

Israeli Women's Movement Follows A Lesson Taken From Aristophanes

by Dean Andromidas

In the Seventh Century B.C., Sparta asked Athens to send a great general to aid them in their war against the Messenians; the Athenians, in their wisdom, sent Tyrtaeus, the crippled poet, whose poems inspired the Spartan soldiers on to victory. Two centuries later, when Athens and Sparta led two opposing factions in a bitter civil war which almost destroyed Greece, another poet, Aristophanes, the insightful writer of ancient comedies, used the power of poetry in an effort to bring peace. In his masterpiece, *Lysistrata*, the women of Athens and Sparta waged a campaign for peace with the strategy of denying their husbands their conjugal rights. The strategy brought the men to their senses, and they established peace, as Aristophanes writes, "Made by the power of Love." Aristophanes used the poetical principle that lies at the center of true humor in order to create within his audience, the conception that only through an act of love, could peace be brought to Greece.

A movement among the women of Israel today has taken a lesson from Aristophanes. Although not using precisely the tactics of his heroine, Lysistrata, they hope to become a powerful force for peace where the political leadership, dominated by men, has miserably failed.

The first manifestation of this poetic principle, was the 53 Israeli reserve soldiers and officers signing the now-famous "Combatants Letter," refusing to serve in the Israeli occupied territories. Since the letter first appeared at the end of January, close to 400 soldiers have signed; 10 are already serving prison terms. One, Itai Haviv, a reserve captain in the artillery corps, wrote a statement expressing why he signed the letter:

"I accuse you, Palestinians, of crossing all the red lines, in your struggle for freedom. Of not raising your voice when your brothers exploded and crushed the essence of humanity.

"I accuse myself. I was silent in face of the occupation. I accuse us of ruling another people. Of being indifferent to the suffering of others, despite our persecuted past. . . . Of being afraid. Afraid of shouting too loud. Afraid to pay a personal price to defend the moral image of this land. Of betraying the human dignity of others and ourselves. Of crushing the right of freedom."

Captain Haviv's statement is poetic, and an act of love. The moral impact of these few soldiers struck a powerful chord among growing numbers of Israeli wives, mothers, and

sisters, who not only fear for the men they love, but more importantly, fear the destruction of those virtues for which they love their husbands, sons, and brothers. They have begun to take action.

Potential Ally in Senator Mitchell

In an interview appearing recently in the *Palestinian Report*, former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, who is trying to make peace in Palestine and Israel, spoke of his own personal experience when he played the role of peacemaker in Northern Ireland. At one point, after violence had brought talks to a crashing halt, "a very unique and interesting thing happened. Irish women, on both sides of the conflict, intervened. They intervened with their families, they intervened institutionally, and they made their views known. Without the leadership of women in Northern Ireland, there would have been no political solution and we would have had more bombs. When the women of Israel and the women of Palestine get together and demand peace, and demand an end to violence, then we will have a political solution."

The "Lysistrata" movement is complex. One mother who signed a petition in support of the Combatants Letter was Ofra Mayerson, mother of more than one reserve officer, and wife of retired Gen. Rafael Eitan, a leading right-wing personality in Israel, Ariel Sharon's former chief of staff, and founder of the ultra-right Tsomet Party. General Eitan has withdrawn from politics but has not changed his own political views. Mayerson told the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, "I try to convince everyone that I know not to enlist, to refuse!" Her son's reaction was to say, "Mom, you're bothering me," she related. "It's hard for me, knowing that I'm disturbing my sons, because this month, they're both going to reserve duty, and they need mothers and wives and girlfriends who will keep their mouths shut . . . and greet them happily when they return on furlough and feed them and iron for them and be proud of them. But I'm 'bothering' my sons."

Shoshan Brosh-Weitz, of the group called Re'ot (Friends)—mothers, wives, and girlfriends who support the signers of the Combatants Letter—told *Ha'aretz* that she uses more aggressive tactics which she calls "pedagogy from a distance. . . . Calling them all the time on their cell phones, sending them letters, writing them candid letters." She says

Israeli War Economy Implodes

The value of goods and services in the Israeli Gross National Product is approximately \$100 billion, so that a \$1 billion loss represents about 1%. Last year, Israel lost 41 billion shekels (\$8.5 billion) in these areas, meaning a loss of 8.5% in national product, according to the daily *Ma'ariv* on March 15. That loss is the equivalent to the entire education budget plus all transfer payments for the needy; six times greater than the state budget for public security. This is not just the result of the Intifada, which has added 4.9 billion shekels in security expenditures.

Ma'ariv journalist Yossi Greenstein reports that Israel has plunged, within months, "to depression, . . . thrown into the deepest recession in 50 years."

- In 2000, the Israeli economy grew by 6.4%. In 2001, the economy shrank by 0.5%.
- Production in the business sector shot up 8.5% in 2000. It dropped 2.2% in 2001. Industrial production grew by 11% in 2000. In 2001, it dropped 6%. High-tech production grew by 26% in 2000. In 2001, it dropped by 24%.
- In 2000, the per-capita national product rose 3.6%. In 2001 it dropped 3%.

- Investment in the Israeli economy in 2000 grew by 9.5%. In 2001 it dropped by 11%. Foreign investors withdrew \$1.2 billion from the Tel Aviv market in 2001. Direct investments in the economy (factories, businesses, and real estate) dropped in 2001 by 33%, to \$3 billion.

- Compared with 46,100 building starts in 2000, there were only 31,700 starts in 2001, a 31% drop. Building sector production overall, in 2001, dropped 11%. Investments in the building sector dropped 16%. Real estate transactions dropped by 12%.

- Israeli farmers suffer from a shortage of workers, due to the closure of the West Bank and Gaza to Palestinians. Foreign workers are being imported from Thailand and China, but are not as effective.

- The number of unemployed jumped from 40,000 to an all-time record of 260,000, and unemployment is expected to cross the 10% barrier, reaching 300,000 by the end of 2002.

- Purchases of new cars dropped 0.5% in 2001; sales of electrical appliances dropped 10%, after a rise of 17% in 2000.

The Finance Ministry had projected growth of 4.5% in 2001, but, as noted above, the economy contracted by 0.5%. Bank of Israel Governor David Klein said growth would be 0% in 2002. The expected loss of 8.5% of the national product will lead to a 14 billion shekel drop in tax revenue, and consequent increase in the budget deficit. 2002 is another lost year.

women can change the situation if we "teach ourselves to interfere and nag. . . . Let us interfere, let us tell him what to do." Brosh-Weitz relates how during her husband's last reserve duty, she went and stood guard with him at a roadblock. At that time, she did not have a sign, but "today I'd go with a megaphone and stand there with slogans like 'Muli, I'm worried about you. Service in the territories is corrupting your virtues;' or, 'At the checkpoint you're going to, soldiers have killed, babies and sick people have died, people have been humiliated. Does this suit you?'"

According to *Ha'aretz*, when Brosh-Weitz asked her husband how he would react if she were to make good her threat, he replied, "It would disturb my work as a commander, and my functioning and that of my soldiers, so I would have no choice but to come home with you."

Ha'aretz on March 15 also quoted another Israel activist, Tamara Rabinowitz, who lost her son in the military: "Zionism is about building, establishing, creating, defending, but the words we hear now are 'destroying,' 'encircling,' 'cleansing,' 'burning,' 'assassinating.' It is totally counter to Judaism, which to me means humanism and the sanctification of life. It's anti-Jewish to believe and act as if land can be more

important than human life. . . . The order that sends soldiers to serve in the territories means making them have no choice but to commit acts that are neither humanist or moral, because the sanctity of life doesn't mean the sanctity of our lives and no one else's."

Sharon's 'Consensus' Collapsed

In recent months, many groups like Re'ot have been formed. Another, called Profil Hadash, founded in 1998, is committed to "demilitarizing" Israeli society. Its charter declares, "While taught to believe that the country is faced by threats beyond its control, we now realize that the words 'national security' have often masked calculated decisions to choose military action for the achievement of political goals. We are no longer willing to take part in such choices."

Not all the women's groups support the reserve soldiers who refuse to serve in the territories. In fact the question of refusal continues to be controversial within the peace camp. The recently formed Seventh Day movement—which does not support the "Combatants' Letter" reservists—is expected to have a great impact on public opinion. The movement is an outgrowth of the Four Mothers movement which was

IDF Accused of War Crimes, Looting

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) officers and soldiers were accused again of war crimes, and for the first time, of looting—always a sign of military demoralization—during the invasions and partial destruction of Palestinian refugee camps and cities in March.

Speaking on March 19 to French parliamentarians visiting Palestine, Rene Kosirnik, the head of the Red Cross in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, said the IDF had committed war crimes on a large scale, and “wantonly and crudely trampled” the Fourth Geneva Convention which forbids such crimes. Kosirnik judges that in his 25 years in the field, he has not seen anything like it. In the recent period, four doctors, as well as medics and Palestinian ambulance drivers, have been seriously wounded, while others have been “murdered,” he said. “I was shocked and deeply hurt. I expected much more of the IDF. Nothing justifies such behavior.” Kosirnik said he has yet to see any evidence to back up the IDF’s charges that ambulances are used to aid Palestinian fighters to carry out their attacks.

The IDF command has, in the past, come down hard on the most despicable of war crimes: looting, rape, and massacres. But even this is starting to change. *Ha’aretz*

correspondent Amira Hass reports that in the latest military operations, Israeli soldiers engaged in widespread vandalism and looting. In one particularly serious case, the cardiology department at the Ramallah Hospital was vandalized extensively by the Israeli soldiers who occupied it during the attacks on the city. Files were strewn all over the offices, valuable and irreplaceable medical equipment was destroyed, and computer disk drives were stolen.

In addition, according to reports, during the occupations of the Palestinian cities and camps, there was widespread theft, including of computers, video cameras, and other valuables—even, in some cases, a few shekels found in the houses of refugees when they were being searched for “terrorists.”

Hass writes, “The Palestinians have concluded that the IDF has gone through a major change. Human rights activists and ordinary people say they never encountered soldiers who stole out of homes during the first Intifada [in 1987]. In recent days, as residents paid condolence calls on families with relatives killed during the incursion, the topic of the day was, what kind of army allows its soldiers to commit vandalism. After all, a tank bumping into an electric pole . . . is not the same as a soldier deliberately smashing a television owned by a family with four children. . . . People do notice the soldiers who behave humanely . . . but draw the conclusion that those soldiers and officers have no influence over those who find the opportunity . . . to destroy, vandalize, and even steal.”

formed in the 1990s by mothers who demanded that Israel withdraw from southern Lebanon, a goal that was eventually attained. The Seventh Day movement calls for unilateral withdrawal from the territories occupied since the June 1967 war.

Just as the reservists are also lawyers, doctors, bus drivers, or farmers, the “Lysistratas” include university professors, professionals, trade unionists, and some women with former professional military and security careers themselves. They can have a profound impact on Israel, especially now that the 18 months of the Intifada, with its unbearable death toll, is having a profound impact on public consciousness.

The failure of the Sharon government to bring about security, and the collapse of the Israeli economy, have led to the crumbling of the “consensus” that brought Sharon to power. A recent survey published in the daily *Ma’ariv*, showed that 60% of the voters support the establishment of a Palestinian state and for Israel to evacuate some of the settlements, while 35% favor a compromise on the status of Jerusalem.

But the Likud-Labor unity government has not collapsed. The Labor Party members, led by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, remain

“firmly glued,” commentators say, to their cabinet seats.

In the face of this lack of national leadership, grassroots groups have taken shape, the most significant being those of the soldiers and women, because they are openly challenging the norms of Israeli politics and society. Nonetheless, the failure of a powerful national leadership to emerge, and the fact that the Bush Administration continues to support Sharon, make the situation ever more dangerous. For Sharon, the real danger is not Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, but this growing movement in Israel which threatens the nightmares Sharon holds in store for the Middle East.

Commentator Yuli Tamir warned in *Ha’aretz* on March 24 that “the suspicion will grow that the defined aim of the Israeli government—‘mopping up the territory’ followed by ‘readiness for painful concessions’—is meant to soften public opposition to a series of military actions that will have the purpose of foiling a future political move. If this suspicion turns out to be correct, it will be . . . an act that is liable to lead to Israel’s destruction as a Jewish democratic state.”

Sensing this danger, the women of Israel hope for the same success as those in Aristophanes’ play, who brought peace to all of Greece.