

{JUNE 24 2006}

BALLS INSTEAD OF BULLETS

If President Bush wanted to deal with Iran by “bombing them back into the stone age”, (as an American general once put it during the Vietnam War), now would be the time. With everybody riveted to the World Cup, who would notice?

The Israeli government knows this well. In their fight against the Qassam rockets that are landing in the town of Sderot, the Air Force has been given free rein. Since the beginning of the 2006 World Cup, more than 20 Palestinians, including boys and girls, a pregnant woman, a doctor and several paramedics have been killed. It seems that nobody in the world is paying any attention. Why should they? After all, the World Cup is more important.

When I come back from Jerusalem to Tel-Aviv, I generally make a slight detour to Abu Gush, an Arab village with a unique oasis: a coffee shop where mixed groups of Jewish youngsters and Arab youngsters (male only), and sometimes groups of Border Guard soldiers, Jewish and Druze, sit together on couches and fauteuils, relaxed, smoking Nargilahs (water-pipes). They devour sugary Baklava, talk, laugh and listen to the Lebanese singer Fairuz and the Oriental Israeli singer Zahava Ben. An unusual phenomenon in Israel.

When I passed there this week, they were all sitting in great excitement before a large screen, fixated on the game between Argentina and the Netherlands. They got excited together, jumped up together, shouted together.

A few days before, I saw the same in Sarajevo. In the coffee shops in the center of the town, lots of local youngsters, Muslims, Croats and Serbs, were sitting together, staring together, getting excited together, jumping up together, shouting together.

The same is happening at the same time all over the world, from Canada to Cambodia, from South Africa to North Korea.

It that good? Is that bad?

I am not a football fan. Like many people in the world who think of themselves as intellectuals (whatever that means), I usually dismiss this phenomenon with a condescending, slightly ironic smile, even if I catch myself nowadays looking for long minutes at the game. When I was a child, my father told me that sport was “Goyim

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Naches” (Yiddish from Hebrew, “pleasure of Gentiles”), and that the only Jewish sport was to ponder the philosophies of Spinoza and Schopenhauer, or, alternatively, the Talmud. Yeshayahu Leibovitch, an observant Orthodox Jew, described football teams as “eleven hooligans running after a ball.” (Another Jew suggested, for the sake of peace: “Why quarrel? Give each team their own ball.”)

From this point of view (too), Israel has long since ceased to be a Jewish state, in the spiritual sense. The Israeli Goy is like any other Goy on earth. The World Cup proves it.

A phenomenon that arouses such deep emotions in a billion human beings cannot be dismissed with a shrug. Here we have a profound human trait. What does it mean? Where does it come from?

Konrad Lorenz, one of the founders of the science of Ethology, which deals with the behavior of animals (including the human animal), maintained that human aggressiveness is an inborn trait, a product of millions of years of evolution. Cavemen lived in tribes, each of which depended for survival on a specific territory. The aggressiveness was needed to defend this territory and drive others away.

Predators in nature, which have natural weapons – such as teeth, claws or poison – are generally equipped with an inhibiting mechanism that prevents them from attacking their own kind. Otherwise they would not have survived until today. But humans have no effective natural weapon, and therefore nature has not equipped them with such a mechanism. That was a terrible mistake. True, humans have no dangerous teeth or claws, but they have something more effective than any natural weapon: the human brain which invents clubs, pikes, cannons and nuclear bombs. So human beings have a deadly combination of three attributes: inborn aggressiveness, murderous weapons and a lack of inhibitions concerning the killing of their own kind. The result: the human inclination for war.

How to overcome it? Lorenz pointed to a remedy: sport, and especially football. Football is the surrogate for war. It directs human aggressiveness into harmless channels. That’s why it is so important – and so positive.

Aggressiveness and nationalism go together. In this respect, too, football allows a glimpse into the recesses of the human soul.

The human animal has a profound need to identify itself with a collective. It lives in a group. Ancient man lived in a tribe. Since then, social forms have changed many times. The “We” changed from time to time with the change of social structures. People lived in religious and ethnic frameworks, in feudal society, in monarchies, etc. In the modern world, they live in nations.

Self-identification with a nation is an absolute necessity for modern man (with very

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few exceptions). Football gives expression to this identification in a way that outwardly resembles war. That's why the national flag and the national anthem play a central role in football. The masses wave flags, paint their faces with the national colors, shout nationalist slogans, give an emotional expression to this phenomenon.

Sometimes this becomes downright ridiculous, as happened to us last week. Israel has no part in the World Cup, having been knocked out before it really began. But a member of the Ghana team, who plays for Hapoel Tel-Aviv, for some reason waved the Israeli flag on the field – and the whole State of Israel erupted in an outburst of joy: We are there! We are at the World Cup!

A less ridiculous apparition: for the first time since the destruction of the Third Reich, masses of Germans have been waving their national flag with an enthusiasm that borders on ecstasy. Some observers speak of a rebirth of German nationalism and whatnot. Yet I believe that it is a positive thing. A nation cannot live a normal life when its citizens are ashamed of it. That can cause a collective mental disturbance and give birth to dangerous tendencies. Now, thanks to football, Germans can wave their flag.

The nationalism of football overcomes all other sentiments. A classic example: at the end of the 19th century, Vienna had a mayor, Karl Lueger, who was a rabid and outspoken anti-Semite. But when the Jewish "Hakoah Vienna" played against a Hungarian team, the mayor was observed cheering the local boys. When it was pointed out to him that they were Jews, he made the famous remark: "It is I who decide who is Jewish or not."

When a French-Algerian was the star of the French team, French racists cheered him on until they were hoarse. The same happened in Israel, when an Arab played on our national team.

Recently, A European intellectual told me: There are jokes about a Pole, a German, a Frenchman and any other European nation. But he has never heard a joke about a European, which proves that a European does not yet exist.

I would apply a similar criterion to football. Every nation in Europe has a national team, but there is no European team. Until the team of Europe, under the European flag, plays against the team of Asia or Africa, there will be no popular European consciousness. (A utopian may well dream of a match between the team of Earth and the team of Mars or Planet X.)

My Palestinian friend, Issam Sartawi, who was murdered 23 years ago because of his contacts with us, once said: "There will be no peace until the team of Israel plays against the team of Palestine – and we win."

There is, of course, a gender angle to it.

A brilliant advertising copywriter has plastered Tel-Aviv with posters of a woman's

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note to her husband: “Itzig, let the goalie of Brazil prepare coffee for you. I am off with the girls to the drugstore. Gali.” In a cartoon, a woman asks her husband, who is riveted to the World Cup on TV: “Are you sure you don’t want to come with me to the book fair?”

Football is a raucous guy thing, even if there are also women fans. In this respect, too, it is a substitute for war, and perhaps also for ancient man’s lust for hunting. (In the United States, European football – called soccer – is preferred by women, because American football is far more violent.)

In football, men dare to do things that, in other surroundings, would be taboo: they embrace each other, kiss each other, lie on top of one another. This expresses, no doubt, deep needs, and does not harm anyone.

From all these perspectives, football is a positive thing that replaces many negative ones. Provided, of course, President Bush does not use the opportunity to attack Iran, and we don’t use it to bomb children in Gaza.