

Comment

Good fences make good neighbours

Robert Frost

Finding your way out of a Jewish settlement in the occupied territories of the west bank of the Jordan can be a complicated business. In the new settlement of Efrat, about five or ten minutes drive from Bethlehem, a group of British clergymen was advised to make 'a straight circle'. That was to prove an apt assessment of the current Israeli political situation. The previous day's election victory for Yitzhak Rabin's Labour Party had not brought much encouragement to the residents of Efrat. For them Labour's win could mean the difference between stability and displacement. Many people are facing the possibility of an exchange of land for peace, a possibility that appals many members of the Likud party, for whom the West Bank is 'Judaea and Samaria', part of *eretz Israel*, the historic 'Land of Israel' covenanted to them by God. In Israel religious and political claims overlap.

Efrat itself is built, like so many settlements, on a firmly defensive site on the crest of a hill. Any vision of a rough and ready collection of pioneer homesteads should be abandoned immediately. The houses are well-built, fetching high prices on the open market. Supermarkets, a library, schools have sprung up in a very short time testifying to the massive investment in the settlement programme, much of it on borrowed money. Needless to say, if the Palestinian people were to achieve their own independent state Efrat would be part of it. However, as Mr Shamir, the former Prime Minister realised, demography is difficult to argue with. The recent large influx of settlers into the West Bank, many of them eating up the finance stemming from the loan guarantees offered by the United States, has sufficiently muddied the ethnic waters to make disentanglement almost impossible. If Israel is to avoid the fate of other ethnically and culturally mixed communities closer to home what can be done to ease the situation? Are there real prospects for a successful peace?

The visitor to Efrat will notice, amidst the modern buildings constructed of gleaming white Judaeian stone, groves of olives or the odd vineyard or cultivated patch. They are not the allotments of the Jewish settlers, all of whom tend to be occidental in their horticultural preferences with an inordinate devotion to grass. They are the fields and groves of the Arab farmers who have laboured there for centuries. They stand as a mute reminder that another distinctive people also has a stake in this land. In the past four and a half years 1300 Palestinians have died, 80,000 have been injured, 3000 have suffered permanent disability, 125,000 have been detained and 12,000 have endured administrative detention, 1600 homes have been demolished, 120,000

trees uprooted and large amounts of land have been confiscated for Jewish settlers. These figures show the human and material cost of an exclusive emphasis on the right to 'The Land'.

The particularity of the claim of the people of Israel to The Land can only be rendered effective by the acceptance that many other people live in it. The Land cannot be 'purified', the boundaries of the people will never fit the contested boundaries of the land. The particularity of Israel must find a way of living with pluralism. Israel, in an age of fragmenting empires, finds itself faced with similar problems of accommodating different peoples and nations within one sovereign framework.

The Ottoman empire hit on a governmental formula for managing the ethnic and religious diversity of its territories. Each urban community was divided into quarters, it was thus possible to live almost entirely within one's own quarter with only occasional threat or fear. The one place where the members of each different community could meet was the *souk* the market place. There, where goods and ideas could be traded, the various communities learned to live and deal with each other with the minimum of contact. Communities were left with a considerable degree of independence and responsibility for self-government. It was possible to have several jurisdictions within one territorial area. Provided the boundaries were accepted the peace was kept. However, what is in danger of resulting from this is a community of ghettos each insisting on its own narrow particularity.

It is ironic that, as a tide of anti-Semitism sweeps over the newly-liberated countries of Eastern Europe producing an emphasis on national and racial purity, those who have suffered most from this ideal should be faced with finding another way to political stability and national security. As political options contract in some European countries they must necessarily broaden in Israel. One of the key questions facing the various communities of Israel and Palestine is exclusive, narrowly national or religious vision. This question not only affects the Palestinian Muslims, but also their Christian brethren. The Arab world appears to have concluded that Israel is a fact with which it is going to have to come to terms. A feature of any negotiated settlement must involve respect for the rights of the Palestinian communities. It should not be forgotten that in the days of the 'quartering' of Islamic Middle Eastern urban communities part of the price the Jewish and Christian peoples had to pay for toleration was the acceptance of second class status. It would be a sad comment that in an Israeli state, which boasts of its democratic tradition, roles were reversed and Judaism was replaced by Islam in a similar equation. Good fences make good neighbours, but as the book of Leviticus tells us: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Lev. 19:18, 34)

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