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ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel
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Commentary...

Resign, Rabbi Sacks

Jerusalem Post Editorial

As chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, Dr. Jonathan Sacks holds one of the more prominent, and highly visible, rabbinical positions in the Western world.

Since assuming his post in 1991, he has become a regular on British radio and television, presenting the people of Queen Elizabeth's realm – both Jew and non-Jew – with an image of Judaism that has been both erudite and appealing. Rabbi Sacks has authored more than a dozen books, lectured at universities such as Oxford, and even received an honorary doctorate from the archbishop of Canterbury.

Yet, it is precisely because of both his reputation and standing that his recent remarks on Israel in a newspaper interview can only be described as morally inexplicable and astonishingly naive.

Speaking with The Guardian – long one of Israel's harshest critics – he said that Israel's response to the Palestinian issue is "incompatible" with the ideals of Judaism and is "corrupting" Israeli culture. "I regard the current situation as nothing less than tragic," he said. "It is forcing Israel into postures that are incompatible in the long run with our deepest ideals."

Going one step further, Sacks spoke of "things that happen on a daily basis which make me feel very uncomfortable as a Jew." In particular, he noted, he was "profoundly shocked" by reports of smiling Israeli soldiers posing for a photograph with the corpse of a slain Palestinian. He also asserted that in 1967 he was "convinced that Israel had to give back all the land for the sake of peace" and added that he does not renounce that view now.

Sacks's views, it will be said, are similar to a fair number of Israelis and their political representatives. But therein lies the rub. Sacks is not an Israeli and he is not here with us fighting this war.

Diaspora Jewish leaders are not required or expected to blindly support the Jewish state, or even to refrain from criticizing Israel. But they are required not to endorse the gross double standards and false morality applied by Israel's most bitter opponents.

For Sacks to lecture us about "our deepest ideals" is worse than insulting. It implies that we are not as appalled by exceptional looting and gruesome grandstanding as much as he is. It pretends that we want peace less than he does. And it deprecates the fundamental value that we are fighting for – our freedom and our very lives.

Sacks has apparently forgotten that the State of Israel is at war, with the Palestinian terror campaign about to enter its third straight year. This is a war that Israel neither sought nor initiated, but one that was foisted upon it by an obstinate foe bent on its destruction. In such a situation, morality demands that the Jewish people defend themselves, and that is precisely what the people of Israel have been doing.

Indeed, rather than "corrupting" us, this war of self-defense has brought out some of our finer qualities, such as patriotism, national pride, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices on behalf of the common good. Further, Israelis have sacrificed their own lives to save Palestinian lives, by fighting terrorism in a way that no other democracy has or would. Where was Sacks's eloquent voice when 23 soldiers died fighting from house to booby-trapped house in Jenin, when every other would country would have simply bombed the trapped terrorists – and their civilian hostages – from the air?

When young Israelis faithfully answer the call of reserve duty, they are embodying the highest of Jewish values and standards, for they are leaving aside

the safety and security of their homes, donning uniforms, and going out to defend their families and their nation from attack.

As Rabbi Sholom Gold of Jerusalem told the BBC yesterday, "The only moral response that is compatible with Jewish belief is to stand up and fight and defend yourself. And every act of that sort is not immoral; on the contrary, it is the height of morality." What Sacks fails to grasp is that the "tragedy" of the current situation lies not in the fact that Israel has chosen to defend itself, but that the Palestinians chose the path of violence, in the process sending the entire region into a morass of hatred and bloodshed.

By assailing Israel, he has done his fellow Jews a grave disservice, sowing defeatism rather than deliverance. There is a fine line between constructive criticism delivered in a conscientious manner and ill-conceived censure whose main effect is to cheer our enemies and those of the Jewish people everywhere. Wherever one might reasonably draw that line, Sacks has crossed it by a wide margin. If Sacks is so embarrassed by the spectacle of Jews defending themselves as best and as morally as they know how that he cannot contain himself, that is his right, but he cannot at the same time hold office as leader of an important Diaspora Jewish community. (Jerusalem Post Aug 29)

Deconstructing Baker Jerusalem Post Editorial

Call it the battle of the Bushies. Earlier this month, Brent Scowcroft, US national security adviser to presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush, took to the pages of The Wall Street Journal to argue against going to war against Iraq. Coming as it did from one of the former president's closest associates, the piece caused a sensation, leading many to wonder whether the article wasn't a thinly veiled missive from father to son.

Nowhere was such speculation more rife than in the pages of The New York Times, which led its front page with the Scowcroft story on two successive days. So it is fitting that when the former president's other closest associate, former secretary of state James A. Baker III, chose to weigh in on the side of going to war, he used the Times as his venue.

"The only realistic way to effect regime change in Iraq," Baker writes, "is through the application of military force." This Baker supports. "Peace-loving nations have a moral responsibility to fight against the development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by rogues like Saddam Hussein," he says.

The question for Baker, then, is not the whether, but the how. He holds that the war cannot be won surgically, but will require a massive application of troops and treasure. He argues that the US should renew its United Nations Security Council mandate to use "all necessary means" to enforce the disarming of Iraq, saying this is worth considering, despite the risks posed by a show of Iraqi cooperation. The US, Baker further claims, can and should reserve the right to take unilateral action even as it pursues multilateral support.

And then up pops the issue of Israel.

"We should frankly recognize that our problem in accomplishing regime change in Iraq is made more difficult by the way our policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute is perceived around the world," Baker writes. "We cannot allow our policy toward Iraq to be linked to the Arab-Israeli dispute, as Saddam Hussein will cynically demand, just as he did in 1990 and 1991.

"But to avoid that, we need to move affirmatively, aggressively, and in a fair and balanced way to implement the president's vision for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute, as laid out in his June speech. That means, of course, reform by Palestinians and an end to terror tactics. But it also means

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withdrawal by Israeli forces to positions occupied before September 2000 and an immediate end to settlement activity."

Let's see if we've got this straight. In order to avoid any effort at "linkage," there must be linkage. So as not to fall into Saddam Hussein's trap, the US must fall into the trap.

These columns have argued tirelessly that the road to Baghdad must not be paved through Jerusalem. The reasons that impel the US to remove the Iraqi regime, so eloquently summed up by Baker, have nothing to do with whether a few new housing units go up in Gilo, and it is folly even to pay lip service to the notion. More importantly, by tying a prospective war against Iraq with a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the US would only encourage Palestinian terrorism, since the continuance of the crisis here would mean delaying a US attack.

No serious person can believe that idealism alone prompts Saddam to issue \$25,000 checks to the families of suicide bombers, or train Palestinian terrorists at his Salman Pak facility near Baghdad. He's also getting something for his money: namely, a distracted American administration, with the likes of a James Baker serving Baghdad as an unwitting accomplice.

The hallmark of the present administration has been its moral clarity. It understood from the start that no cause excuses terrorism, and that no distinction can be made between terrorists and the states that harbor them. Now it's high time to recognize that Arab radicalism, not Israeli actions, is the source of aggression and instability in the Middle East.

Had Baker recognized this during his term in office, perhaps the crisis Israelis and Americans now find themselves in would never have come to pass. (Jerusalem Post Aug 27)

"I Pledge Allegiance to the State of Israel." By Michael Freund

As if Israelis did not have enough to worry about, talk of early elections is now in the air.

With a parliamentary showdown looming in the fall over the national budget, and a dearth of legislators willing to back the painful spending cuts that will be necessary to preserve fiscal discipline, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has now raised the specter of a premature visit to the ballot box.

Regardless of whether this indeed comes to pass, voting must in any event be held no later than November 2003, as the law requires. But if there is one thing that appears certain, it is that the coming campaign will likely be no less divisive and bitter than its predecessors.

With the very future of the State again in the balance, Israelis will once more be subjected to the spectacle of name-calling, mudslinging and verbal abuse that have unfortunately come to typify the country's political culture. After all, why bother arguing a point when vilifying your opponent is so much more likely to generate some headlines?

Needless to say, disagreement is a natural part of any democracy. But what is decidedly unnatural is the manner in which the question of loyalty to the State has come to play an increasingly central role in Israeli politics.

An electorate divided over so many basic issues can ill-afford the luxury of having large portions of the population effectively tarred with the brush of betrayal and duplicity. It is time, therefore, to put an end to this rather uncivil situation.

In the United States and other Western democracies, voters may disagree about a broad range of issues, but they are at least bound together by that most fundamental of values - fidelity to the state whose leaders they are about to select. Sadly, because of the numerous political fault-lines in this country, many Israelis appear to have forgotten this. And that is precisely why elections are the perfect time to remind them that however much we might disagree, we nevertheless share a common fate and destiny.

Therefore, when the Knesset reconvenes after the summer recess, it should enact a law requiring every voter entering a polling station to sign a "Pledge of Allegiance to the State of Israel." The text should be straightforward and concise, free of political rhetoric and unifying in its message, such as the following: "I pledge allegiance to the State of Israel, its laws and institutions, and I undertake to uphold and defend her from any and all foes."

Just as a person giving testimony in a court of law is required first to affirm that he is telling the truth, so too should every voter be reminded of the solemnity and importance of the act of casting one's ballot and choosing the nation's representatives. Voting is a right, but it is also a responsibility, and that is something that people often overlook.

Moreover, the fact that everyone taking part in the electoral process will be signing a formal declaration of loyalty to the State will necessarily put an end to all the invective about "treachery", thereby making for a somewhat more civil, and less vitriolic, campaign.

As a formal document, the pledge of allegiance can also serve more than just a symbolic role. Should a person at a later date commit an act against the State,

his signed pledge can then serve as a basis for denying him some of the advantages of citizenship in the future, such as voting. There is no reason why those who break the law and undermine the State should continue to enjoy the same rights as decent, law-abiding citizens who are loyal to it.

Cynics will undoubtedly attempt to find a hidden political motive behind the proposal for an "Israeli Pledge of Allegiance". This idea, however, has nothing to do with Jews or Arabs, religious or secular, or right or left. But it does have everything to do with safeguarding and preserving the country.

No one loyal to the State of Israel could possibly object to reaffirming that loyalty on Election Day by signing a paper to that effect, as they would have nothing to fear from making such a pledge.

And anyone wishing to ensure that Israel remain strong and united can not help but appreciate the need to reinforce the public's respect for the State and its institutions, particularly in these difficult times.

The Israeli Pledge of Allegiance is fair, it is reasonable, and it is the right thing to do. And the time to implement it is now, so that the upcoming election, whenever it is held, will be as rewarding and constructive as possible. (Jerusalem Post Aug 21)

Roed-Larsen's Novel Yardstick By Evelyn Gordon

I have often wondered how, after two years of terrorist warfare, people could still believe in the Oslo process. But last week, Terje Roed-Larsen finally explained it for me: All you have to do is lie about the facts. After that, the desired conclusions fall into place like magic.

Roed-Larsen, the UN's Middle East envoy and a key player in the secret talks that produced Oslo, demonstrated his technique in an article published in the Inter-national Herald Tribune last Tuesday. "The principles and tactics of Oslo were the right choice nine years ago," he wrote. "They brought violence down to unprecedented levels, a uniform rise in Palestinian living conditions and a balanced Palestinian budget without donor support."

Had Oslo actually done those things, it would indeed have been a success. Yet in fact, even before the intifada began in October 2000, not one of those statements was true.

First, even excluding the current violence, the Oslo Accords raised terrorism to levels unprecedented in Israel's history. Within two and a half years after Oslo was signed in 1993, Palestinian terror had claimed as many victims as it had during the entire preceding decade, which included the period of the first intifada.

By five years after the accords were signed, the terrorist death toll had surpassed that of the 12 worst years of the pre-Oslo period -- the years of Yasser Arafat's mini-state in Lebanon (1970-82), which claimed 162 victims and included such spectacular attacks as the Munich and Ma'alot massacres.

It is difficult to imagine how Roed-Larsen can interpret these statistics as a drop in the violence -- unless, of course, dead Israelis do not figure in his tally.

The "rise in Palestinian living conditions" is equally fictitious. According to World Bank estimates, per-capita gross domestic product in the West Bank and Gaza fell by an average of 2 to 3 percent per year (gains in some years being offset by sharp drops in others) from the inception of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 to 1999, the eve of the current war (after which the decline became a nosedive).

Using another measure, Palestinian per-capita income fell from a peak of 23% to 25% of Israel's level shortly before Oslo was signed to only 10% of the Israeli figure in 1998 -- a low it had not hit since 1968, the first year of Israeli rule over the territories.

In absolute terms, GDP per capita in the West Bank fell from almost \$3,000 in 1993 to \$2,000 on the eve of the current intifada.

And unemployment, which was generally under 5% in the 1980s, rose to a peak of 24% in 1996 before declining to a mere 12% or 14% in 1999 (depending on whether you prefer World Bank or UN figures).

As for Roed-Larsen's "balanced Palestinian budget without donor support," donor support for the PA actually totaled a whopping \$482 million in 1999, or \$161 per Palestinian.

As Patrick Clawson recently observed in these pages, this is a level of per-capita aid virtually unmatched in the world: In recent years, only Bosnia, at \$185 per capita in 2000, has exceeded it. Finally, there is Roed-Larsen's astonishing conclusion: that the current war "came not because of Oslo but despite it. The violence and misery we are facing now are the opposite of Oslo's principles, from which both parties deviated."

There is no lack of facts that undermine this thesis.

It was Oslo that put an unregenerate terrorist in charge of the PA; it was Oslo that gave the Palestinian "police" 50,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles that have since been used to murder Israeli civilians; it was Oslo that created the "safe havens" of the PA where terrorist groups could arm, train, recruit and

generally flourish undisturbed; it was Oslo that provided the PA with \$4 billion in aid over the last eight years with no controls to prevent some of the money from being siphoned off to purchase additional arms.

Perhaps most importantly, it was the Oslo logic that insisted that all the early evidence of bad faith—the sharp upswing in terror, the Palestinian incitement in mosques, schools and media – be ignored rather than confronted before it exploded into the current violence.

Yet even if one discounts all these facts, Roed-Larsen's statement still posits a novel yardstick for measuring the success of a peace agreement.

No longer should an agreement be judged by whether it actually brought peace; it should instead be judged by whether it might have brought peace had one side not violated it by launching a war!

Roed-Larsen has undoubtedly done the world a valuable service by exposing the rotten foundations on which support for Oslo rests. But it is to be hoped that other public figures will not imitate his tactics. In the long run, facts are always better than lies as a basis for policy. (Jerusalem Post Aug 27)

The writer is a veteran journalist and commentator.

Fighting to Win Jerusalem Post Editorial

"As a military man [I tell you] this is a conflict we must win, so the Palestinians will understand that they cannot gain through terror." This statement, coming Sunday from Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, might seem to be unremarkable. Military leaders are supposed to be about winning, one might think. Yet ours generally have not been, and therein lies its significance.

Our minister of defense, for example, not only avoids speaking of victory, but repeatedly asserts that there is no military solution to the current conflict. This would be understandable as a statement relating to the somewhat distant future, after the current terrorism's slaughter has been defeated, but Binyamin Ben-Eliezer does not speak in such terms. Rather, he speaks as if the current military campaign were a sort of unfortunate interregnum preceding what will really bring peace, which is negotiations.

Yes it is unfortunate, even tragic; but our current fight is also essential. What Ya'alon is saying, in so many words, is the reverse of what Ben-Eliezer has been saying. According to Ya'alon, the Palestinians are attempting to defeat Israel through terrorism; Israel must therefore defeat that attempt before peace is possible.

It follows that if terrorism is not decisively defeated as a weapon, it will be used again in the future. As Ya'alon put it, "If the Palestinians conclude that terrorism produces achievements, we will find ourselves on a slippery slope in terms of our ability to deter further use of terrorism whenever the Palestinians have a disagreement with us ... even after agreements are signed." In the same speech, Ya'alon made important statements about Palestinian motives and the stakes in the current conflict. Unlike the intifada of the 1980s, which was more of a spontaneous eruption, the current attack was launched and perpetuated by the Palestinian leadership.

Ya'alon identifies two reasons for the Palestinian choice of arms. First, there was a desire to avoid responding to the offers put on the table by Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton – an offer of essentially all of the disputed territory in exchange for full peace with Israel. Second, there was the tempting logic offered by Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who in his victory speech following Israel's somewhat chaotic unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, compared Israel to a spider's web – having the illusion of solidity, but collapsing at the slightest touch.

Ya'alon argues that Israel has debunked the Hizbullah model by showing a high degree of unity and sticking power, and particularly through Operation Defensive Shield, the first major Israeli counterattack. At the same time, his assessment is that the goal of the current Palestinian leadership is not a "two state solution" but a Palestinian state as a stepping stone toward the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state.

Accordingly, Ya'alon, in a break from decades of military statements that tended to downplay the Palestinian threat within the strategic picture, places the Palestinians at the top, along with the potential threat of Arab countries developing nuclear weapons. Noting that Saddam Hussein has offered the family of every suicide bomber \$25,000, Ya'alon argues that all the Arab forces seeking the destruction of Israel "have chosen what in their eyes is Israel's weakest point: the inability of Israeli society to withstand attack. It is no coincidence that they have chosen terrorism that targets civilians, avoids Israel's military capabilities, and strikes at the Israeli home front," says Ya'alon.

Does the recent understanding reached between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, called "Gaza-Bethlehem first," mean that the Palestinians are abandoning their "military" option? Unfortunately, it seems, Ya'alon's warning that we have not yet restored a basic level of deterrence are already being confirmed by Palestinian spokesmen.

When Ben-Eliezer, for example, said that the IDF would not be withdrawing from Hebron for at least six weeks, the Palestinians responded with threats. Such a delay is a "dangerous action," according to a senior adviser to PA Chairman Yasser Arafat, Nabil Abu Rudeineh. This despite the fact that Ben-Eliezer explained that the IDF could not withdraw because of the many warnings of terrorist activity emerging from Hebron.

Some might regard Ya'alon's frank assessment as an interference in civilian decision-making. Perhaps it is. But while it is the responsibility of the generals to follow the orders of the civilian leadership, it is also their responsibility to frankly assess the situation in military terms, rather than becoming arm-chair diplomats themselves. Generals should be professionals, and their profession should be to win.

Winning, as even Ya'alon would admit, is not a purely military matter. Yet if the civilians are ordering the generals to do otherwise, then it is the political leadership that has some explaining to do. (Jerusalem Post Aug 26)

In Defense of 'Collaborators' By Gabriel Danzig

The "Gaza-Bethlehem first" cease-fire has yielded its first fruits, and the Palestinian Authority has finally decided to take strong action in the war against terrorism. As reported in The Jerusalem Post, the Palestinians are planning to execute up to 200 Palestinians for crimes they have committed in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The alleged crime is "collaborating" with Israel.

The PA is not executing terrorists who killed civilians; it is not executing the planners and organizers of these actions; instead it is executing those it claims aided Israel in the war against terror. In doing so, the Palestinian leadership sends a clear message about whose side it is on in the battle between terror and those who seek to end it.

The timing of this action is surely significant. The so-called collaborators are being held in Gaza, a stone's throw from Israeli army forces. If any of them has really helped in the war on terror, the PA must be worried that Israel would try to prevent the executions either by demanding a halt, or if necessary mounting a rescue operation. By coming to agreement on a temporary truce, then, the PA has not only won badly needed time to rebuild its infrastructure, but has also provided itself with apparent immunity from Israeli action. If Israel rescues these prisoners, it will be condemned in many quarters for destroying the "hope of peace" that these cease-fire agreements supposedly represent. One can only hope that Israel will not allow public relations to take precedence over humanitarian concerns, or to allow the Palestinians to claim the lives of yet more innocent human beings.

What did these collaborators really do? Given the nature of the Palestinian judicial system, one cannot assume that they necessarily did anything at all. "Collaboration" is a broad term that the PA uses to justify the execution of its citizens while reinforcing the message that cooperation with Israel is a crime. It is odd that at a time when many people of goodwill encourage Israel to enhance cooperation between Jews and Arabs, the PA should go ahead with executing those who do cooperate in the most vital way possible.

But what about those who really have provided information to Israel about potential acts of terror and who have thereby saved the lives of innocent Israeli civilians? It is understandable that the PA wants to kill them, but the only reason that that is understandable is because we have already come to realize that the PA is a sponsor and not an opponent of terror. But that does not mean that they deserve it.

For the rest of us, these collaborators are heroes. It is they who enable the IDF to pinpoint terrorists and avoid killing civilians. Without accurate information, Israel could not prevent terrorist attacks, could not uncover terrorist rings, and could not avoid inflicting unnecessary and tragic damage to Palestinian civilians. By eliminating rather than aiding those who provide such information, the PA makes it even harder to do that, and thereby makes it likely that more civilian lives that will be lost unnecessarily.

But for Israelis these men and women (a woman accused of "collaborating" was executed only two days ago) are not just heroes, these are also our allies. They have saved our lives and the lives of our children. Yes, they have been paid for the vital information they have provided, and they deserve every penny of it. They deserve more than that: they deserve our protection in their moment of need.

The IDF has enormous capacities for fighting terrorists and destroying them. But these same capacities can and should be used to save human lives. Among the endangered prisoners there may be some friends of ours. Few there are who would be willing or able to undertake the task of saving them. Aside from Israel, probably no one. The moral responsibility lies with the PA, but it is still our duty to do everything we can to save them. And if while taking control of the prisons in Gaza, we also destroy part of the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure, that will also be a step towards preventing further loss of life.

Cease-fires, peace agreements, and all forms of negotiation with those who have proven themselves unworthy of trust are counter-productive. They are manipulated by such parties in order to gain additional opportunities for wickedness. We should not allow the recent cease-fire to be used as a pretext for murdering Palestinians. Even if we should be condemned for doing so, we have a moral obligation to do what we can to help them.

The only way to reach peace, as Professor Sharon of Hebrew University has reminded us recently in an interview on Israel Radio, is by winning the war. The hope for peace depends on a complete unconditional surrender of the PA, without which the aim of destroying Israel will remain in force.

The writer is a classicist at Bar-Ilan University, specializing in political thought. (Jerusalem Post Aug 28)

Refugee Status By Yossi Klein Halevi

Tayseer, as we'll call him, a 21-year-old Gazan whose constant smile tries to conceal watchfulness, learned early on that to be gay in Palestine is to be a criminal. Three years ago his older brother caught him in bed with a boyfriend. He was beaten by his family, then warned by his father that he'd strangle Tayseer if it ever happened again.

It happened again a few months later. Word gets around a refugee camp, and a young man he didn't know invited Tayseer into an orange grove. The next day he received a police summons. At the station Tayseer was told that his sex partner was in fact a police agent whose job is to ferret out homosexuals. If Tayseer wanted to avoid prison, he too would have to become an undercover sex agent, luring gays into orchards and turning them over to the police.

Tayseer refused to implicate others. He was arrested and hung by his arms from the ceiling. A high-ranking officer he didn't know arranged for his release and then demanded sex as payback. Tayseer fled Gaza to Tulkarem on the West Bank, but there too he was eventually arrested. He was forced to stand in sewage water up to his neck, his head covered by a sack filled with feces, and then he was thrown into a dark cell infested with insects and other creatures he could feel but not see. ("You slap one part of your body, and then you have to slap another," he recounts.) During one interrogation, police stripped him and forced him to sit on a Coke bottle. Through the entire ordeal he was taunted by interrogators, jailers, and fellow prisoners for being a homosexual.

When he was released a few months later, Tayseer crossed into Israel. He now lives illegally in an Arab Israeli village and works in a restaurant. His dream is to move to Tel Aviv. "No one there cares if you're gay," he says. These days, though, he knows that an illegal Gazan in Tel Aviv risks being deported and that he's safest staying where he is. And if he were sent back to Gaza? "The police will kill me," he says. "Unless my father gets to me first."

With bombs once again exploding all over Israel, and the Palestinian territories under seemingly permanent curfew, the woes of Palestinian homosexuals haven't exactly grabbed international attention. But after spending two days with gay Palestinian refugees in Israel, I began to wonder why the liberal world has never taken interest in their plight.

Perhaps it's because that might mean acknowledging that the pathology of the nascent Palestinian polity extends well beyond Yasir Arafat and won't be uprooted by one free election. Indeed, the torment of gays is very nearly official Palestinian policy. "The persecution of gays in the Palestinian Authority [P.A.] doesn't just come from the families or the Islamic groups but from the P.A. itself," says Shaul Ganon of the Tel Aviv-based Agudah-Association of Gay Men, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgender in Israel. "The P.A.'s usual excuse for persecuting gays is to label them collaborators--though I know of two cases in the last three years where people were tried explicitly for being homosexuals." Since the intifada, Ganon tells me, Palestinian police have increasingly enforced Islamic law: "It's now impossible to be an open gay in the P.A."

A gardener we'll call Samir, who has fled the territories for Israel, told me of a gay friend who was a member of the Palestinian police and ran away to Tel Aviv: "After a while he returned to Nablus, where he was arrested by the Palestinian police and accused of being a collaborator. They put him in a pit. It was the fast of Ramadan, and they decided to make him fast the whole month but without any break at night. They denied him food and water until he died in that hole."

International human rights monitors have all but ignored gay Palestinians' plight. The U.S. State Department's recently released human rights report for 2001, for instance, blandly notes, "In the Palestinian territories homosexuals generally are socially marginalized, and occasionally receive physical threats." As Ganon explains it, "The Palestinian human rights groups are afraid to deal with the problem. One Palestinian activist told me that Israelis need to raise the issue because they'll be shut down if they try to. Amnesty Israel is sympathetic but their mandate is limited to Israeli human rights violations. And the international human rights groups say they've got a long list of pressing issues. When Israeli police harass Arab Israeli homosexuals, I send out reports, and then--oh, you

should see how quickly the human rights organizations get in touch with me to investigate. The hypocrisy is unbelievable."

Because the world hasn't forced the P.A. to tolerate gays, Palestinian homosexuals are increasingly seeking refuge in the only regional territory that does: Israel. In the last few years hundreds of gay Palestinians, mostly from the West Bank, have slipped into Israel. Most live illegally in Tel Aviv, the center of Israel's gay community; many are desperately poor and work as prostitutes. But at least they're beyond the reach of their families and the P.A.

Still, for these refugees life in Israel means subsisting on the margins. Ganon, my guide to the community, heads the Association's outreach to Palestinian gays. He is a big man with a goatee who spends his nights on the Tel Aviv streets where Palestinian gay prostitutes gather, providing food and clothes and trying to keep them off drugs and out of jail. Over the last four years Ganon has waged essentially a one-man campaign to try to interest human rights groups in Israel and elsewhere in their plight. He's helped about 300 Palestinian gays in Israel and estimates that probably twice that many currently live here illegally without access to legal employment or health care and under constant threat of deportation. "No one here cares about us," says Samir, the gardener, who lives with his Israeli boyfriend. "I've written to all the government ministries, to all the newspapers, asking for my status to be recognized. No one even bothers answering."

According to Ganon, during the last year police have generally stopped arresting and deporting Palestinian gays because of his efforts. He has even worked out a quiet arrangement with Tel Aviv police, providing them a list of Palestinian gays under his sponsorship and providing those gays with Association membership cards to show their affiliation. The goal is to reassure local police, who are primarily on the lookout for Palestinian terrorists, that these Palestinians pose no threat. (The exceptions to this arrangement are Palestinian gays with security records and those from Gaza, whom the Israelis see as inherent security risks because of Hamas's popularity there.) Some Palestinian gays, though, say they see no recent change in police policy and still feel hunted.

An American we'll call William finds himself in the Palestinian gays' no-man's-land. Last year he and his Palestinian boyfriend, whom we'll call Ahmad, moved into Ahmad's West Bank village--a move that in retrospect seems mad. "We told the people in the village that we were friends, and for a while it worked," says William. "But then one day we found a letter under our door from the Islamic court. It listed the five forms of death prescribed by Islam for homosexuality, including stoning and burning. We fled to Israel that same day." Now they live in hiding--mostly from Ahmad's brothers, who have searched for the couple in Tel Aviv and threatened to kill Ahmad. Though William has appealed to human rights groups around the world, and to the U.S. Embassy for an American visa for Ahmad, he's gotten little response. One American gay-advocacy group offered to help Ahmad get asylum after he arrives in the United States. But getting him there is precisely the problem, and William refuses to leave without Ahmad. And so here they are, an American Christian and a Palestinian Muslim stranded in the Jewish state, with no money and no work, living off the charity of friends, dreading the reappearance of Ahmad's brothers, and waiting for help they know will almost certainly not come.

On a recent humid Tel Aviv night, in an area of shabby cafes for foreign workers and neon-lit sex shops, a half-dozen Palestinian teenage boys with gelled hair and sleeveless shirts sit on a railing, waiting for pickups. Ganon is here, as he is most nights, checking on "my children." "Does anyone need condoms?" he asks. "How about clothes? Who hasn't eaten today, sweethearts?"

A police car slows down, and the boys call out, "Identity cards!" and laugh. The police ignore them and drive away. The teenage prostitutes, refugees from the West Bank, live in an abandoned building. They tell me that sometimes a client will offer them a meal and a shower instead of payment; sometimes a client will simply refuse to pay in any form, taunting them to complain to police. And sometimes police will beat them before releasing them back to the streets.

A 17-year-old refugee from Nablus named Salah (a pseudonym), who spent months in a P.A. prison where interrogators cut him with glass and poured toilet cleaner into his wounds, tells Ganon that he has been stopped by Israeli police no fewer than four times that day. He recites the names of the different police units who stopped him by their acronyms. "Try not to do anything stupid," Ganon says.

"I've tried to kill myself six times already," says Salah. "Each time the ambulance came too quickly. But now I think I know how to do it. Next time, with God's help, it will work before the ambulance comes."

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