

## An Apology and a Question

At midnight I caught the CNN international news (Channel 133 here in Manhattan). It was a remarkable presentation on the weapons Israel had used against Hamas (and the general population) in Gaza, followed by an even more interesting (and unusual) questioning of Mark Regev, the chief Israeli spokesperson for the foreign press.

Looking at the Week in Review in the *Sunday NY Times* there was a fascinating piece (front page of Week in Review) by Ethan Bronner, writing from Gaza, which I commend to "both sides" in this dispute.

While watching the CNN news I'd written a note to Arieh Lebowitz and Ralph Seliger asking whether they could believe that Mark Regev believed what he was saying. I should apologize to Arieh and Ralph for personalizing the issue. I know that Ralph Seliger, who holds a key position in Meretz-USA, (as does Arieh Lebowitz), feels that all of the material I send the Middle East is hostile to Israel, even though I have also posted material from both Arieh and Seliger.

Let me say that I believe the Gaza events have been deeply saddening to both Arieh and Ralph - they are Zionists, left-Zionists, which increasingly put them in a minority position. And because of their beliefs, the events in Gaza must be more hurtful - more excruciatingly painful - to them than to me. Since Ralph feels my views are systematically hostile to Israel I'll not send him further copies, not out of spite, but because I feel they are the cause of pain, and do not lead to understanding or dialogue.

I had hoped that on a matter such as Gaza, Meretz-USA would have taken a leading role on calling on those of us who do not, in fact, "hate Israel", to join them in some vigil or action which demanded an end of the Israeli attack. (Not a demand for some "mutual ceasefire", though that is always a good thing, but for an end of the Israeli attacks). There were Jews in New York who issued a call, and I joined them happily in a silent vigil at the Israeli Mission. But aside from the blog - which any of you can get by going to Google and typing in Meretz weblog - nothing from Meretz.

Let me make a few things clear. I know that Hamas uses women and children - a point Regev made in defense of the Israeli strikes against civilians. I don't know what else they can do, given the confined area. I also know that, in any resistance movement in history, there are women and children who will volunteer for these risks - as there certainly were in the making of Israel.

If I am judging Israel harshly, it is not because Gaza is the worst thing happening just now. Zimbabwe is perhaps at the top of the list. It is because Israel is armed and funded by the US and the mad man running Zimbabwe is not, nor are the murderous war lords in Afghanistan, or the killers in the Congo. Further, it is because most of the conflicts are not led by elites which lay claim to Western values and which, in Israel's case, have repeatedly played on those values to give them an exemption. (ie., "we are a Western democracy, with a free press, an active civic life, we are unlike any other country in the Middle East").

When I watched Mark Regev tonight (and much the same has applied when I've watched Tzipi Livni) it wasn't simply that it was clear he was lying, but that surely he must have known he was lying, and what is it like to be in his skin? It is the same reason I never judged George Bush as harshly as I've judged Tony Blair - Bush is stupid, and Blair is not. Bush didn't really know what he was doing, and Blair did.

When Regev was asked by the interviewer (a good interviewer, hard questions, much harder than we see on domestic CNN) about the reports of illegal weapons used on civilians, Regev said none of the weapons are forbidden by treaty. And he is right - white phosphorus, which it is now clear Israel used, has a military use to lay down a smoke screen. But when used in densely populated areas it is not a smokescreen - it is clear murder. And Regev knows that. There are other weapons being discussed now - DIME or DME - which sends out minute bits of shrapnel, killing everything in its immediate radius. Regev's response was that, first, he questioned any of the news reports from Gaza itself as possibly being biased. He didn't admit to the fact Israel barred all foreign media from Gaza. Instead, he accused the media on the ground (Al Jazeera and Palestinian sources for the *NY Times*) of being untrustworthy. Regev knows better, he is lying, he knows he is lying. Livni has done much the same thing - I watched her interview recently at the Washington Press Club).

The "party line" (dare I say "the Zionist line"?) is that Israel tries to avoid civilian casualties, that it regrets it when they occur, that their military forces are told to take great care . . . and this is also a lie. Not a mistake, but a lie. Both Regev and Livni know perfectly well that it was impossible to launch the kind of attack which was made and expect the bombs to know, as they exploded, which were civilian and which were military targets. (As well as the fact that, as CNN reported, Israel is still shelling the coast despite the ceasefire, and that it attacked UN installations on at least two separate occasions).

We now know that Benny Morris, the Israeli historian who recently, in despair over finding a two state solution, has edged toward calling for the ethnic cleansing of Israel, documented the very precise and deliberate use of terror by Israeli armed forces way back in 1948 - an effort to "speed" the refugees on their way, and open up territory which Israel wanted. The Israeli military was never the clean weapon the Zionist State had claimed it was. It was a murderous machine like all other military machines.

If Hamas is a terrorist state, isn't Israel? One can applaud the free press in Israel - and I do - but does that exempt its actions from moral judgment? Can we exempt the United States from its massive destruction in Iraq simply because we have a free press and because we have permitted a strong protest movement? If we can't have diplomatic relations with Hamas, should we have them with Israel? And surely, if we do have such relations, shouldn't we end all further military and economic aid to Israel, boycott all Israeli products?

What response are we left with? If Israel were not in so many ways an extension of US policy in the Middle East, we would not be morally obligated to call for a separation. But it is an extension of US policy, funded by the US, given special status by the US, applauded almost unanimously by our Congress, and we are morally obligated to call for a separation. Beyond that, hard

political realism requires that we ask what the US gains from the conceit that Israel is our special friend. In what way? What do we get that aids our national interests?

All these questions occurred as I watched the CNN half hour, documenting the attacks on the civilian population, and watching Regev's efforts to excuse it. (Even, perhaps most pathetic and surely something that must haunt Regev in the dark reaches of his sleep, was his statement that because Hamas was totalitarian the people that were interviewed by BBC, people who were in hospital beds, whose families had been killed, who were in pain from burns, were only saying what they were saying because of their fear of Hamas).

I'd add one final note. The US is not innocent. War - not "Islam" or "Zionism" - is the real problem. When the air war started against Germany it sought to knock out military targets. But the Allies found that the Germans were shifting machinery, rebuilding factories, and maintain war production. And so - you can check this with historians if you doubt me - the Allies made it a deliberate policy to destroy . . . the workers, the civilians. They would be harder to replace. It wasn't just Dresden, which almost everyone now realizes was an Allied war crime, but the nature of the air war itself which targeted civilians, as the Israelis now target the Palestinians. By the end of World War II the air war on Japan was aimed at anything that moved - Hiroshima and Nagasaki merely symbolized what war had become. And since the Japanese were Japs, just as the Israelis view the Palestinians in equally racist terms, there was no moral question involved.

It is time to ask those moral questions.

David McReynolds, 1/25/09