

HA'ARETZ

“Let Their People Go”

By Bradley Burston

Haaretz , Israel

May 2006

In all of the Holy Land, there is no more beautiful area than the Gaza Strip. And none more accursed. It is the Riviera of the damned. The cruel Club Med of the eternally passed over, the pitied, the left to drown.

This week, a number of schoolchildren were caught in the crossfire of a gun battle in which Hamas and Fatah vied for the upper hand. The children lost. Eight were wounded in the exchange of fire.

Later that day, an official of Shifa Hospital in Gaza City noted that at least four people suffering from kidney diseases had died in the Strip in April, after the cash-starved Palestinian Authority Health Ministry cut budgets for dialysis treatments.

Some cancer patients have stopped receiving chemotherapy, the hospital has a dwindling two-week supply of medicines, and cannot afford to repair medical machines when they break.

If that were not enough, the next day, Gazans were told that fuel could run out soon, after the Israeli company that supplies petroleum products to the Strip, citing a succession of unpaid bills, threatened to stop supplying it.

Should we care? We should, and not only because we live on the slopes of Vesuvius, and there's thick black smoke issuing from its summit. Not only out of fearful self-interest, that is, not just because today's misery can be tomorrow's murderous desperation.

We should care because there are people living next door to us whose normal daily life is built of the kind of hardships one sees after a natural disaster. No work, no money, little food, open sewage, disease, depression, hope too scant, shelter too primitive, services too meager, death too soon, the horizon too empty, the future worse than no relief for an unbearable present.

We should care because we will travel to the ends of the earth to help people suffering tragic loss, large-scale traumatic injury, destruction of their homes, their livelihoods, but as far as Gaza's concerned, a few meters from our doorstep, good riddance.

We have left it to the wolves.

We were right to have left it. But we were wrong to have done it the way we did.

We hurt and abandoned our people who lived there and whom we expelled.

We hurt and exploited and ultimately abandoned the Gazans themselves, who lived in a colony we called part of the Land of Israel because we were unwilling and unable to run it as what it was, a colony.

And now we are hurting and abandoning them as what they have become, what we have, in fact, made them, our neighbors.

"Stop right there, you've got it wrong," we console ourselves. "These people want to kill us. These people want to throw us into the sea. They won't even let us help them. Besides, we can't even manage to feed our own people, you want to take care of them, too? And just when we've finally washed our hands of them, after all these years?"

"They brought it upon themselves," we tell ourselves. "Let them stew in their own juice. They elected murderers to lead them. Let them go hungry, let their electricity be cut off, their water."

"Why should we help them," we ask ourselves, "when their own brothers screw them, and have done so systematically for decades - the Egyptians, the Lebanese, the Jordanians, the Syrians, the Kuwaitis - the Arab world as a whole has let them rot - forced them to rot - evolved and adhered to an entire ideology explaining why the Gazans must be kept as a symbol of Zionist induced suffering. For their own sake."

"Why should we feel responsible when the Saudis, the Emirates, could have used a sliver of a fraction of their stratospheric oil revenues to solve Gaza's problems, when the expenses of one week of the fruitless, decision-less 10-year Iran-Iraq war could have helped turn Gaza around. Their own brothers won't lift a finger, why should we?"

Forget, for the moment, what the right says. Consider the limousine left. There are a number of reasons why the disengagement from Gaza was and remains so popular in the svelte sections of Tel Aviv, Herzliya, and, for that matter, the Upper West Side. One of them is surely this:

We don't want to think about those people anymore, and now we think we no longer have to.

"Mah li u'lezeh?" What does this have to do with me?

The most unpleasant answer is this: Because we are still occupying them.

There is more than one way to occupy a people. We, having evolved, have chosen remote control.

Our drones occupy the Gazans, morning and night, directing the artillery that occupies

them, shell after shell after hour and hour, directing helicopter gunships that fire missiles at cars and hit terrorists and also kill innocent bystanders.

Our lifestyle occupies them, and the fact that, not only are they unable to work on our side anymore, they can't even work in the factories in Gaza that once shipped goods to us for sale.

We occupy them because we don't like the government they elected, and we believe that we can quarantine them into choosing another.

We occupy them, fundamentally, by deciding for them who should rule over them, and by deciding that we have the right to set them straight.

This is, of course, the cue for the right-wing chorus from abroad to dismiss this as the usual leftist drivel, and to point out the obvious:

Really, though what are they to us?

Well, here's the worst of it, especially for those of us who believe in the Bible:

They are our family.

They are the relatives we cannot stomach, the cousins we have disowned, the kin we pretend are unrelated, the blood relations we act as if never existed.

They are certainly as ornery as we, as unforgiving, just as likely to think that we are all their enemies, as we are to think the same of them.

But they are also human beings, children of Abraham, trying to raise children and keep them from being shot - either by us or their own - keep them fed, perhaps even, one day, have an actual childhood.

It's about time we saw this price that we've paid for weathering the Intifada:

Hamas has hardened our hearts. Islamic Jihad suicide bombers have robbed us of much of our compassion. Every Fatah Al Aqsa gunman killing innocents has blinded us to the Palestinians who aren't wearing masks, the vast majority.

Over the past six years, we made a conscious decision to stand up to their bombings, not to buckle under to the maiming and murder of our children, not to change our lives just to suit them, not to let the Palestinian fanatics win.

But this has cost us something very profound in the national soul. Suddenly, even leftists welcome the idea that you can't make peace with these people. Even leftists now embrace unilateralism, which, at its root, gives a whole new meaning to the tired adage of the right, that There Are No Palestinians.

We have to realize that our hearts have been hardened, and do the right thing: Let these people go.

Even if they're still being used as pawns by their own leaders, their own brothers. Even if their own people won't let them go, it's time we did.

We have to stop occupying them, find entirely new ways to start helping them, involve the international community as a presence for large-scale relief, start seeing them as what they actually are, human beings, trying to get by in one of the worst places on earth.

We must, as well, swallow our fears of international intervention and find a way to involve the international community in helping to stop attacks against us. We are no less deserving of life, nor of protection from killers.

The challenge of being a Jew in Israel today, is to stand up and say, I'm willing to stay here, defend myself, and still find a way to help those in distress just over the fence - even if I find their leaders horrendous and the fanatic fringe among them abhorrent.

It's a challenge that moral people in the world face as well, the same international community for whom talk of concern for the Palestinians is so seldom matched by action.

Gaza, by rights, should be paradise, not hell on earth. These people are right next door. They are in our blood. Their future, whether we like it or not, is ours as well.