

{JULY 9, 2005}

THE WAR OF THE COLORS

A visitor to Israel at this time may get the impression that the country is in the throes of a contest between two football teams – orange and blue. Thousands of cars are already flying ribbons with these colors, mostly from the antennas. This is very striking on the roads: those who fly different colors are treating each other with hostility, also expressed by their driving, while those who fly the same color exude a civility that is quite foreign to Israeli highways.

The use of colors to symbolize the two sides resembles the War of the Roses 450 years ago.

Then, the red rose was the emblem of the house of Lancaster in their struggle for the English throne, while the white rose signified their adversaries, the house of York. The war went on for 32 years and ended with the victory of the red flower.

In our time, color wars belong in the sports stadium, where blood is only rarely spilled.

But the Israeli war between the orange and the blue is a very serious affair.

On the face of it, this is a struggle about the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of the few settlements there. But in reality, this struggle has assumed a much deeper significance. It concerns the very character and future of Israel.

Those who fly the orange ribbon know this perfectly well. They swear to “paint the country orange” and aim to change its way of life from the bottom up. As they see it, the laws of the Knesset are invalid if they conflict with religious law (the Halakha), as interpreted by the “nationalist Zionist” rabbis, a nationalist-messianic faction with a fascist fringe. Government decisions are null and void if they are opposed to the will of God. And God, as is well known, speaks through the mouths of the settlers’ leaders. (One can only say: God help God, if He needs spokesmen like these!)

Those who fly the blue know – some clearly, some vaguely – that they are struggling for a different vision of Israel. Some have a thought-out conception of a democratic, liberal and secular Israel, living at peace with the Arab world. Others have a more

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general vision of a sane and decent Israel, where the majority decides through the Knesset. Either way, the difference between blue and orange is striking and unmistakable.

Today, 37 days before the planned evacuation, two phenomena are manifest:

First, the vast majority of cars on the roads are not flying any ribbon at all.

Secondly, among those which do fly ribbons, the orange outnumber the blue 2 to 1.

Public opinion polls show that the real ratio is the reverse: two thirds support the Gaza withdrawal. This percentage rose last week, after the appearance on television of the attempted lynching of a wounded Arab boy by Gush Katif settlers. But even before that, there was a solid majority for the withdrawal.

If so, why is there, at this moment, no solid majority of blue ribbons in the streets?

The first reason is unsurprising: a fanatical minority with a high, emotional motivation has an advantage over a “silent majority” that always tends to be passive and weak-willed.

The settlers and their allies also have a distinct logistic advantage. They live in their own communities, and it is therefore easy for them to mobilize thousands of children and youngsters, who disperse throughout the country and attach their ribbons to the cars. The religious Jews, almost all of whom support the settlers, are concentrated in their Yeshivot (seminaries) and separate townships, where they can easily be called to action.

But these advantages would not have been so manifest, were it not for the weaknesses of their opponents.

Many citizens are simply anxious. They are afraid that if they fly the blue ribbon, their precious cars will be vandalized by right-wing hooligans. Here and there cars flying blue ribbons have indeed been damaged. Fear is a typical symptom of a society menaced by a fascist minority: storm-troopers use violence deliberately in order to paralyze the law-abiding majority, which shrinks back and cannot respond in kind. A few well-publicized instances suffice to sow fear.

Another reason springs from the character of the democratic public. Most people just want to be left alone in peace, they do not like to be conspicuous and to demonstrate their convictions in public. They are not concentrated in specific neighborhoods, which would have lent them a sense of security and power. Many feel, therefore, that they are isolated in their thoughts and feelings. And not a few are reluctant to make even the slightest effort to obtain a blue ribbon.

Another phenomenon: while almost all the “orange” fly their ribbons proudly from the antennas on top of their cars, many of the “blues” hang their ribbons lower, from the side mirror or the handle of a door, where they are less conspicuous.

But the struggle of the ribbons is not a game. At this time, it is extremely important, and the settlers know this well.

It is important because the number of orange ribbons creates the impression that the settlers rule the streets, that they are the real majority in Israel, even if the polls say the opposite. This raises their morale in their fight against the Israeli democracy and lowers the morale of the democratic public.

This influences - consciously or unconsciously - the politicians and media people, who, in their turn, mold public opinion. The Israeli media, almost without exception, have already become a mouthpiece for the settlers. Even a liberal paper like Haaretz, which is (erroneously) considered “left-wing”, carries news pages (as distinct from the editorial pages) which often look as if they had been lifted straight from one of the settlers’ organs.

If the blue ribbon overcomes the orange, it will have a big impact on the entire political system. It will lend new courage to the parties that support the withdrawal and to the security forces that will have to enforce it. The opposite situation would be fraught with danger to the future of the state.

Also, the blue (or blue-white) ribbon is a unifying symbol. Forces of different shades are working together in this campaign, from those who support Ariel Sharon and withdrawal from the Gaza Strip only (“Gaza - First and Only”) to those who want to turn this withdrawal into an instrument for the achievement of a general peace (“Gaza - First But Not Last”). To belong to this camp is respectable, for it is a camp with a liberal and peace-loving culture, a camp that believes in equality between the citizens of both genders and of all ethnic and national backgrounds. In short: the opposite of what the settlers believe in.

The victory of the blue ribbon will restore to many people a sense of power. To those who have sunk into despair, who have come to believe that they are few and weak and that “everything is lost”, the blue ribbon will give a sense of belonging to a large and influential community.

The struggle is having yet another interesting effect. In recent years, the right-wing has succeeded in securing a near monopoly over the display of the Israeli flag. A part of the left has distanced itself from the blue-and-white banner, because for them it symbolizes the occupation and the settlements. In demonstrations against the occupation, the Israeli flag is seen only on the Gush Shalom signs, which combine the flags of Israel and Palestine. (Palestinians, too, carry these signs willingly.)

Since the settlers have adopted the orange color (swiped from the Ukrainian uprising), their opponents quite naturally adopted the blue color, which is taken from

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the flag of Israel.

The importance of this is more than symbolic. More and more people are becoming convinced that the current struggle is essentially one between the State of Israel and the “State of the Settlers” – a democratic state on the one side, a nationalist-messianic state on the other. That is an important conception, which may have far-reaching implications for the future. It is the start of the real separation that between the State of Israel and the settlers.

For that, too, it is important that the blue now win the War of the Colors.