

cc sent to Rabbi Maurice Lamm -
6/7/71

In one of my recent letters to you I rather belittled the Israeli version of the Black Panthers. On further study and personal confrontation, I have reached quite different conclusions. It seems to me now that there is no room for disparagement or patronising and we had better take the matter seriously, with a view to encouraging every kind of constructive effort before the situation gets out of hand.

The immediate occasion for my change of judgement was a debate held under the joint auspices of the Panthers and the Hebrew University students. I attended the meeting and feel that it calls for a full report to you, which I propose to give in the following.

Before doing so, however, I must make a reservation. I was profoundly stirred by what I heard and saw. Indeed, I find it hard to recall a similarly disturbing experience outside the scope of my personal concerns. I therefore wish to inject a note of caution lest I am carried away by subjective impressions. Actually, there was nothing novel either for me or for you or for any one else who has followed social developments in Israel. We have all been long familiar with the problems discussed - or shall I say, bursting out with tremendous vehemence on that particular occasion. But the emotional impact on me and the entire audience was overpowering, and I have already observed that note has been taken with surprising promptness in some important quarters - by Pinhas Sapir, Teddy Kollek and in the Knesset, to mention only the more outstanding examples.

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the press coverage was grotesquely inadequate and you should not be misled by any nonchalant items which may come to your attention. You know that the ordinary newspaper is interested above all in sensations that lend themselves to big headlines. Had the meeting broken up in violence, as it threatened to do at one stage, you can be sure that the papers would have carried a full story - they did so in connection with the recent demonstration. But a mere debate is not newsworthy...

Now to the subject matter itself. Ever since that by now famous first demonstration - a modest affair as demonstrations go - through which the Panthers thrust themselves into the arena, public opinion has been agitated. There have been echoes in various places, including the Tel Aviv slum quarter Shechanat Hatikva, where the young went on a rampage last Friday night, basically of the kind, if on a lesser scale, well known to you from Black neighbourhoods in American cities. One outcome of the unrest in Jerusalem was that the Hebrew University students organization arranged together with the Panthers to give a

full airing to the issues at stake. The meeting took place last week at the Wise Auditorium (which prompted one Panther to declare, to thunderous applause - "At last, we have made it to the university!"). There had been no prior publicity, except for notices on the campus. Even so, an overflow audience of about 1,000 turned ~~up~~ up, consisting of students and members of the so-called Oriental communities in roughly equal numbers.

After a few brief, and clumsy, introductory statements by the Panther leaders, a debate ensued which lasted four hours. There were close on sixty (sic) speakers, all rigorously restricted by the chairmana student to 3 - 4 minutes. Despite the length of time attention was unabated right to the end, and no wonder. Those who took the floor were all highly articulate and forceful - the Panthers no less so than the students notwithstanding the crudity of their language (for which one of their number apologized). Passions ran high and the public was not easy to control. You know what an Israeli audience is like, but here it was much more so. This was no occasion for a reasoned exchange of views in a rarified academic atmosphere, but an irresistible outburst of pent-up feeling with a lot of hyperbolic language. People had no patience for dissenting opinions and the chairman had to use all his skill to keep proceedings going. I have never had an opportunity to watch a revolution from close quarters. However, I would venture to say that such must be the mood when crowds take the law into their own hands. Anything could have happened that evening.

Discussion focussed on four separate, though interconnected, subjects - juvenile delinquency, pockets of poverty, frustration of the non-Ashkenazis, and politics. This, to be sure, is my post mortem analysis. In the minds of the audience it was all one ~~incoherent~~ conglomerate and the few attempts made to bring some order into this intellectual chaos were doomed to failure. But then, you could not expect reasoned argument in what was essentially a protest rally.

As the whole turmoil was started by the Panthers, the issue of juvenile delinquency loomed very large, probably out of its proper proportion. According to police reports, the rate of such delinquency is constantly growing, but non-Israelis, especially Americans, should be warned against imagining a situation which would be comparable to conditions in Western countries. In any event, the Musrara slum of Jerusalem certainly does have a substantial number of youths who have been in and out of prisons and reformatories several times and feel their disabilities keenly. Through a variety of circumstances they have made themselves, or become, the spokesmen of Israel's underprivileged generally, who happen to be for the most part non-Ashkenazis.

In point of fact, Musrara has long been recognized as a trouble spot and hot bed for disruptive elements. You may recall that no other than Lou Horowitz initiated a special rehabilitation project several years ago, in co-operation with all interested bodies. These efforts, for whatever reasons, did not produce the hoped-for results. Indeed, as one social worker remarked in the debate, there has been general failure in coping with juvenile delinquency throughout the country.

It is all very much like a vicious circle. Children growing up in

extreme poverty easily turn to delinquency. Once they have convictions - "a past", as Hebrew slang puts it - they are not accepted by the army, which has quite sufficient problems in dealing with normal sabras. As a further consequence, they find it hard to get a decent job because, as a rule, Israeli employers want to see the army book of applicants. Some speakers even asserted in the discussion they were weeded out from vocational training schools by the police. All this happens while the country is experiencing an acute shortage of labour. If those who complain wanted to accept unskilled work, they could be placed in no time. But the fact is that they refuse "dirty" or "black" jobs, even though they lack the qualifications for higher-grade employment.

In recounting their frustrations, and blaming them on "the Ashkenazis", the Panther speakers resorted to a remarkable line. One after the other got up and proudly proclaimed to have been in prison so and so many times - which earned them stormy applause from the audience. They evidently relished the role of martyrs and/or heroes. (Incidentally, ~~there~~ there was not a single reference in the course of four hours to the fact that juvenile delinquency is by no means confined to slums, but is making alarming progress in well-established middle class suburbs of Tel Aviv and elsewhere. The public as well as the Panthers unquestioningly accepted the (false) contention that delinquency, poverty and Oriental origin must be equated.)

Even more remarkable was an odd mixture of self-pity and self-glorification on the one hand and of an honest desire to find a way back to respectable society, on the other hand. The leaders made it very clear that no one will be accepted as a Panther, unless he commits himself to refrain from delinquency of any description. They passionately asked for rehabilitation, above all for education. This one demand came up again and again. It by far overshadowed all other concrete demands, including the one for better housing.

Perhaps equally remarkable was the emphatic disclaimer, repeated countless times - to the obvious displeasure of some of the students present, that the Panthers had any connection with or sympathy for Matzpen (the Israeli Maoist group), which has been trying for some time to take the Panthers under its wings. (More will be said about this aspect of the problem further below.)

Before leaving the subject of the Black Panthers, it may be worth mentioning why they chose this particular name. The group had in fact been active before under a variety of different labels, but without arousing any special interest from outsiders. It was only, the leaders explained, when they adopted the present colourful name that they caught the public's fancy...

Turning now to the subject of poverty in Israel generally, which formed the second issue of the debate, the Panthers really acted only as catalysts. Numerous social workers, community workers, teachers and the rank and file of the Orientals who spoke up took the opportunity to express their anger with the way the situation is allowed to drag on without,

as they see it, any determined action on the part of the authorities. There was a great deal of bitterness on account of the preferential treatment accorded to immigrants, relative to the earlier arrivals who have failed to make good. The construction of comparatively spacious, high class houses at Ramot Eshkol, practically within sight of Musrara, aroused particular ire because this quarter is intended for newcomers and "young couples" with some means of their own, and therefore out of reach for the typical slum dweller.

"If you don't have the money to take care of everybody, at least you can distribute the new houses more justly - one for an immigrant and one for an old-timer". This challenge thrown out in the debate accurately reflected the mood of the meeting. Interestingly enough, quite some speakers recognized that housing would not of itself solve the problems of the underprivileged. "These families must be dispersed, not transferred to new slums. They must be given education for the adults as well as youth." Demands of this kind recurred throughout the evening.

At one point, a dramatic illustration of conditions in Musrara was provided when a family of eleven mounted the stage, taking up a position as for a nineteenth century photograph - father, pregnant mother ~~holding~~ holding a baby, and another eight boys and girls from 16 down, including a little one in the arms of one of the girls. When the father started to explain their situation - one bed for three, etc. - and referred to a tenth child "on his way", one of the listeners had the callousness of interjecting "Don't you have The Pill?" This all but brought the house down. Scores of Fathers tried to get at the heckler and their leaders had a hard time in restraining them. "For God's sake, let's behave and show them that we can act like humans. We are no beasts." Admonishments of this kind eventually succeeded in restoring relative calm. Then the father proceeded to describe his sundry efforts to secure better accommodation. He produced four or five letters from various official bodies which he gave his big son to read out - the man himself being illiterate. (The boy too appeared to be rather a poor reader.) It transpired that the first communication was from Amidar, referring the applicant to some welfare ^{office}, which passed the matter on to another body, and so on until the man ~~was~~ sent back to Amidar - to no avail, of course - closing the circle.

The third theme - the communal gap - intruded constantly and obstinately on whatever was said. Here was a subject with which all the "Orientals" in the hall (many of whom happened to be anything like disadvantaged) could readily and unreservedly identify. Many speakers produced statistics to prove what needed no proof - that the 50 or more percent of Sephardim in Israel were underprivileged, underrepresented in the establishment, and otherwise discriminated against. Pleas for self-help and organization along communal lines - such as were ~~mentioned~~ voiced by a clinical psychologist, himself a self-made man - fell on deaf ears. The majority of the complainants appeared quite comfortable in the role of blaming it all on the Ashkenazis, meanwhile waiting fatalistically for a deus ex machina to come to their help.

The call for communal organization was resisted by a handful of Ashkenazis who courageously braved the hostility of the crowd, explaining that poverty is not confined to any one community. It was also rejected

by a number of Sephardim, including the son of a mixed marriage. ("My father is Sephardi, my mother Ashkenazi - what am I? Do I have spots?")

Characteristically, the old-established Sephardi families - many of the wealthy and well-entrenched socially - came in for indignant criticism. So did the relatively recent immigrants who had managed to integrate satisfactorily. They were termed "snobs" and accused of withdrawing into their own shell or being "bought" by the Ashkenazim. Some poignant examples came to light of the failure of success in "merging the exiles". (Is not there a similar phenomenon in the United States with regard to the Black middle classes?)

Critics were on firmer ground in inveighing against the pronouncedly Ashkenazi slant of Hebrew education in Israel. They resented the stress laid on Bialik, Tshernikovski and other representatives of Eastern European literature to the almost complete exclusion of Sephardi poets and writers, except for the Rambam. Even the latter, they claimed, received but a cursory treatment.

They went on to protest that "they" (i.e. the Ashkenazim) reject "our" values and traditions. This argument, while correct up to a point, shot far beyond the mark. As every Israeli knows, immigrants from Moslem countries evinced an almost indecent hurry in shedding their distinctive customs and heritage - in a frantic attempt at Westernizing. (This process of catching up is, of course, inevitable and by no means confine to Israel.)

In any event, the concrete demands formulated with great insistence amounted to the provision of more and better qualified teachers and of school equipment equal to that available in Ashkenazi neighbourhoods.

A painful sense of self-negation permeated the entire debate, conflicting gratefully with the burning desire for betterment. Several Sephardi speakers castigated the tendency of aping the frills of Western civilization, while being unable to absorb its essentials. A young Yemenite recalled how every boy in "the old land" aspired above all to excel in Tora studies in contrast to the overpowering pursuit of material achievements in Israel. But most ended up by holding the Ashkenazim responsible for their frustrations. The general sense of bewilderment found perhaps its most telling expression in a quip attributed to Golda Meier - "One who does not speak Yiddish is only half a Jew".

Nevertheless and somewhat paradoxically, the consensus of opinion which emerged strikingly was ~~the~~ the regaining of self-respect. As one Panther put it succinctly - "We are no longer the scum of the earth". In this one sentence he summarized not only the feelings of his own group, but of the non-Ashkenazim as a whole.

In passing, the reference to the non-Ashkenazim "as a whole" requires a reservation. The well-known tensions among the various Sephardi communities repeatedly came to the surface. The Moroccans, reputed to be particularly hot-blooded, aggressive and articulate, bitterly berated the Persians, Kurds, Yemenites and others for their alleged meekness. There was an undeniable element of mutual recrimination, which prompted one

Ashkenazi to volunteer the advice -"Before attacking us, first put your own house in order".

Not surprisingly, if quite alarmingly, acrimonious criticism was levelled against the wide-spread concern about the fate of Soviet Jewry and the very special efforts being made to ease the absorption of arrivals from Russia. It was likewise asserted (unjustly) that the Baghdad hangings had produced no comparable reaction. Attempts to put the record straight made no impact. As often in such situations, it is not the facts that matter, but subjective impressions. In a similar vein a remark about the great material help of American Jewry evoked the rejoinder -"True. But then you (meaning the students) come here and take it away from us again". A propos the measures taken to boost the birth rate, one Panther exclaimed-"If this is the life you have to offer us, save yourselves the trouble".

Over and over again, threats were uttered (or rather warnings) of what lay ahead for the country when peace came. "Today we are sitting on a volcano. The lid is kept on the pressure cooker only by external dangers. The situation is apt to explode when calm returns. To solve the problems of Musrara you don't need the United Nations - you are simply not interested."

Social workers and similar professionals as well as ordinary Ashkenazis who took part in the debate reacted with a mixture of perplexity, frustration, pragmatism and wishful thinking. There emerged no single common attitude. On the one hand, calls were issued for volunteers to help in youth clubs, community centres and other institutions. On the other hand, teachers remonstrated that coaching was not enough in the absence of more basic remedies. One acute but disgruntled social field worker explained with a great deal of heat why he had given up his job in despair. He had had a case load of 500 families in Mattamon - another of Jerusalem's immigrant slums - and was expected to act merely as "a fire brigade", dealing exclusively with explosive situations while neglecting all preventive work or true rehabilitation. Echoing what had been claimed in another context, the policy was, he charged, to buy off trouble makers.

It might be mentioned, incidentally, that a handful of young Americans, some students and some professionals, also spoke up. Their Hebrew was on a remarkable level and their involvement and identification with Israel carried profound conviction. They reminded one of the halutz movement in its hey-day.

The chairman of the meeting, and of the students organization, in a brief and pithy summing up, admitted that he and his fellows had hitherto failed to see the problem in its true proportions, and was jolted into taking an interest only by the recent demonstration. He committed his organization to setting up a joint committee with the Panthers to work out practical steps for direct help. He also announced a further meeting to be held on April 5 for discussing "tachliss", without politics.

The latter stipulation aroused mixed reactions. As hinted above, a variety of political groups - above all Matzpen, but apparently also Communists and the New Left - it was hard for an outsider to distinguish between them - had a field day in trying to interpret the grievances in terms of their respective ideologies. They kept protesting against charity and assured the house that nothing but a "change of regime" could cure the ills. They also managed to smuggle in pleas for the Palestinians and protests against "the cruel suppression in the Gaza strip" - only to be booed down by the public. At the same time, their vitriolic attacks on the Government, and in particular the Jewish Agency, struck a warmly responsive chord. They had no difficulty in persuading their listeners that the authorities were only bent on "enriching the capitalists", though choosing as evidence for this the subsidies granted to pioneer industrial ventures in development towns. How much of this was calculated demagoguery is not easy to tell. Most of the protesters seemed honestly convinced of their reading of the situation. This, then, was the fourth issue which kept cropping up, ~~making the crowd's~~ making the crowd's confusion more confounded.

It must be repeated that the Panther leaders emphatically dissociated themselves from Matzpen, their would-be sponsors. Neither did they spare the whole spectrum of political parties from "socialist Mapam" to their self-styled protector Gahal. They reminded Begin of his vote-snatching sorties to Musrara and accused him of taking refuge in the Knesset cafeteria while the House was debating the problem of poverty.

Though rejecting "politics", including the Second Israel movement of Dr. Yardeni, as any other country-wide organization, they resolved to become a pressure group. The advice tendered by Matzpen speakers that "only violence will produce results" did not go unheeded. But such advice was scarcely needed. They left the audience in no doubt that they had learned a lesson from the Ashdod stevedores, and indeed from the countless other strikes backed by the Histadrut. On top of which they made much of the Prime Minister's declaration of sympathy and promise of aid on the eve of their threatened demonstration. Meanwhile they asked for practical support from the students and any other group, not excluding Matzpen.

If the present report appears replete with contradictions, this is but a reflection of the state of affairs. No useful purpose would be served by oversimplifying matters. While the problem does not lend itself to any ready-made solution, and money alone will obviously not do the trick yet there can be no question that substantial funds are required at least to alleviate the worst hardships and head off uglier developments.

In conclusion, let me express my sense of encouragement which I gained, perhaps paradoxically, from watching the Black Panthers. If these intelligent, honest, plucky and remarkably self-restrained youths are the outcasts of Israel's society, there is small wonder at our military superiority in terms of human material. And if the students of whatever ideological complexion continue to react they way they did on this occasion, I can only say that here we have a genuine grass-root

democracy. Even more significant, despite all appearances to the contrary, the distinctive ethos of Judaism is still very much alive in "secularized" Israel.

Warm personal regards and a joyous Pessach.

PS. Since finishing this letter I have learned that the Prime Minister addressed a meeting of North African immigrants with unmistakable concern and Pincus endeavoured on the same occasion to give them a pat on the back. I also read in the morning papers that seven members of the Second Israel group (referred to above) yesterday, in somewhat melodramatic fashion, chained themselves to the Knesset gates, but were removed by the guards.