

Letter from Jerusalem

Nr. 31

It has certainly been a very eventful month. We began with Iran closing the Straits of Hormoz and President Trump threatening that if they weren't opened--not specifying the actual deadline-- he would take military action. Meanwhile, fighting continued between Israel and Lebanon, with the Israel Defense Force spokesman saying that it might go on for weeks. One evening, missiles fell in Arad and Dimona--both in the southern part of Israel--with more than 180 Israeli civilians injured. The next day, it was revealed that the defense system called David's Slingshot had not done its job of interception.

Trump announced a 5-day ceasefire with Iran, with the Saudis encouraging the US to keep on fighting. This war, named "Epic Fury" by the US administration, has been very unpopular in the US, even among many Trump supporters.

In Israel, we weren't allowed to have more than 40 or 50 people gathered together in one area. The festival of Pesach (Passover) was rapidly approaching, and we realized we would have to register for synagogue. (We were used to that going back to the days of COVID.) Many missiles were sent from Iran during both day and night, and Israelis throughout the country ran to their shelters, sometimes two or three times in the same night. The night of the Seder, the major celebration of Pesach, was disrupted in parts of the country several times. Later, we saw that in some communities, the Seder was held in the air-raid shelter itself.

In one of the attacks, Haifa was struck. Two couples from two generations within the same family were killed.

A very shaky ceasefire was attempted. After Pesach, the restrictions on participation were lifted, but by then, many events had already been canceled, including some for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Still, as is traditional in Israel, on the mornings of Holocaust Day and the day for remembering the fallen soldiers, sirens were sounded and everyone stood at attention for two minutes of silence. Traffic stops and people get out of their cars to honor the memories--one week, of the victims of the Holocaust; the following week, for the fallen soldiers. The first siren is intended to demonstrate the price we pay for Jewish powerlessness; the second, the price we pay for Jewish power.

But the use and abuse of Jewish power has become a hotly contested issue, both within Israel and elsewhere. To a large extent, Israel has become a pariah state. Until recently, in the US Congress, Israel was considered to be an issue on which both the Democrats and the Republicans could agree and both parties generally supported Israel on the international stage. Now, if there is bipartisanship, it is because of a growing negative attitude towards Israel. American young people from both parties tend to hold negative views of the Jewish state. Regularly scheduled elections are due to be held in Israel towards the end of October. If the present coalition is voted out, and new people and

new policies take over, it remains to be seen how that might affect Israel's international standing.

American Vice-President J.D. Vance was sent by the Administration for talks in Iran but left somewhat abruptly after the first round. Perhaps he is not familiar with Middle Eastern habits of bargaining. Iran has threatened to stop all Red Sea shipping. Such an act might have serious consequences for the US, which would be hampered in its attempt to secure oil supplies. Thus, the fighting might actually resume.

Just two days before Israel Independence Day, an IDF soldier in Lebanon desecrated a statue of Jesus in a Christian village. He was filmed by another soldier, and this incident was posted on social media. There was an international outcry and both he and the photographer were disciplined harshly. I would like to add on a personal note that I served as an education officer in the IDF from 1980 to 1982. When soldiers came to Jerusalem for a week of education--and most of them did, during that relatively quiet period--we visited churches and spoke about Christianity and Islam. Perhaps in the ensuing decades, this is no longer the case. But the two soldiers who committed this atrocity can also not have used their own common sense.

For many years, an alternative memorial service has been held on the evening of Memorial Day. It is a joint ceremony for bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families, conducted in both Arabic and Hebrew, with personal testimonies, music and poetry. The ceremony is broadcast on Zoom, reaching thousands of people throughout the world. I watch it every year, having attended it in person several times. But now the location is a closely guarded secret, because extremists from both sides have tried to disrupt the ceremony or even attacked the participants. This year, the theme was "The Day After..." It is a tribute to the humanity and nobility of these bereaved families that they respond to their own personal tragedy by developing empathy and solidarity with the other side and share their grief in such a constructive way.

One of the very worrying phenomena revealed lately deals with two very prominent members of the US administration. Vance has already been mentioned. The second is Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of Defense (although Trump renamed him Secretary of War.) Both are Christian nationalists who have promoted antisemitic stereotypes as in, for example, calling the press "pharisees." Vance, a convert to Catholicism, has been highly critical of the Pope for expressing liberal anti-war views. Hegseth is an evangelical Christian who wants to turn the US into a Christian nation, seemingly ignoring the fact that many Americans hold other religious views.

The last news item seen before writing this installment was that Netanyahu has been treated for prostate cancer. This is not unusual in a man of his age and we no doubt all wish him a speedy and complete recovery. But this may be an additional reason for him to consider stepping down, even before the October elections.

Whatever happens, we can be sure of one thing: it will be a hot summer here in the Middle East, in many senses of that word.