

The Road Back by Basil Porter

After more than five hundred days in captivity, hostages have returned. In most cases, their health and nutrition have been severely compromised. And some have returned in boxes. It is sobering to remember that moment on October 7th, when we were shown a picture of Shiri, the mother of the Bibas family, holding two red-headed children in her arms, her face saying it all. *Help, please. Before we are taken away!* The picture that every Israeli holds in his memory since October 7th. The babies, Ariel and Kfir, two years and eight months old. They will be a precious bargaining tool we thought; nobody would deliberately harm them. That picture, circulated by Hamas, reminded me of two other heart-rending pictures of children as helpless victims of war. The Jewish child in the ghetto raising his arms to the German captors, and the naked Vietnamese girl fleeing the flames from American attacks, her body covered in burns, the soldiers strolling behind.

Can any of us really understand what Yarden Bibas has been through, kidnapped while trying to defend his family, then five hundred days in captivity not knowing their fate, and coming home to the ghastly reality? The coffins of the Bibas family travelled across the country to a memorial service at their home on Kibbutz Nir Oz, the roads lined by people shedding tears, knowing that these three hostages were now part of the more than one hundred members of the kibbutz in a war where more than two thousand civilians were murdered.

We must all remember these pictures and remind ourselves that however much adult soldiers kill each other for no good reason, innocent women and children should not be there. The thousands of children who died in Gaza were not “collateral damage”, nor were the Bibas children; all were children not yet matured to fight, or to understand why big people fight and kill.

How does an eighty-two-year-old couple deal with “the situation”? Here in central Tel Aviv, one way is for my wife and I to stroll to the *Hostage Square* as it is now officially known. The long table, the endless yellow chairs and the artificial tunnel which allows people to feel something of the claustrophobia the hostages are experiencing. The families

and dedicated citizens patiently sit holding placards with pictures of the hostages, ready to chat with the people visiting this center for action regarding the hostages' fate.

Last Friday morning was different. We strolled in an unpleasant *Hamsin* heat to the tent camp near the Defense Ministry. A few dozen tents, and relatively few people sitting with placards, setting tables with drinks and snacks. The atmosphere was more like a *Shiva* visit, sitting and trying to identify with the nightmarish existence of the hostages still in Gaza and the angst of their families. We didn't stay long, the silence was painful, the tents somehow symbolizing the upheaval of the families, a feeling of total despair.

Life in Israel has its vibrant side of culture and restaurants, which has managed to somehow survive the past eighteen-month nightmare of war. It's tricky to find a table in restaurants in Tel Aviv; the Israel Philharmonic somehow continues its complex schedule of concerts despite ongoing cancellations of invited musicians, theater productions carry on. But the dominant national emotion is mourning, for all those killed in the War. The memorial sites at the site of the Nova concert massacre on October 7th will attract thousands who want to touch the placards with pictures and stories of their loved ones. A noticeable absence will be of government members and ministers, scared of showing their cowardly faces.

People are angry. Angry at the *Kahanists* who lead the battle for ongoing war, the ultra-orthodox who demonstrate their national pride by refusing to serve in the IDF, angry at the Opposition who still seem unable to put forward a real threat to the Bibi cult, and above all, angry at the man who despite being the leader responsible for this war, keeps the kettle boiling by demanding more of it, refusing to talk about the hostages or with their loved ones. He listens to no one and has neutralized Biden and anyone else who dares to stand in his way, with the new boy Trump just starting to reveal himself as his partner for establishing a new Middle East.

We huddle together, reassuring one other that despite everything, Israel is the only place for Jews to feel secure. And yes, antisemitism has reared its ugly head in this war, not in the slums of Islam, but also on Ivy League campuses. It has stirred our government into action, allowing our erudite Minister for Diaspora Affairs to organize a conference devoted

to antisemitism. Most of the invitees are representatives of the most right-wing governments in the world today (and there are many with serious past records of antisemitism), and many others have declined the invite. I guess one never really knows who your true friends are.

I look at the young soldier girl with her machine gun at the entrance of the Ministry of Defence , and wonder what she’s thinking, or whether the system has succeeded in convincing her too that “only Bibi can”.

Most of us belong to the ‘Silent Generation,’ those born during, or following World War two, a generation which only wanted peace and quiet. Many of our parents had experienced pogroms and two world wars, which might explain their desire for “Do Not Disturb,” but many of us had found a way to actively escape life under apartheid, with the Zionist youth movement capturing us and persuading us that Aliyah was the way to go. We now review the wreckage after a totally unexpected and brutal war, wondering about the future of the country, the Jews and the world. Liberal doctrine is becoming passe as the world is taken over by authoritarian regimes, and the word “Aliyah” seems like total *chutzpah* for anyone who does not share a messianic or fanatical national view of Zionism.

But just as we begin to declare that the “Start -Up Nation” is dead, a 32-billion-dollar exit was closed by a company run by four young Israelis. This is not exactly one of the socialist ideals we were taught in the Movement, but it is a source of pride at this time, when everything seems to be dissolving into dust and distant memory.

True, residents are returning to their homes in the north since the rocket barrages abated, and survivors of the war in the south are slowly planning a future in their ravaged settlements. All we really need now is to replace the Prime Minister and his government, with one which will deal with the diversity and craziness that is Israel and allow our generation to talk once again with pride about the country that we all love and believe in.

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