

Letter from Jerusalem

Nr. 32

As the festivals of Shavuot and Pentecost are winding down, the people of the region are preparing for what will undoubtedly be a hot summer. Much has been happening, but let's begin with some good news.

For the second year in a row, Israel's entry won second place in the Eurovision song contest. A charming and charismatic 23-year-old singer named Noam Beten, Israeli-born but the son of French immigrants, performed a song called "Michelle," in Hebrew, English and his native French. By now, Israelis are getting used to being boycotted. Five countries, including Eurovision powerhouses like Spain and Ireland, refused to participate because of the Israeli presence. This time, pro-Israel forces throughout Europe organized to promote the voting, and Israel finally made the news, for something that didn't relate to war and conflict.

On the last day of May, Jewish organizations, schools and other institutions in New York City will hold their annual Salute to Israel Parade down 5th Avenue. For the first time in the 62-year history of the parade, the NYC mayor will not participate. The (relatively) new mayor, African-born Zohran Mamdani, is a Muslim and an outspoken critic of Israel. It is expected also that fewer Jews will show up to march or observe. This may be due to a combination of two factors. One is a fear of anti-Zionist and perhaps also antisemitic responses, and the second is a reluctance on the part of some Jews to publicly express support for the State of Israel. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish support for the State from support for its government. (I wonder how some of the centrist and leftwing Zionist youth movements will express themselves.) The Israeli government has not made things easier for its critics. They chose to designate as their official representatives three Knesset members from the two most extreme right-wing parties in the coalition, the one led by Itamar Ben-Gvir and the one led by Bezalel Smotrich.

There continue to be anti-Christian incidents reported in the media. In Jerusalem, a visiting French nun doing scholarly research at the Ecole Biblique, was attacked by a settler who knocked her down and then came back to kick her. He was apprehended by the police and, one would hope, will be punished appropriately for his crime. There was an additional incident of icon desecration in southern Lebanon. An IDF soldier stuck a cigarette in the mouth of a statue of Mary, in a Christian village. Both he, and his friend, who filmed the incident and posted it on social media, were caught by the Army and will be disciplined. When such events occur, they are publicly condemned by the Prime Minister and the Army leadership. But what else has to happen for the Army to recognize the seriousness of the problem and begin to deal with it in a more proactive manner? In early June, the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University, together with a number of other institutions (including the Ecole Biblique,) will sponsor a special seminar entitled, "Jews Facing Christians and Christianity: Between Thought and Action, Between Hostility and

Brotherhood."

But there are other incidents involving Jews. For example, a London-born lecturer in Jewish education at the Hebrew University, Dr. Alex Sinclair, was recently in the news. He wears a kippah that displays both the Israeli flag and the Palestinian flag. Police removed the kippah and detained him for several hours, for questioning. When they finally gave him back the skullcap, they had cut off the part with the Palestinian flag. The Ministry of Education has intensified its "witch hunt" against teachers who express their left-wing opinions. This has been true for several years with regard to teachers who are Palestinian citizens of Israel, but it is becoming more and more widespread among Jews, as well. These might not be remarks made in class, but even posts on social media.

What is clear is that the political polarization in the country is intensifying, as we move closer to the next elections. It is as yet not clear whether they will be held in September or October. They must be held by the legal deadline of October 27th. The two opposition front-runners, Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, have joined forces. The third major contender, Gadi Eisenkott, has chosen, at least for the time being, to remain independent. Many parties have already begun the campaign.

US President Donald Trump is trying to promote talks regarding the future of relations with both Iran and Lebanon. There has been a cessation of hostilities with Iran, at least temporarily. The "ceasefire" in the North has included Hizbollah attacks on Qatar and widespread drone attacks on Israel, in which both Israeli civilians and soldiers have been killed. It has been revealed in the press that during the war with Iran, PM Netanyahu, together with the leaders of Israeli security services, including the Mossad, secretly visited the United Arab Emirates. One can only hope that perhaps one of the positive outcomes of the present crisis might be the solidifying of Israeli ties with some of the more moderate Arab countries in the region.

A blatantly racist law was passed in the Knesset, calling for the death penalty for acts of terrorism, but only those perpetrated by Palestinians against Jews. Although even some Israeli Army leaders have recognized that Jewish settlers may be guilty of acts of terrorism against Palestinians, these are not considered as such by the present government. The executioner's noose has become a new right-wing symbol, to the extent that when Ben-Gvir recently celebrated his 50th birthday, his wife baked him a birthday cake with a gallows and noose on it!

Finally, the issue of rape of prisoners has been highlighted lately. A recent comprehensive report was issued on the extent of rape involving both the victims on October 7th and the Israeli hostages of Hamas, both female and male. The day before this report came out, New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof wrote a controversial piece on the extent to which Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have been subject to rape. He included an allegation that Israel trained special dogs to participate in these atrocities. Netanyahu called this report a

"blood libel." Other Israelis and Jews abroad denied the allegations or allowed that there might be some cases of rape, but that they are the exceptions and not the norm. The point about the trained dogs was refuted, as well.

I don't often express my own personal opinion in these letters, but it seems to me that the truth lies between the two extremes. It seems clear that since October 7th, the behavior of some Israeli soldiers has included vengeful acts of looting and perhaps even cases of rape. As a former education officer within the IDF, I realize that the Army is being stretched beyond its capacity, and some soldiers are responding in unacceptable ways. Dealing with these issues must become a priority for Israeli society and for friends and supporters of Israel throughout the world.