

Moments with Menahem

This is a very special event, and I would like to express my gratitude to have been included in it, even though all I can contribute are a few reminiscences of brief moments, spread well over forty years, which nevertheless have left an indelible imprint on my outlook on 'my enemy'. It has already been a few years since my wife Lucy and I last met with Ronit and Menahem over a friendly dinner at their home on the eastern slopes of Mevasseret Ziyon, on the eve, so to speak, of the dark viral era that began to spread around us, and that has since then somehow lingered lethally in a different form. There was gloominess in the atmosphere over dinner, one that accompanied my wife and myself as we drove home afterwards. 'This is not what we signed in for' was the electric sentence he said over dinner and that seemed to capture the mood that evening, a sentence my wife still vividly recollects.

As I said on a previous occasion, I first met Professor Ya'ari when he paid me a surprise home visit in the old city in the aftermath of Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982. The PLO in Lebanon was the target of that war, but so were the budding university campuses in the occupied Palestinian territories, where Israel, in a move reminiscent of what we today witness on American campuses, issued military orders by which it believed it could contain the sprouting nationalism of Palestinian youth in those territories. Did these orders conflict with basic academic values? Professor Ya'ari led a team of concerned Israeli academics to look into these orders, our responses to them, and to write a report about that. During those turbulent times when universities were often shut down or professors barred from entry or from teaching, concerned Israeli academics had started volunteering to give classes at Birzeit, where I happened to have just started work a couple of years earlier. I am sure that different bridges of mutual interest across the green line were anyway in full swing by that time, or since 1967, especially in the trade and labor sectors, but here was a specific and critical point of friction between the two sides where it was common values among academic

professionals from both sides that were of primary concern, and that drew them together. I call it a 'critical' point because this academic interaction slowly encouraged the budding of an internal discourse within the broiling Palestinian campuses among students and academic staff that eventually led to the articulation of a practical political aspiration for the nationalist cause. Those days, you will also recall, witnessed the first near half-million Peace Now demonstration calling on the Israeli Army to return to its base from southern Lebanon in the aftermath of Sabra and Shatila, and on the Israeli government to make peace with neighbors as the answer to security. All-out wars must be a last resort, as the so-called Officers Letter to Shamir said. For a few, or from a bird eye's view, it began to look like tentative steps of common values and practical mutual interests were beginning to reach out to one another, bringing the two sides closer. As fate would paradoxically have it, the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon which sparked the above-mentioned nationalist turmoil in the occupied territories turned out to have been just another step in bringing the PLO leadership into that budding discourse, and into the territories themselves!

Later, when the Washington talks began, tens of academics and professionals from both sides engaged each other in discussions and joint research to determine in specific and detailed ways how to merge values with mutual interests. Various initiatives were beginning to open up the two societies to one another, but the so-called 'second' or third' negotiation tracks were special because they were the technical laboratories used to identify how and where values and interests converged. Janet Aviad, one of the founders of Peace Now, made full use of the Bronfman Foundation to support these early joint activities, as did the Belgian government on behalf of the Palestinians. It was not long before the Israel Palestine Science Organization, or IPSO, was founded, with Professor Ya'ari and myself becoming deputy chairs of an international Board headed by Nobel laureate Torsten Wiesel and other science luminaries, whose sole purpose was to further encourage joint research in the mutual interest and common values of both sides. Besides Professor Wiesel, Ya'ari was the dynamo who brought all these luminaries

together, and who acted as the moving spirit that kept the machine churning over more than fifteen years. Sadly, I must confess, while Jewish and international organizations became enthusiastic financial and moral supporters of the effort, Arab parties and organizations preferred to look the other way!

As you all know, those were not confidence-building years. Grass-root opportunities were not fully grasped, or they were not properly seized. We have our respective political leaderships to blame for that! Gradually, new openings were outrun by preexisting trends, these being reinforced by a latent counter movement on both sides. Inevitably, what had started as a hopeful surge in academic cooperation was beginning to find itself struggling against the tide. Indeed, among other things, the BDS movement was gaining ground, reaching into the academic world. But we still held on, believing, in Ya'ari fashion, that we must account for the long-term, this hopefully extending into a durable future! Here I must briefly confess to my own take on the subject, probably controversial on all sides: while I thought that the argument of BDS should be made in international academic circles, and international academics should make their own reasoned decisions about them, and be respected for these whatever they were, the case between Israeli and Palestinian academics should be kept out of the circuit, and indeed, cooperation between the two sides should be continued and intensified. It is only bridges that can be built between the two sides, however difficult the endeavor, that can eventually bring them together. Reasoned discourse must not be allowed to lose its sway. Encouraged by Professor Yaari I co-signed as President of al-Quds University at the time with the President of the Hebrew University a pledge of continued cooperation. I later defended my position before a large university audience, but while my arguments were respectfully received, they did not stand up to an increasingly prevalent mood of general wariness of all peace efforts.

Profesor Yaari and I shared many moments during those years across Europe and the United States, either attending science conferences, appealing to foundations, or holding meetings with members of the Board where they

pored over joint project applications by Israelis and Palestinians. My contribution as a non-scientist was minimal. But in the back of my head two issues that always figured were political value and equity, the latter meaning that proposed budgets be evenly divided between the two sides. You must therefore imagine my delight when, in one of those early meetings, Professor Yaari insisted from the word go that budgets should be divided two thirds for the Palestinian side, and one third to the Israeli. He explained that, in terms of laboratories and equipment, Palestinian scientists are disadvantaged and therefore needed more support to build up their capacity. The Board naturally concurred.

Let me with a final few words sum up the cumulative effect on me of all these and similar moments: In fact, perhaps one word will do as much as another, and that is 'comfort'! What is comfort in the context of a relationship with the enemy? It is that, notwithstanding all the painful and traumatic circumstances that envelop who you or the other are, or figuratively represent, you could still find a path through the blinding maze where you could find human solace in looking the other in the eye. You might also detect the outlying traces of fear or weakness there; but the solace and comfort you feel assures you that you are allies, not enemies. Naturally, this sense of comfort cannot turn the tables round, but it is a human chord that may keep the flicker of humanity alive.

Thank you!