

An Israeli Hero Calls for Justice

by Michele Steinberg

On Aug. 29, a powerful statement of conscience from Avraham Burg, an Israeli Labor Party Knesset (parliament) member who had served as Speaker of the Knesset (1999-2003), was published on the front page of *The Forward*, the national Jewish newspaper in the United States. The article is entitled "A Failed Israeli Society Collapses While Its Leaders Remain Silent."

Like Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's heroic statement in September 1993 following the signing of the Oslo Accords, in which he toasted "those with the courage to change axioms," Burg's essay is a call for peace. He writes: "The Zionist revolution has always rested on two pillars: a just path and an ethical leadership. Neither of these is operative any longer. The Israeli nation today rests on a scaffolding of corruption, and on foundations of oppression and injustice. As such, the end of the Zionist enterprise is already on our doorstep. There is a real chance that ours will be the last Zionist generation. There may yet be a Jewish state here, but it will be a different sort, strange and ugly.

"There is time to change course, but not much. What is needed is a new vision of a just society and the political will to implement it. Nor is this merely an internal Israeli affair. Diaspora Jews for whom Israel is a central pillar of their identity must pay heed and speak out. If the pillar collapses, the upper floors will come crashing down."

Burg's article has been published on hundreds, if not thousands, of websites, in English and other languages. It is being widely discussed in the United States.

On Sept. 13, 1993, at the White House signing of the Oslo Accords, Prime Minister Rabin surprised nearly everyone when he addressed Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian people directly: "We who have come from a land where parents bury their children, we who have fought against you, the Palestinians, we say to you today in a loud and clear voice: Enough of blood and tears, enough!"

In response to critics who said he should not have shaken Arafat's hand at the White House ceremony, Rabin scoffed, saying, "You make peace with your enemies, not with your friends."

It is in this spirit that Burg addressed his fellow citizens, during one of the darkest hours, when, following targeted assassinations of Palestinian leaders by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), a suicide terrorist killed 19 Israelis, including

children, on a bus in Jerusalem.

Burg decries the silence in the face of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy of killing. "The opposition does not exist," he writes, "and the coalition, with Arik Sharon at its head, claims the right to remain silent. In a nation of chatterboxes, everyone has suddenly fallen dumb, because there's nothing left to say. We live in a thunderously failed reality. Yes, we have revived the Hebrew language, created a marvelous theater, and a strong national currency. Our Jewish minds are as sharp as ever. We are traded on the Nasdaq. But is this why we created a state? The Jewish people did not survive for two millennia in order to pioneer new weaponry, computer security programs, or anti-missile missiles. We were supposed to be a light unto the nations. In this we have failed.

"It turns out that the 2,000-year struggle for Jewish survival comes down to a state of settlements, run by an amoral clique of corrupt lawbreakers who are deaf both to their citizens and to their enemies. A state lacking justice cannot survive. . . . The countdown to the end of Israeli society has begun. . . . "Even if the Arabs lower their heads and swallow their shame and anger forever, it won't work. A structure built on human callousness will inevitably collapse in on itself. Note this moment well: Zionism's superstructure is already collapsing like a cheap Jerusalem wedding hall. Only madmen continue dancing on the top floor while the pillars below are collapsing."

Burg seems prophetic when he writes, "We have grown accustomed to ignoring the suffering of the women at the roadblocks. No wonder we don't hear the cries of the abused woman living next door or the single mother struggling to support her children in dignity. We don't even bother to count the women murdered by their husbands." Only a few days later, a Palestinian baby died at an Israeli military checkpoint where its mother, a pregnant Palestinian woman, had been detained too long and had given birth.

Burg also warns, "We could kill a thousand ringleaders and engineers a day and nothing will be solved, because the leaders come up from below, from the wells of hatred and anger, from the 'infrastructures' of injustice and moral corruption.

"If all this were inevitable, divinely ordained and immutable, I would be silent. But things could be different, and so crying out is a moral imperative.

"Do you want the greater Land of Israel? No problem. Abandon democracy. Let's institute an efficient system of racial separation here, with prison camps and detention villages. Qalqilya Ghetto and Gulag Jenin.

"Do you want a Jewish majority? No problem. Either put the Arabs on railway cars, buses, camels, and donkeys and expel them en masse or separate ourselves from them absolutely. . . . There is no middle path. We must remove all the settlements, all of them, and draw an internationally recognized border between the Jewish national home and the Palestinian national home."