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## The Israeli Peace Camp in Dark Times

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The title of this essay comes from Hannah Arendt's book *Men in Dark Times*, a collection of essays describing the activities of men and women who provided a glimmer of light and hope during sinister periods. "Israeli Peace Camp in Dark Times" invokes the meaning Arendt ascribed to her title but also adds another dimension.

It is not only that the Israeli peace camp is attempting to provide a light during times that—according to all accounts (right and left)—are dark. In addition it has recently experienced its own share of darkness. At the critical moment, the Israeli peace camp faltered: it remained silent when it should have cried out, it became complacent when it should have resisted, and it betrayed its partners when it should have expressed compassion and solidarity. Examining this second dimension, the darkness within the peace movement rather than the one surrounding it, will be our subject here.

The current crisis within the peace camp first manifested itself in October 2000, in the days following the outbreak of the second *Intifada*. In the Occupied Territories, popular Palestinian demonstrations were dispersed with live ammunition. Snipers were given orders to shoot down protesters from 300 yards away, extra-judicial executions were reintroduced, houses were demolished, villages and towns were kept under siege, and access to medical facilities was denied. Although these and other violations were documented in the local and international media, the masses comprising the Israeli peace camp remained mute.

Simultaneously, Palestinian citizens of Israel filled the streets protesting the suppression of their kindred in the Territories. While most of the demonstrations were peaceful, on many occasions protesters blocked roads and threw stones. The Israeli police decided to clamp down on the demonstrators and employed brute force to disperse them, killing 13 citizens and wounding dozens of others within a number of days. Most people comprising the Israeli peace camp watched the protests on television, saw how the police shot down fellow citizens, and continued their daily routine without a murmur of protest. How does one account for this disturbing silence?

Suicide bombings that have been carried out repeatedly from November 2000, killing and wounding scores of civilians. This certainly did not help mobilize the peace camp. Yet, on their own they cannot explain the collapse of a powerful grassroots movement, particularly if one acknowledges that

suicide bombings are not new to Israeli life. The most common explanation suggests that the peace camp finally had to face up to reality; it had been immersed in some form of false consciousness and the incidents following the 2000 Camp David summit served as a reality check.

“We told *you* that all *they* want is to destroy *us*,” the right-wingers exclaim. “Yes, *they* signed Oslo, but only as a means to an end; their real agenda is the whole of Israel, not just the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.”

For those who do not understand, the pronoun “they” in that passage denotes Palestinians, “you” refers to Israeli doves, while “us” means Jewish Israelis.

“*You*,” the accusation continues, “gave them weapons, ammunition, and now *they* are using it against *us*, killing *us*, murdering *our* children. Only after Prime Minister Barak offered *them* everything, their true intentions became manifest. Barak actually did *us* all a favor. Now, finally, all *you* peaceniks must face up to reality and admit that *they* have been manipulating *us* all along. *They* don’t want peace; *they* want to kill *us*.” This line of argument takes many forms, sometimes emphasizing Arafat’s “crimes” while on other occasions accentuating Rabin’s and Peres’s “crimes,” but the crux of the claim is always uncannily the same.

A slightly different argument suggests that the peace camp faltered because its constituency accepted Barak’s claim that Arafat rejected the most generous peace proposal possible at the Camp David summit. The second *Intifada* was accordingly perceived by the peace movement as an attempt to grab by force what could not be attained through negotiations.

We now know, however, that Barak conceded only 78 percent of the West Bank at Camp David, while 69 Jewish settlements, comprising 85 percent of the settler population, were to remain intact. Major bypass roads were to stay under Israeli control, thus slicing up the Palestinian state-to-be. And some of the most important water reservoirs were to be kept under Israeli sovereignty. Which begs the question: why did most Israelis uncritically accept the claim that the Palestinians are peace refuseniks?

Certainly, the Israeli and American propaganda machines, which worked overtime to persuade the public that Barak had indeed made the most generous offer, helped produce this effect, as did the ineptness of the Palestinian Authority to relate their side of the story. Yet, other factors were just as important.

**B**ut there’s an alternative explanation to these narratives, which provides a different account of the peace camp’s regression. By the “peace camp” I do not mean the 3,000 or so dedicated activists comprising Women in Black, Ta’ayush, Gush Shalom, Yesh Gvul and a number of other Israeli organizations, but rather the liberal left, the majority of Peace Now members, which is by far the largest grassroots peace movement in Israel and which had—until recently—the capacity to mobilize 100,000 protesters. One hundred thousand protesters in a country of six million is by all accounts a significant number.

Peace Now was founded in the late 1970s by a group of reserve military officers, worried at the time that the Menachem Begin government would not respond favorably to Anwar Sadat’s peace initiative. In due course, the group turned into a grassroots organization whose aim was to pressure Israel to reach peace with Egypt and with the rest of the Arab world.

The movement's initial actions were promising. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon paved the way for Peace Now to become The Israeli Peace Camp. The movement organized, among other things, an impressive mass demonstration following the Sabra and Shatila massacre and in this way created enough pressure on the Israeli government that it, in turn, established the Kahan Committee to investigate the massacre and ultimately asked Ariel Sharon to resign from his position as Defense Minister.

Since the early 1980s, Peace Now has been in the forefront of the struggle against the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, arguing that they comprise the major obstacles to reaching a peaceful solution with the Palestinians. It has consistently opposed the establishment of more Jewish settlements and successfully monitored the expansion of the settlement project.

Considering this impressive history, why did Peace Now cower when the second *Intifada* erupted? The current crisis threatening the Israeli peace movement is merely a symptom of a much deeper malady. Already in the late 1970s the seeds sown by those who founded Peace Now were unhealthy, and now that the movement has matured it is trapped in a series of contradictions. The following, friendly criticism of Peace Now concentrates on the local while also shedding light on the global retreat of the liberal left.

Peace Now suffers from five weaknesses: a firm connection to political parties; the sacrifice of universalistic principles; a historical bias; an undemocratic decision-making process; and an inability to draw the connection between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the socioeconomic oppression of society's weaker segments. One of the reasons the Israeli peace camp did not fill the streets in October 2000 is because Peace Now—an ostensibly non-partisan grassroots movement—has a strong and ultimately damaging connection with two Israeli political parties—Meretz and the left wing of Labor.

While Peace Now's relationship with these parties gives it access to cultural and social capital—that is, to power—it also has had a demobilizing effect on the movement's operations. When the second *Intifada* erupted, Meretz (which had previously left the coalition for totally different reasons) was supporting the Labor government from outside, which helps explain why Peace Now did not organize major protests against Israel's rights-abusive government. The peace camp's government was in power and Peace Now would not undermine its authority.

On a deeper level, though, this relationship has had a disturbing effect on Peace Now's political thinking—an impact that manifests itself in two important ways. First, many of Peace Now's constituencies (paradoxically, not its grassroots leadership) uncritically adopted the Oslo worldview disseminated by the Labor/Meretz government, ignoring the daily reality in the Occupied Territories.

Since Rabin signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, Israel has built over 20,000 house units in the Occupied Territories, not counting the construction of new Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. The Jewish population living in the territories increased from about 110,000 in 1993 to close to 200,000 in 2000, again not counting the Jews living in occupied East Jerusalem. These numbers suggest that Israel was employing the rhetoric of peace while doing everything possible to create an irreversible situation on the ground, settling thousands of

Jews on expropriated Palestinian land. Rabin, Netanyahu, and Barak were not dissimilar in this respect.

Moreover, following Oslo the Palestinian economy deteriorated dramatically. No more than two miles from my Jerusalem apartment, which I rent for U.S.\$600 a month, are thousands of Palestinians living on less than \$2.10 a day per household; that is, two adults and two children. Within the first three years following the Oslo peace agreements per capita GNP fell a dramatic 37 percent, and unemployment rose to 28 percent. The economic and settlement examples suffice to show that what had first appeared to be a promise for the vast majority of Palestinians rapidly turned into a curse.

During the post-Oslo years, Israel was experiencing an economic boom. The harsh reality in the Occupied Territories, which had become visible during the first *Intifada*, became invisible again to most Israelis due to the so-called peace agreement. Had the Israeli peace camp acknowledged the ongoing oppression within the territories, it would have also realized that when the Palestinians filled the streets of Ramallah, Nablus, and Jenin in September 2000 they were not only protesting Israel's ongoing occupation but also demonstrating against Arafat, and his own acceptance of the rhetoric of peace while ignoring many of the facts on the ground.

The political parties influenced not only the content but also the mode of Peace Now's thought, which is currently informed by a pragmatic rather than a principled approach. Like all grassroots social movements, Peace Now has to make pragmatic calculations informed by monetary constraints and the likelihood of changing policy. Decisions of this kind are both honorable and necessary if one is to remain efficient, that is, to bring about social change.

But a grassroots social movement must also be wary of being overtaken by a pragmatic mode of thought. One recent example is Peace Now's decision not to participate in coalitions with the Israeli conscientious objectors for fear of offending the so-called Israeli consensus. This not only constitutes unprincipled thinking but it is also misguided, since it conceives the "consensus" as something that is fixed, as an essence, rather than as something composed of malleable opinions that can be shaped through persuasion and negotiation. Like the two political parties to which it is attached, Peace Now all too often focuses on ways of not offending certain segments in society, thus discarding its role as a social leader.

The second problem of Peace Now, the sacrifice of universal principles, is also intricately tied to the organization's pragmatic approach. On the level of party politics, Barak received in the 1999 elections about 98 percent of the Arab vote, but decided not to invite the Arabs leaders to join his government. The reasons were ostensibly pragmatic; he wanted to make peace and needed a Jewish majority to do so. While the decision to exclude Arab leaders from governing is certainly not new in the Israeli political arena, Barak and Meretz helped perpetuate and legitimize this thinly veiled racist approach.

As a grassroots peace movement, Peace Now has a responsibility to advance a universalistic and egalitarian worldview if only because human rights should be the basis of just peace agreements. Nonetheless, over the years Peace Now has

sacrificed a number of universal principles. Its failure to protest the make-up of Barak's or Rabin's discriminatory governments is a manifestation of this sacrifice. The deeper problem stems from Peace Now's worldview, which is informed by the basic tenets underlying the Jewish state, tenets that are saturated with prejudiced and non-universalistic characteristics. This, in fact, is the elephant in the room, and it's not being dealt with.

Disregarding the purely theoretical argument of whether a Jewish state can be democratic and egalitarian, after 54 years the facts on the ground plainly show that Palestinian citizens of Israel are discriminated against in all aspects of life. Peace Now has, nonetheless, accepted the Jewish-state paradigm and has become a vehicle of its articulation, disseminating this idea through the organization's activities and publications, while failing to reflect on its discriminatory effects.

Consider for a moment a few lines taken from Israel's national anthem, with which Peace Now ends all its major rallies. The anthem is called "Ha Tikvah" (The Hope), and begins like this:

As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart,/With eyes turned toward the East, looking toward Zion,/Then our hope—the two-thousand-year-old hope—will not be lost:/To be a free people in our land,/The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

These words, written in 1886 by Naphtali Herz Imber, were intended for Jews only and consequently exclude Palestinians, who currently comprise 20 percent of the Israeli citizenry. Given the historical developments since the song was written, it's safe to conclude that the anthem helps perpetuate the Zionist myth that describes the return of Jews to Palestine as a return of "a people without a land to a land without people."

Peace Now's Jewish bias manifests itself in various ways, whether through the exclusion of Palestinians from the make-up of the organization—there are no Palestinian citizens of Israel on its board or among its staff—or through the message Peace Now promulgates, which is frequently directed towards a Jewish-only audience. If Palestinians had been involved in Peace Now's decision-making process, its members probably would have been on the streets in October 2000, and this might have saved some lives. It surely would have helped reduce the alienation of Israel's Palestinian citizenry.

**T**his leads to the third criticism of the Israeli peace camp: its historical bias. Although Peace Now claims that it recognizes the "fact that there are two peoples in this land, Palestinians and Jews, each with a history, claims and rights," all of its activities since its establishment reflect a historical bias; it fails to acknowledge the 1948 catastrophe of the Palestinian people and considers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as if it began in 1967.

This shortsightedness has had far-reaching implications. For example, it has helped render Israel's Palestinian citizens as well as the pre-1967 Palestinian refugees (both external and internal) invisible. Because, in a sense, the Palestinian citizens are unseen, the national anthem can be played after each large demonstration. It also helps explain why, when the refugee problem was finally

raised during negotiations, it came as a shock to many Jews on the Israeli liberal left. Moreover, this bias underscores Peace Now's unwillingness to confront history from the standpoint of the oppressed, which is a necessary component in every dialogic attempt to bring peace.

The fourth shortcoming involves the organization's hierarchical and undemocratic structure, which ultimately corrodes and stifles the movement. Although a democratic decision-making process formally exists, the ongoing control by the old guard, many of whom have been at the organization's helm since the late 1970s, alongside its close relation to the political parties, has created a hierarchy in Peace Now that undercuts democratic procedures.

From a movement that introduced a new discourse and political horizon into the Israeli landscape, it has transformed into an organization that lags behind and suppresses alternative progressive worldviews. A case in point is Peace Now's attitude toward conscientious objectors. If the younger generation in Peace Now were given a voice, the organization's decision to steer away from the military refuseniks would likely never have passed. Moreover, new forms of action are rarely tried, as if the organization is limited to a few prescribed models of political practice. Isn't it time, for example, for the peace camp to move from a politics of protest to a politics of resistance?

Finally, Peace Now—like most peace groups in Israel—has failed to bridge the artificial division between the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and domestic economic exploitation. For years the peace camp has been claiming that a firm connection between the occupation and the economy exists, and has attempted to link the absence of substantial investment in the poor and underdeveloped Israeli slums with the vast sums of money poured into the settlements and the bypass roads. This connection, however, has remained on the discursive level and has never been translated into action. The peace movement never actually joined the struggle of the economically depressed population—whether Jews or Palestinians—against exploitation and oppression.

Perhaps Peace Now's sociological make-up—mainly middle class Ashkenazi Jews—helps explain why it has not spent time, resources, and energy in Israel's poorer neighborhoods in an attempt to address some of the wrongs afflicting Israel's underprivileged. No matter what the reasons, the more deprived segments of Israeli society often feel that the organization concerns itself only with the occupied Palestinians and has abandoned the lower classes within Israel. Peace Now has in this way alienated the weaker segments in society, not least the lower class Sephardic Jews. The alienation of the ever-growing weaker segments within Israeli society and the absence of any activities to help the economically deprived have sown dragon's teeth for the future.

Currently, Israel is heading towards an economic crisis, and it could very well be that the anger of those who have been hit worst will push them into the streets. There are already signs of this happening. These protests could take many forms. They could become a widespread left-leaning movement, whereby the anger is directed towards government policies and big corporations, or they could turn into a right-wing phobic movement directed against the other—namely, the Palestinians and perhaps the migrant workers. Given the current atmosphere inside Israel and the absence of extensive preparation on the ground, the rage will likely become phobic and hence destructive.

Peace Now appears to be recovering from the blow it sustained in October 2000. Since the struggle ahead will surely not be any easier than the one we have already seen, the Israeli peace camp must take a step back and strengthen the infrastructure of resistance. New groups like Ta'ayush (Arab–Jewish Partnership) and Dirty Laundry as well as old groups like Yesh Gvul and Women in Black are addressing some of the issues I have raised and changing traditional modes of operation and pervasive worldviews. These changes must spread, however, and not remain merely on the margins of Israeli society.

In the past, Peace Now provided light during periods that were particularly dark. If it will overcome its past mistakes, it could once again provide a source of light and inspiration for us all.

