



Göran Rosenberg

Back in the ghetto

The Israeli Right nurtures the image of the nation as a bastion under eternal siege, but fails to see that Israel is laying siege to the Palestinians. Attending a family funeral, Göran Rosenberg observes how Israelis' fears are exploited so that one version of Israel is furthered at the expense of another. The window of opportunity opened by the Oslo agreement has been closed for good, he fears.



Photo: Cecilia Persberg

On the night of 26 October 2006, my aunt Bluma dies, and thirty–six hours later I find myself on a flight to Tel Aviv. Jewish funerals are speedy affairs and I have only a margin of eighteen hours. The news of aunt Bluma's death was unexpected and the decision to attend her funeral was not considered; but as I settle down in the plane, the thoughts and memories come forth. The thoughts of stories silenced and links severed. The memories of glittering eyes, contagious laughs, the unruly mix of Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew, the indomitable *joie–de–vivre* against a backdrop of unmentionable experiences.

Bluma was born in 1915 in the village of Chelm in Eastern Poland, noted in folklore for its fools (as is the Swedish city in which I was born, Södertälje). She was eleven years older than her youngest sister and the only remaining member of the Staw family with a conscious memory of the place where my mother was born. Many years ago, on a tape in a format for which they no longer make tape recorders, I asked her for memories of Chelm. When, bursting out laughing, she told me about the local *Wunderrabbi* and his miraculous cures and blessings (in case of difficult childbirth, tie a prayer book to the bed with a thread), I couldn't be sure whether she was reminiscing or just telling tales. While I'm not sure I understood everything she said, I am sure that whatever she did manage to tell me is as much as I will ever know about the world from which my mother's family came.

My mother Hala (Chaia) was only five when my grandfather Jankiel (Jacob) and grandmother Rachela (Rachel), with five daughters and one son, left Chelm to seek a new future in the teeming industrial city of Lodz. And only thirteen when the Germans occupied Lodz and imprisoned its Jews in a sealed ghetto. And only seventeen when, in September 1944, the surviving members of the family were deported from the ghetto of Lodz to the selection ramp in Auschwitz, where most of the stories were silenced for good. Grandfather Jankiel and grandmother Rachela went straight to the gas chambers, as did my aunt Dorka with her one–year old son, Ovadja, my eldest cousin. The four younger and childless sisters were deemed capable of work and, after spending two days under the never–ending smoke from the never–stopping crematories,

were transported to Stutthof concentration camp on the Baltic coast east of Gdansk. In Stutthof my aunt Bronka died. In Slupsk outside Gdansk, a month after liberation, my aunt Sima died. "Somewhere" in southeastern Poland, having escaped Lodz before the ghetto closed, my uncle Shlomo died.

After liberation the two only surviving members of the Staw family, my aunt Bluma, who was now thirty, and my mother to be, Hala, who still was only nineteen, headed back to Lodz in search of something or someone to continue living for. But neither found there what they were looking for. Instead, Hala found my father-to-be on a list of inmates in a transit camp for Jewish Red Cross refugees in the village of Furudal in central-northern Sweden. In August 1946, she managed to get from Poland, via a large camp for "displaced persons" in Bergen-Belsen in occupied Germany, to Sweden. It was not an obviously feasible move. She succeeded because she didn't hesitate to travel with a false story, under a false name, which is probably why I don't get upset about asylum seekers who are compelled to do the same.

Aunt Bluma searched in Poland for a few more years, started a small business in wholesale textiles, married Leon and gave birth to two sons, my cousins Jacob and Isaac. But anti-Jewish sentiments remained rampant. The few remaining Polish Jews who were able to return home soon discovered that there was no home to return to. The pogrom in Kielce on 4 July 1946¹ confirmed that a thousand years of Jewish history in Poland had come to an end. Within a few years, a large part of Poland's remaining Jews had left the country. In 1949, Poland opened the door for Jews to emigrate to the new Jewish State and the last representative of my family on Polish territory closed it behind her without ever looking back. My mother has never returned to Poland; my aunt Bluma did once, with her children and grandchildren, when she was almost 90 and no longer afraid of anything in this world.

I change planes in Vienna. For a few years now there have been no regular direct flights between Israel and Sweden or any other Scandinavian country. Tourism has dropped and the business climate has cooled. Israel inspires ever less curiosity and ever more consternation and aversion. The forty years of occupation have come to be regarded by an increasing number of people as scandalous, the ongoing colonization of the West Bank as provocative, the building of a security wall on largely Palestinian lands as unlawful, and the wielding of military superiority as disproportionate and self-defeating. Some people are weeding out Israeli oranges and avocados from their food baskets and non-stop flights to Tel Aviv from their itineraries.

The greater part of the passengers on the flight from Vienna are Israelis. The trolley with pre-ordered kosher meals is as well stocked as the trolley with standard chicken. A Christian group from Norway occupies a few rows at the back of the plane. Christian groups seem insensitive to the cycles of war and violence in the area, or rather inversely sensitive: the more troubled the region, the more reason to travel there. I get the feeling that the group on the plane is at least partially travelling to demonstrate solidarity with their Christian Palestinian brethren in Ramallah or Bethlehem. I fear that other Christian groups are travelling in order to demonstrate solidarity with the repossession of the Holy Land by the Jews, thereby, they believe, hastening Armageddon and the second coming of Christ.

The new terminal building at Ben Gurion Airport is spacious and bright; one walks enormous distances through gently sloping and generously glass-walled arcades. Newcomers receive an impression of openness and normality, at least

until they arrive at the passport and security controls, although these are not *much* worse than anywhere else. Nowadays, everybody everywhere is a potential terrorist. In that respect, Israel has become the world — and the world has become Israel.

It's only on the way out of the airport zone that Israel unmistakably becomes Israel again. Or rather, it's on the way out that I realize how much the airport zone symbolizes the country Israel has become. It's a large zone, the size of a small city. You must travel a while along broad boulevards lined with lush palm trees and confusing road signs before you reach the boundary of the airport zone, which is as heavily-fenced and controlled as the border between two states. Inside the fence there are not only runways, airport terminals, shopping arcades, hangars, hotels, car parks, administration buildings and everything else you would expect to find within the boundaries of an airport, but also farmed fields and orchards and other things that you would rather expect to find outside.

A well-stocked mini-Israel, I reflect.

A small fortress within a large.

A last refuge in a final siege.

This is not the first time I keep thinking of Masada when entering Israel. Not only because I was raised in the belief that the State of Israel was the closing of a parenthesis opened two thousand years ago by the fall of Masada. But also because for a long time I have been frightened by the link between the mass-suicide in a besieged mountain fortress in the Judean desert in 73 AD and Israel's ideological self-perception today. By the notion of Israel as an eternal bastion under eternal siege. By the ritual oath sworn by Israeli soldiers that Masada must never fall again. By the national motto *ein brira*: no choice. No choice between fortress and failure. Between survival and suicide.²

In the 2005 documentary, "Revenge but one of my two eyes" (*Nekam achat mishtei einai*), Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi reveals in monotonous detail the continuing existence of an ominous cult of suicide at the ideological and mythological heart of the Jewish state. In scene after scene we are shown groups of Jewish youngsters gathered at the top of Masada, huddling in the strong wind, covering from the blinding sun, dizzy from the breathtaking view, listening to version upon version about how and why a group of nine-hundred besieged members of a fanatical Jewish sect, the Zealots, choose to commit collective suicide rather than fall in to the hands of the Romans. And why it was the right thing for them to do.

"What do you hear?", a young guide with a skullcap asks impatiently while the young Jews in his group close their eyes in the wind. And he keeps asking until they hear what they are supposed to hear (which takes a few rounds). What they are supposed to hear is the sound of external threat and internal resolve. What they are supposed to think is what the Zealots were thinking. What they are supposed to conceive is that the Zealots did the only thing conceivable.

"Do you see the remains of a wall down there?", another guide asks another group of youngsters on another occasion, pointing down from the precipice. "It was built by the Romans in order to seal off the besieged Jews. It was once two metres high and surrounded the whole fortress. And you see those piles of

stones at intervals of about two hundred meters? Those were the watchtowers."

The youngsters look and nod. Had they been able to look further, all the way to Bethlehem or Jerusalem, they would have seen another wall, considerably longer, considerably higher, and considerably harder to penetrate — not built two thousand years ago by the Romans to fence in Jews, but today by the Jewish State to fence out Palestinians. In certain stretches, the wall is not a wall but an electronically monitored metal fence fortified with broad security zones, deep trenches, barbed wire, and military patrols. Nevertheless, the word wall is factually and symbolically justified: even where the wall is "only" a fence, its aim is to contain Palestinians in a territory that less and less resembles a state and more and more prison.

Running throughout the film is a phone conversation between the Israeli director, in full view, and an invisible Palestinian friend somewhere on the other side of the wall, at times under curfew. "I am training to be dead", says the friend. "When people here no longer have anything to live for, they will want to die."

At a locked gate in the separation fence people are waiting to cross, but no one is opening. The camera observes them through the wire. The hours pass, the sun moves, Israeli patrol cars move back and forth, people gesture, plead, become resigned. "This is the end", says a man in his forties. "We have nothing to live for."

"You can't cross here. Leave!" Invisible soldiers behind dark observation holes in massive watchtowers or in heavily-armoured vehicles bellow their warnings and commands to a never-ending stream of people who day and night are humiliated by the whims of force. In another scene, a sick woman is brought to an ambulance waiting beside an armoured vehicle and a tank.

"She's bleeding", explains a man carrying the woman's belongings in a green plastic bag. "I don't care. Get out!" rasps a metallic loudspeaker voice from the darkness behind the protected windshield.

The man is pleading.

"Just get out!" scratches the voice in broken Arabic. "Get out!"

The ambulance is waiting with red emergency lights blinking. "Only to Beit Furik", pleads the ambulance driver.

"Go back! Get out!" The armoured vehicle turns around and advances threateningly. The ambulance reluctantly drives off. Left at the checkpoint are the woman and her relatives, an elderly man in a red and white chequered *kafiyah*, a young woman in a grey headscarf carrying a small child, and a teenage girl and a small boy.

"May God humiliate them as they have humiliated us", says the young woman to the camera. The young girl cries incessantly. The armoured vehicle and the tank stay motionless in the background.

"Don't be afraid my little one", says the young woman. "God sees us. God will help us. God will liberate us from them." Then she cries too.

"Try to imagine how they felt", says a guide to one of the groups on top of Masada. "Try to understand why they did what they did?"

"Romans, we won't give up", a group of Israeli school children shouts into the abyss. "Romans, we won't give up", the echo bounces back from the mountains opposite.

"Come and stay with us for two days and try to understand how we live", says the Palestinian voice on the other side of the wall. "Try to understand why we no longer fear death. Why it doesn't matter to me whether I live or whether I die."

How to make a hero of a suicide killer? The biblical tradition knows. Let me die with the Philistines, Samson begs God when, with his strength taken away and his eyes gouged out, he is at last brought before the masses to be humiliated. Strengthen me one last time, he pleads, so that I may revenge one of my two eyes.

How Samson in that moment regains his strength, tears down the pillars of the house and takes three thousand Philistines with him in into death has been recalled as a true story of heroism to generation upon generation of Israeli school children. In the national mythology of Israel, Samson is inscribed as Samson the Hero, *Shimson Ha'gibor*.

"Who among you can imagine what Samson feels when he stands there?" asks the female teacher in Avi Mograbi's film. "He feels that it's better to commit suicide", answers a child, "because then he can decide for himself when to die, and then he can also kill Philistines."

In a following scene, a group of Palestinian men have been arrested at a checkpoint and ordered to stand side by side with their heads turned away. One of the men turns his head and is ordered to stand on a small stone. "Look what they are doing to us", says the man to the camera while balancing on the stone.

Another man turns his head and is ordered to stand on another stone.

Ten men in a row, two men balancing on stones. A cold wind takes hold of their jackets and sweaters. No one is moving. No one is allowed to cross the checkpoint.

The only things crossing freely are the poisoned seeds of humiliation.

My first memories of aunt Bluma are from the late Summer of 1956. Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal and the tensions along the 1949 armistice lines were higher than usual; a new war between Israel and Egypt seemed probable and Bluma thought it a was an opportune time to take the children and visit her sister in Sweden. How we all, three adults and four kids, managed to share two small rooms on Hertig Carls väg in Södertälje Södra I can't remember. It is only with hindsight that I understood why they really came. This was before the era of charter flights; the decision to embark on such a long and demanding journey must have been a tough one.

During nine summer weeks, two red-headed toughs from the cultural cacophony of an inner-city street in Tel Aviv tried to make themselves at

home in the homogenized *folkhemmet*, or "home of the Swedish people", but with little success. I was ashamed of their talking a foreign language, that they didn't understand our games, that they "borrowed" our unlocked bikes, when they called for me outside the house of my polio-stricken friend Berra, where I used to hide from them among his books and magazines. Yet towards the end of their stay, Jacob, the elder of my cousins, started to learn Swedish and we slowly began to get to know each other.

Later that autumn I remember my father's worried head bending over the radio set in the corner of the living room, listening to crackling reports about the war that finally had broken out and that ended with Israel temporarily erecting its barricades along the Western shores of the Suez Canal. But by then aunt Bluma and the cousins had gone back. I suppose that they couldn't have stayed on forever. That they were homesick. And that home was Israel after all.

Following the death of my father six years later, in spring 1962, the small "Swedish" branch of the family followed their footsteps and we too made our *aliya*, ascent, to Israel. The apartment of aunt Bluma on Shenkin Street became a second home to me. An unlimited number of mattresses and beds could magically be produced from sturdy wooden cabinets and an unexpected number of people could, with no notice whatsoever, be accommodated in the two small and bare-walled rooms on the second floor above a bakery that produced an eternal ambiance of fresh bread and chocolate cake.

On early summer mornings, before the heat had filtered through the heavy wooden blinds, aunt Bluma put on the kitchen table a bowl of sour cream, *shamenet*, fresh bread from the bakery, and a plate of finely minced vegetables, before hurrying away in her flowery dresses and broad-heeled shoes to a small textile business somewhere in the maze of narrow streets the other side of the teeming Carmel Market. When she returned home it was mostly dark and the flowery dresses were damp with sweat, but before long a three course dinner was miraculously produced. When the usual four chairs had been assembled around the balcony table and the quartet of card players was complete, the bids and the laughs and the stories and the smoke from incessantly burning cigarettes began mixing with the sounds and scents from a night of open windows and wounds.

Light-heartedness can be a form of self-delusion, and the light-heartedness I so distinctly associate with the people laughing away their evenings around aunt Bluma's balcony table was certainly not uncomplicated. They had all been to hell, they had all been forced to seek something to continue living for, and they had all learnt from experience that Israel was not paradise. It was, to say the least, a complex-ridden people whose phobias and anticipations in a decade or so permeated the newly created state. And, to say the least, a complex-ridden political and military reality that they willy-nilly became part of. In the humid nights on Shenkin Street, you could imagine yourself being in any other Mediterranean country. That is, if you avoided seeing what Israel also was: an armed fortress, established on contested lands, by a highly traumatized people.

And for a time it seemed to work. Rapid advance seemed to be a way of keeping the past at bay. And Israel was advancing rapidly in those years. People who otherwise would have been consumed by nightmares of annihilation were now consumed by dreams of restoration. The outer borders were certainly narrow and unsafe, "Auschwitz borders" as the Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban, was to call them in 1967. But the inner horizons were

still wide and promising and Israel still a country of the righteous and the just. Righteous in their return to history and just in doing what history demanded of them. That corrosive feeling of closed vistas and dead ends, which would grow stronger as progress became bogged down in military occupation and messianic self-righteousness, couldn't yet be noticed.

I remember them as fine years, those years when the hot-humid darkness outside the yellow cone of light above the card players on aunt Bluma's balcony was saturated with the scent of bread and the murmur of hope.

Dusk is falling when we arrive at a large villa in Ramat Ha'sharon, a wealthy suburb north of Tel Aviv. The locked gates to the entrance are flooded with searchlights and guarded by closed circuit cameras. The interior floors are covered with marble. I have not been here before and I am somewhat surprised, since I didn't know that there was such a house in the small family circle of aunt Bluma. My cousin Isaac works as a ground employee at the airport and his wife Sara as a clerk at the municipality of Tel Aviv, and none of them could expect to live like this. But the house belongs to the sister of Sara, who has married a successful and wealthy manufacturer of plastic wrappings, and so attained a standard of living and a lifestyle that would have been seen as offensive by most Israelis a few decades ago.

Around a large table filled with plates and glasses, the closest family members have assembled for contemplation and comfort. My cousin Isaac is heavily taken by grief and mostly keeps silent, but as the evening passes voices keep rising. Fresh dishes are brought in, and after a while a tray with vodka glasses, and then the owner of the house wants to demonstrate the sliding roof above the table at which we are sitting. It is newly repaired, he says, and pushes a button and the black October sky opens up with a buzzing sound. Later still he wishes to show us the film of the recent wedding of his youngest daughter. I don't know how many times this film has been shown on that large, wall-mounted flat-screen, nor how many times that others around the table have seen it, but I see it for the first time. It is clearly a very costly film, a private reality show in fact, with every phase of the wedding day dramatically staged, from the bride's breakfast, her transformation from cocoon to butterfly at the hands of the most exclusive hairdresser and dressmaker in town, the anecdotes of friends, the confessions of protagonists, the laying of tables for four hundred and fifty guests at the Tel Aviv Hilton, the arrival of limousines, the kissing of cheeks, the small talk over drinks, the exclamations of guests. Somewhere in the middle, dramaturgically too early, comes the highlight of the story, the wedding ceremony under the canopy, whereafter the film dissolves into tedious sweeps along dinner tables, lengthy cuts from the exclusive wedding show with Dana International, and endless sequences of people dancing and socializing. The film keeps rolling long after I have stopped watching.

I ponder the costs of such a film, and such a wedding, and someone around the table says, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that a wedding at this level costs about a quarter of a million dollars.

Less than fifteen kilometres from here, Israel is building its wall.

A wall, it seems, between a Hell of Desperados and a Paradise of Fools.

The next morning we travel in a small car caravan to the large regional cemetery in Holon, south of Tel Aviv. It extends over a vast area that once was covered with sand dunes and now is covered with gravestones. Jewish graves are never removed. Grave is added to grave until the cemetery is filled. Filled Jewish cemeteries, more or less dilapidated, are often the most visible remnants of the Jewish world that once was part of Europe.

The Jewish burial ceremony is straightforward and beautiful. On a wheeled stretcher under the open roof of an outdoor chapel, aunt Bluma is resting in a sack of brodered black velvet. The outlines of her diminutive body show through the cloth. A young rabbi in black hat and coat steps up to a small podium behind the stretcher to say *kaddish*, the prayer over the dead. I was to understand that the family had gone to great efforts to get this particular rabbi for the funeral, but I am a bit surprised when I see him, since I would not have thought that an ultra-orthodox rabbi would be the spiritual support of first choice for my aunt Bluma's mostly secularized, and in some cases openly anti-religious family members.

Then the young rabbi says something that makes an impression on me as well. He says it in the traditional mode of prayer, half singing half lamenting, and at first his intonation obscures his words. Then I hear him intoning a parable about Abraham the patriarch and Bluma my aunt. "As Abraham once left his country and his family and his father's house to begin a new life in the land that God had promised to him and his children", chants rabbi Dan Lau, "so did Bluma Genislaw, blessed be her memory, leave her country and her family and her father's house to begin a new life in the State of Israel."

Yes, indeed, Bluma had indeed left everything behind, and she had never looked back, and she had always seemed to be looking forward. Towards the end, when her eyesight deteriorated, I sometimes got the impression that what she still saw was not what she once had hoped to see.

The stretcher with the body is rolled out under the bare sky and into an endless maze of narrow walkways through densely packed grave quarters. Most graves are traditionally modest, horizontal slabs of white stone, but all along the route the funeral procession takes, enormous palaces in black or red marble have recently been raised, with golden inscriptions and portraits of the deceased etched into the stone. The inscriptions in Russian or Georgian testify to a newly arrived grave culture. Their size and their brazenness and the glaring contrast they form to the even sea of white stones surrounding them testify, like the wedding at the Hilton, to a new class society.

We gather around an open grave neatly squeezed in between two white stones. Here Leon and his sister Carola are already resting; only one spot remains. The stretcher is lifted off the wheeled carrier and brought to the grave and slowly tilted forward so that the white-draped body can slide out of the black velvet sack and down into the red-white sand. With one shovel each, we all help to seal the last resting place of aunt Bluma.

Her grave, like Leon's and Carola's, will have a flat stone in white.

On the other side of the wall, or the barrier, or the fence, or whatever you prefer to call that expanding structure that is supposed to protect Israel from its enemies, the Palestinian hell has gone from bad to worse. Step by step the

conditions for sustaining a functioning society have disappeared. The economy has been ruined, the people have been humiliated and every hope for change has been frustrated. In the process, the will to live has weakened and the will to die has taken increasingly destructive forms.

The ensuing havoc cannot have surprised anybody. The predictable effect of frustration is aggression, and the predictable effect of social destruction is chaos. In a classic experiment from 1941 (Barker, Dembo, Lewin), a group of small children were shown a room full of attractive toys behind a wire screen and made to understand that they would be allowed to play with toys only after a long wait. Another group of children was permitted to play with the toys immediately. The difference between the behaviour of the two groups was striking. Those who didn't have to wait played happily and without aggressiveness. Those who were forced to wait played destructively, sometimes even smashing the toys against the wall.³

To divide a group of children into two and to make them hate each other is simple. Punish the one and reward the other. Recognize the one but not the other. Promise the one what you give the other. Divide and rule is well-proven technique for the destroying a society. The destruction of the Palestinian society in the occupied territories, and its dissolution into violence and anarchy, has been the all too predictable outcome of an Israeli policy that, at least since 2001, has aimed at preventing the creation of a functioning Palestinian State alongside Israel. It has been done through the systematic deflation and humiliation of every Palestinian leader with a popular mandate to negotiate with Israel. At first the democratically elected Yassir Arafat was ostracized until he died, then the democratically elected Mahmoud Abbas was ignored until he became pathetic, then the democratically elected Hamas "government" (for all practical purposes a prisoners' administration) was boycotted until it ceased to function, then Fatah was openly encouraged to fight Hamas, then everybody looked surprised as lawlessness spread and Palestinians began killing each other.

No, there was no need of any experiments to predict how the Palestinians would eventually start to behave. The Finnish-Swedish poet and politician Claes Andersson has succinctly expressed what we already know:

To make a man mad is easy.
Take everything away from him.
Look how oddly he behaves.⁴

To those who wonder why Israel is using its superiority to do exactly what everyone realizes will make the Palestinians go mad, my answer is that Israel too is a society gone mad. On the "inside" of the wall (or barrier or fence), protected by the mightiest military power in the region, supported by the mightiest military power in the world, financed by the strongest economy in the area, there are people living in the firm conviction that everything can be taken away from them at anytime, and that the slightest display of military weakness is a first step towards Auschwitz.

Some would say that this is a conviction based on experience, not madness. That the reason why many Israelis feel persecuted is that someone actually *is* persecuting them. That the Palestinians, eagerly helped by the Arabs and the Muslims and the Jew-haters of the world, are only waiting for the moment to

destroy the Jewish State. That the Jews remain the eternal victims of eternal enemies and that the Palestinians or Arabs or Muslims are the Nazis of our time (a suspicion conveniently confirmed by the rise of the Holocaust-denying president of Iran, Ahmadinejad). That the Palestinians will never reconcile themselves with the state of Israel and that peace with the Palestinians is an illusion.⁵ That the only language the enemies of the Jews do understand is the language of military superiority.

There is a method to the madness of Israel.

What is often absent from these "rational" explications of the Israeli doctrine of military superiority is the deliberate Israeli manipulation and exploitation of Jewish fears and phobias. The threat of anti-Semitism has come to play an increasingly ominous role in official Israeli rhetoric, while the threat of a new Holocaust has become increasingly prominent in official Israeli defence strategy.⁶ In the Summer of 2004, the prime minister of Israel at the time, Ariel Sharon, urged the Jews of France, the largest Jewish community in Europe, to back their bags and flee to Israel. Other Israeli politicians have compared the Europe of today to Europe of the 1930s. The growing criticism of Israeli policy and ideology is increasingly branded as the expression of a new anti-Semitism.⁷ What before the War on Terror could be seen as a politically manageable conflict about territories, refugees and borders must now be understood as part of a politically unsolvable conflict between good and evil, civilization and terror, liberalism and fascism, democracy and Islam, enlightenment and fundamentalism, the Jews and their enemies. A conflict in which it is wholly logical, and not at all mad, to arm yourself for endless war and barricade yourself in for eternal siege.

Of course, it is entirely possible to reach such an understanding of the conflict independently, but hardly without giving due consideration to the impact of well-organized political and ideological forces with an interest in having the conflict understood in precisely that way. The more that Jews in the world can be made to perceive the conflict as politically unsolvable and the harbinger of a potential Holocaust, the more willingly they will rally behind the present-day commanders of Masada. Palestinian acts of terror and anti-Semitic propaganda of course play straight into their hands, and they seem to have no qualms about stimulating both: the former through a policy that systematically produces humiliation, hatred, hopelessness and fanaticism; the latter by systematically blurring the distinction between criticism of the state of Israel and hatred of the Jews.

The exploitation of Jewish fear to gain support for Zionist extremism is neither new nor hard to explain. It was exploited in the 1930s and 1940s by Jewish terror organizations such as Irgun and the Stern Gang and it is exploited today by the representatives of an Israeli policy bent on occupation and colonization. This does not mean that the fears are unsubstantiated (the Holocaust happened, Islamist extremism is growing, and anti-Semitism is not going away), only that they are exploited and manipulated for the purpose of furthering one Israel at the expense of another; an Israel formed by the inevitability of endless wars and barricades, at the expense of an Israel formed by the necessity of peace and reconciliation.

And herein lies the madness. At least, if as mad you define a policy that is wrecking the very foundations of what it is supposed to sustain: in this case a Jewish society in Israel-Palestine. A policy for suicide, as I have called it

elsewhere:

The Masada of our times will most likely hold out longer than the Masada of antiquity, since it is much better armed and much better prepared and presently has the support of the mightiest military power of our times. But for each day that passes, the state of Israel, by its words and deeds, undermines the territorial and political conditions for a long-term compromise with its Arab neighbours, and thereby the conditions for its survival as a Jewish State, since the Arab neighbours cannot be kept out by a high and massive wall, and not be made to disappear by high-handed demonstrations of military force and territorial occupation.⁸

Since then, the fortifications of present-day Masada have been further weakened. The deliberately induced breakdown of the Palestinian society was clearly aimed at finally doing away with the conditions for a Palestinian state, and thereby finally securing Israeli superiority in the region. Instead, it has contributed to the emergence of a new and considerably more dangerous enemy. The suicidal form of "asymmetrical" warfare, which in Iraq has defeated the world's only superpower, is finding an increasingly fertile ground in the Palestinian territories. Islamist radicalism and extremism has become the all too predictable response to the humiliation of secular Palestinian nationalism. A fanatical enemy, claiming the whole region as a political and territorial base, has replaced a pragmatic enemy territorially based in Israel-Palestine. An Israeli policy that ultimately has offered nothing has produced an enemy that no longer expects to receive anything.

Israel seems to believe that its doctrine of military superiority will suffice to suppress and vanquish such an enemy; by making the occupation more effective, by isolating the enclaves, by fortifying the wall, by consolidating the settlements, by improving the deterring effect of military attacks, incursions and precision killings. But as the enemy has become increasingly ideological and regional, the limits of military superiority have become increasingly apparent. The attempt by Israel to demolish the Shiite Hezbollah militia of Lebanon by destroying the infrastructure of the whole country ended in a military debacle that was not only caused by tactical and military misjudgements and mistakes, but also by a deeper strategic and political failure. An enemy that will not be defeated by massive deployment of excess force, an enemy that under such an attack will manage to strike back, will demand a different strategy than that of military superiority.

The strategic weakening of Israel has been accelerated by the fact that the US in Iraq has squandered its ability to project and exercise power in the region as a whole. Potential threats of future regime changes and military interventions have lost most of their credibility. No one seriously believes that the US, by the use of sheer military superiority, will be able prevent Iran from going nuclear. It is even less likely that the Israelis will be able to do so, although many suspect them of being mad enough to try. The geopolitical fallout of an American withdrawal from a rapidly fracturing Iraq could be momentous. Western-supported autocracies might crumble enabling Islamist parties and movements to rise to power. The alliance between Israel and the US might turn out to be a strategic liability and their combined military superiority a chimera.

All of this, of course, is not the consequence of Israeli policies and actions, but too much is. For too many years, Israel has overestimated its capacity to be at

war with its surroundings. For too many years, Jewish fears have been manipulated and exploited for a policy based on hubris and superiority. For too many years, Israel has allowed extreme political and religious ideologies to shape the political agenda. For too many years, Israel has made enemies without making friends.

I stay in Israel for another two days. In the early mornings I walk with my two cousins to the small Sephardic synagogue in Isaac's neighborhood to read *kaddish* for Bluma. My second cousin Jacob has arrived with his wife and two children from Durban in South Africa, where he has lived and worked for many years. Jacob is the most observant among us. According to Jewish tradition, he has torn his shirt on the left side of the chest, close to the heart, and has made Isaac do the same. After prayer we go back to the *shiva*, the traditional "seating" in the house of the dead. Bluma lived her last years in a small apartment next to Isaac's, so it is in the home of Sara and Isaac that we put in all the extra chairs, set the table with the refreshments, and welcome all who wish to pay their respects to the dead, to comfort her family, and to share their memories. The Jewish tradition stipulates seven days of *shiva*. It is a fine tradition that offers many opportunities for comfort and reflection, and I would gladly have sat it through to the end.

The last afternoon I visit close friends, again in Ramat Ha'sharon, the posh suburb north of Tel Aviv. They have long been critical of Israeli policy and have long hoped for a change, but have become increasingly pessimistic and defeatist. We walk up on the roof terrace from where we looking West can glimpse the glittering Sea and looking East can glimpse the soft hills of the rising West Bank. And somewhere beneath the hills, the wall. "So we are locked in again", they say with an enigmatic smile on their face.

Six months later I read a newspaper interview with the former speaker of the Israeli parliament, Avraham Burg, also the former chairman of the Jewish Agency, also the former runner up to the leadership of the Israeli labour Party (in 2001). Avraham's father Yosef Burg was a leading representative of early religious Zionism and a minister in several Israeli governments during the 1950s.

To make it short; Avraham Burg is not just anybody in Israeli society.

The interview is about Burg's new book in Hebrew, entitled (in translation) "Defeating Hitler,"⁹ where Burg writes that Israel has become "a Zionist ghetto, an imperialistic, brutish place that believes only in itself."¹⁰

The interviewer is clearly upset: "What you are saying is that the problem is not just the occupation. In your eyes, Israel as a whole is some sort of horrible mutation."

"The occupation is a very small part of it. Israel is a frightened society. To look for the source of the obsession with force and to uproot it, you have to deal with the fears. And the meta-fear, the primal fear is the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust."

"So we are psychic cripples, you claim. We are gripped by dread and fear and make use of force because Hitler caused us deep psychological damage.

"Yes. The true Israeli rift today is between those who believe and those who are afraid. The Israeli Right's great victory in the struggle for the Israeli political soul lies in the way it has imbued it almost totally with absolute paranoia. I accept that there are difficulties. But are they absolute? Is every enemy Auschwitz? Is Hamas a scourge?"

The next morning I take a taxi to the airport. With each visit, the traffic on the highway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem is thickening and becoming more erratic. The surrounding landscape is shifting as well. New urban settlements incessantly encroach on agricultural lands. Cranes and bulldozers in frantic action everywhere. Here you can literally see the Israeli economy grow, and along with it the wealth of a growing Israeli middle class. The economic gaps are certainly growing too, but in this respect Israel is no different from most other countries in the merry-go-round of profits in the expanding order of global turbo-capitalism. What nevertheless makes Israel different from all other countries is the fact that all this is taking place alongside, and in conjunction with, occupation, colonization, and demolition. Only a few kilometres away, sometimes at a stone's throw, the same people that here is working hard to build a society, is working hard to destroy a society. And working hard to build a wall separating the construction from destruction.

It is indeed striking how one activity can be conducted practically within eyesight of the other with such apparent casualness. How easily madness can be dressed up as normality. During the short summer of Oslo it became a bit more difficult. For a short time the standards of normality changed. Normality suddenly prescribed that endless occupation was an impossibility and peace with the Palestinians a possibility. During the long winter that has followed, normality has again come to prescribe that peace with the Palestinians is an impossibility and endless occupation a possibility.

And herein lies the madness; endless occupation is *not* a possibility, and military superiority is *not* a possible strategy, and a policy for locking the Palestinians out will increasingly also lock the Jews in.

Self-destruction is a peculiarly human capacity. The human species has the ability to build its own societies — and to destroy them, and it might be the same human individual that will do both. During a few years in the 1990s, many of us perceived a possibility to go from destruction to construction in Israel-Palestine, a specific time- and context-bound window of opportunity created by specific circumstances.

Now I fear that this window of opportunity has closed. What has been further destroyed since Oslo will take a very long time to reconstruct — if ever. The dream of a Palestinian State has been undone for the foreseeable future, but so has the dream of an Israeli State in peace and reconciliation with its neighbours.

My aunt Bluma is dead and buried, I keep thinking, and with her one of the last living links to a generation that made its way to Israel with the hope of escaping the ghetto and overcoming Auschwitz.

Little could she foresee that she would die within the walls of a new ghetto — in fear of a another Auschwitz.

We get into the line of cars making its way through the security entrance to the airport. A routine glance by the guard and we are whisked through. Other cars are taken aside for a more thorough inspection. Security checks might take time, something one must take into consideration when flying out of Tel Aviv. From experience I anticipate three hours for departure.

What I have not anticipated this time is the procedure at the passport control. It has nothing to do with security.

It has to do with my relation to Israel.

"May I see your Israeli ID-card?" asks the young female passport officer after a lengthy gaze into the computer screen.

I answer that I do not have an Israeli ID-card, that I am a Swedish citizen and always have been.

"You are in Israeli inhabitant", she says as if talking to a child caught being mischievous.

"I lived here for two years, forty-five years ago", I answer.

"You still live here, " she says laconically and slowly inscribes onto my Swedish passport, across the Israeli exit stamp, the word "inhabitant" in Hebrew and a number from the computer screen.

She might as well have said: "You will never leave Israel".

I fear that she could be right.

This is the newly written epilogue to the third Swedish edition of Göran Rosenberg's book Det förlorade landet ("The Lost Land", Albert Bonnier Förlag, 2007)

¹ In the pogrom of Kielce, forty Jews (out of two hundred returning after the war) were killed by an anti-Semitic mob. They were clubbed, stoned, kicked, shot, and killed. In a subsequent wave of pogrom violence, more Jews were killed all over Poland. See Jan T. Gross: *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*, Princeton University Press 2006.

² Already in 1946 Hanna Arendt warned of the development of a suicidal attitude in the nascent Jewish State: "Some of the Zionist leaders pretend to believe that the Jews can maintain themselves in Palestine against the whole world and that themselves can persevere in claiming everything or nothing against everybody and everything. However, behind this spurious optimism lurks a despair of everything and a genuine readiness for suicide that can become extremely dangerous should they grow to be the mood and atmosphere of Palestinian politics." Arendt: "The Jewish State", quoted in Kohn and Feldman (ed): Hannah Arendt: *The Jewish Writings*, Schocken Books, New York 2007.

³ Anatol Rapoport: *The Origins of Violence*, Transaction Publishers 1995, p 36 ff.

⁴ From Claes Andersson: *Rumskamrater* (Room Mates), Bonniers 1975.

⁵ So the Israeli historian Benny Morris, who after having done extensive research on the assaults on the Arab population in connection with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and thereby realized the extent of the injustice done (Morris 1993), has come to the conclusion that the Palestinians will never become a "partner for peace" and that Israel therefore for the foreseeable has no choice but to keep them down.

⁶ In November 2006 the right-wing nationalist Avigdor Lieberman was appointed vice prime minister of Israel and minister for "strategic threats", implying the potential nuclear threat from Iran. Among those giving out warnings for a new Holocaust is Benny Morris: "Der

Zweite Holocaust", *Die Welt*, 6.1.2007,
http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article706570/Der_zweite_Holocaust.html

- ⁷ One example is the branding of the Jewish–British historian Tony Judt by Alvin H Rosenfeld: "Progressive Jewish Thought and the New Anti–Semitism", American Jewish Committee, Dec 2006. A forceful argument against claims of a new anti–Semitism is made by Steven Beller in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2007: "In Zion's hall of mirrors: a comment on 'Neuer Antisemitismus?'"
- ⁸ "Israels självmordspolitik", *Dagens Nyheter* 29.4.04. In Swedish at <http://www.rosenberg.se/kolumnsjalvmordspolitik.htm>
- ⁹ In the Hebrew original: *Lenatzeah et Hitler*, Yedioth Aharonoth 2007.
- ¹⁰ Ari Shavit: "Leaving The Zionist Ghetto", *Ha'aretz* 7.6.07,
<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/868385.html>.

Published 2007–11–09

Original in Swedish

First published in *Det förlorade landet*, Albert Bonnier Förlag, 2007 (Swedish version)

© Göran Rosenberg

© Eurozine