to late at night, all TV and radio stations broadcast continuous coverage from The Hague and created the impression that the whole world was glued to the Israeli street

The ghetto inside | 2

spectacle. The court proceedings themselves were presented as unimportant, a miserable little show of Arabs and other anti-Semites. The Israeli demonstration was turned into a world-shaking event. The bombed-out bus appeared on the screen of all Israeli channels many dozens of times, as did the victims' families. Again and again and again. The corresponding Palestinian event was shown for a few seconds, as were the courtroom proceedings. Just to show how liberal we are, the Palestinian representative was also allowed to say three sentences.

But the message for the Israeli viewer and listener was unequivocal: this was a huge Israeli victory. The whole world now understands that in this story we are the victims, that the Palestinians are terrorists, that the Wall is needed to save our lives, that "the lives of Jews are more important than the quality of life of the Palestinians" – a sentence repeated dozens of times during the day. A phalanx of army officers, Security Service personnel, reporters, commentators and professors talked their heads off on all stations, and all of them said exactly the same thing: we are being attacked, we are the persecuted, the Arabs are killers, we are defending ourselves. The occupation was not mentioned at all. Why should it be? What has it got to do with this?

While the broadcast was going on, the Israeli peace movements demonstrated against the Wall at the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem. The state-owned TV Channel 1 showed it for all of four seconds. Throughout the whole day, not one single Israeli TV channel or radio station allowed anyone to say a word against the Wall or in favor of the International Court.

This is quite frightening, because it is happening in a democracy. No KGB or Gestapo is threatening the lives of the journalists, no Gulag or concentration camp is awaiting those who deviate from the official line. It is all done voluntarily, from inner conviction.

True, the free media in the democratic USA behaved in much the same way during the early days of the Iraq war. But they, at least, were not afflicted with the syndrome of "All the World is Against Us".

The day after the first court session, the Israeli Deputy Minister of Defense, Ze'ev Boim, declared in the Knesset that all Muslims are murderers from birth, that it is in their genes. And a personal friend of Ariel Sharon disclosed on TV: "Arik has told me that he is deeply worried about the rise of Christian anti-Semitism. For example in Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ". And now, a large part of the Muslim world is also infected by anti-Semitism."

This is the mentality of the ghetto. We created the State of Israel in order to become a normal nation, "a people among peoples". The events of this week show that we have not succeeded in this. The ghetto is deep inside us.

The ghetto inside | 3

This is also throwing another light on the Separation Wall. It encloses the Palestinians in enclaves, but it also returns us to the reality of the ghetto, and not only physically.

The struggle against the Wall has many aspects. It is not only a struggle to liberate the inhabitants of the West Bank from the monstrous obstacle that turns their life into hell and puts them under pressure to leave “voluntarily”. It is not only a struggle to liberate the two peoples of this country from a situation that imposes on them an ever-widening cycle of bloodshed. It is also a struggle to liberate the Israeli nation from the ghetto that is inside our hearts.

Uri Avnery is a journalist, writer and peace activist. A former publisher and editor-in-chief at Ha'olam Haze newsmagazine, he served three terms as a member of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament).