

He Called Them "God's Cossacks"

Eliezer Berkovits (Sh'ma 10/183, December 14, 1979)

I heard a man say something the other night which filled me with loathing ... But let me begin elsewhere. Living in Israel one is surprised by the glibness with which occasional visitors from the United States are able to espouse the cause of the Shalom Achshav (Peace Now) movement. The question of peace is the question of Israel's survival. Anyone in the state of Israel who opts for Peace Now or against it, stakes his own life and the life of his children on his option. That gives one's choice its moral validation. But the occasional visitor from America plays with the life of others, unless his attitude is the result of his conviction that his own destiny and that of his children are linked inseparably to the destiny of the state of Israel. In which case, however, one should make a serious study of the question before espousing one or the other course of action. Can one do it on the basis of occasional short visits? I doubt it very much. Prior to our settling in Israel, we came quite often on shorter or longer visits. What I understand today is rather different from what I saw then.

Peace In Israel is a Survival Issue

The American Jew, with a liberal tradition and commitment, visits here in a state of Pavlovian conditioning toward Shalom Achshav. What he usually fails to recognize is that this is not another "Vietnam." The Vietnam issue was not a do-or-die issue for the United States; the problem of peace for Israel is. At the same time, one cannot help wondering what the American peace enthusiasts of the 60's think today of the realization of their ideal in the Kissinger peace that has ultimately led, in South East Asia to the worst genocide, since the Holocaust of European Jewry. The withdrawal of the United States from South Vietnam was a pragmatic necessity; the ideal of peace has been made a mockery by the death of millions through massacre, homelessness, and starvation. It seems, history, i.e. man, does not take kindly to ideals. He uses them chiefly for the achievement of his egoistic power interests. The only people that ever tried to live as a people by ideals are the Jews. They have paid a terrible price for it. In the light of all the rest of history, their survival in spite of it all is the miracle of miracles.

All Israelis Want Peace But At What Price

There is not a single Jew in the state of Israel who does not want peace with the Arabs. The question is: peace on what terms, at what price? What then is meant by Peace Now? Do the leaders of this movement have in their hands [from Israel's enemies] a reliable long-range commitment as to the terms of the peace, and have they found those terms acceptable in the light of the Israeli survival problem? Since, obviously, this is not the case, Peace Now can only mean one thing: peace at any price. In fact, the slogan gives great encouragement to the

enemies of Israel and makes the achievement of a meaningful and lasting peace much more difficult.

Shalom Achshav Intolerant of Other Views

However, much more serious than the political naivete of Peace Now is the motivating spirit behind it. There can be no greater mistake than to see the Shalom Achshav movement in Israel as akin to the peace movement in the United States during the war in Vietnam. The American peace movement of the 60's was the expression of a philosophy of life for all inter-human and interpersonal relationships. It was not only intended for purposes of foreign policy. It meant peace internally even more than externally. Whatever its practical effectiveness might have been, it meant a philosophy of life motivated by love. There is no sign of it in the Shalom Achshav movement. Internally, it is intolerant of all those who do not agree with its way. It is enormously intolerant especially, when those who dare pursue a course different from theirs are religiously motivated.

Israeli Thinkers Increasingly Anti-Jewish

As such, Shalom Achshav is a manifestation of, what I consider, the most serious problem of Israeli society, its wide-spread anti-Jewishness. At a recent demonstration, organized by Peace Now, the main speaker, a professor at the Hebrew University, referred to the Gush Emunim followers as "the Cossacks of the Ribbono shel Olam (the Almighty)." I am not a supporter of Gush Emunim, but I could not help sensing the venomous hatred oozing from this formulation, not only against religious Jews but also against Judaism. To call other Jews "cossacks of the Almighty" shows not only complete insensitivity to the Jewish historic experience at the hand of the cossacks but also utter contempt for Judaism from which that historic experience is inseparable. It is here that we reach the problem of problems of Israeli society: intelligentsia that consciously removes itself from the context of Jewish historic existence. One that lives without a sense of national destiny, without a national purpose, in whose eyes ideology, vision, messianism are dirty words, who is enamored with "rationalism" and "Realpolitik" a la Bismarck, without realizing that, in the context of world politics, Zionism has been "irrational" as was the coming into being of the state of Israel and as is its very existence, as has been all Jewish history.

"Cossacks of the Almighty", which is an ingenious summing up of the attitude of the Israeli intelligentsia to the entire historic reality of the Jewish people and Judaism, contains the ultimate issue in the state of Israel: Zionism without Judaism. It has already destroyed itself, and is now devastating the remnants of the Jewish people.