

The Silence of American Jews Is Shameful

By MARK A. BRUZONSKY

As an American Jew, I am emotionally tortured by the reaction—rather, the non-reaction—to what happened after four Palestinian teen-agers hijacked an Israeli bus two weeks ago. I don't know which to condemn more vigorously: Israeli brutality or American Jewish complicity by silence.

The facts, as related by witnesses and Israeli and American reporters so far, are spare: The four youths were indeed reckless in taking the bus, but acted with restraint during the long hours when Israeli officials pretended to negotiate.

At no point did the Palestinians harm anyone on the bus—hardly the manner of “brutal terrorists.” Yet Israeli soldiers stormed the bus, killing one passenger and at least two of the Palestinians. One—perhaps both—of the other two was taken away alive; photographs (yet to be published because of Israeli censorship) show him with no apparent serious injuries. Within hours, the Israelis applied their policy of collective punishment, destroying the hijackers' family homes in Gaza. A short time later the authorities reported that all four were dead.

In an interview on American television, Defense Minister Moshe Arens attempted to cover up the incident. But, after some determined press coverage, Arens was forced to retreat and set up a commission of inquiry (which was intended to be a secret). Yet he was at the scene; surely he knows, and is to be held responsible for, what took place.

It's awful enough that this is what Israel has become, and what Israelis are prepared to tolerate. But when American Jewish organizations—including a number that are devoted to human rights and international law, such as B'nai B'rith International and the World Jewish Congress—accept such conduct, when they insist on looking the other way and making excuses, when they blind their eyes to this hatred and blood-thirstiness coming from “our” side, then surely we are all implicated, unless we cry out in anguish and protest in disgust.

What would have been the reaction of American Jewish organizations if the homes

of Jewish families, whose sons were captured fighting for Israel, were razed? What would have been the reaction of these organizations if an Israeli pilot had been captured alive and unhurt by Syria during the last war, and then killed in cold blood? What would have been the reaction decades ago if family homes had been bulldozed by the British in retaliation for the actions of Jewish “freedom fighters”? What would be the reaction today if any of the Israeli prisoners held by the Palestine Liberation Organization were to be executed?

This double standard has gone too far. American Jews, and the organizations that claim to represent them, cannot stand idly by while such outrages as the Gaza “incident” take place, and then expect their protests to be considered fair and reasonable when they question Palestinian or Arab conduct. American Jews and their organizations cannot claim to be dedicated to civil rights and human decency and yet stand by when major Israeli personalities call Palestinians “cockroaches” and Israelis then act on that analogy. These organizations cannot stand by while preparations are made to disinherit the remaining Palestinians in what the world considers occupied territories. They cannot do this and expect thoughtful Arabs to be “moderate” and “recognize” Israel, and trust in the good will of either Jews or the United States.

Jews around the world have just celebrated another Passover. But how can we honestly participate in a ceremony commemorating our own people's oppression thousands of years ago, while our own people practice a similar oppression today with the approval (or at least the acquiescence) of almost all the organizations that claim to speak in our name?

The events of the past weeks are only an example of what is taking place with increasing frequency in Israel: an acidic racism and militarism that is corrupting the soul of our people, destroying the integrity of our heritage and our modern institutions and threatening the fabric of American society as the Jewish community here

increasingly isolates and stigmatizes itself.

We cannot continue to oppose even meek American attempts to lessen Middle East tension without the difficult subject of “dual loyalty” arising, and without raising questions about who we are. We cannot, issue after issue, side with the government of Israel against the norms of our heritage and the policies of our country, without losing our dignity, corrupting our self-respect and abusing our standing when it is our turn to call on others to protect our own rights.

There will be many more terrorist incidents in the coming weeks and years; Palestinians feel that they no longer have any choice. This “new reality” is beginning to be widely accepted even in moderate and traditionally pro-American Arab circles.

If we are not rational about the likely new wave of terrorist incidents, what will be taking place is likely to achieve the purpose of the most uncompromising elements among us: to break most ongoing contact among the various sides, and to perpetuate the conflict between Jews and Arabs until Israel's eventual destruction, a Middle East nuclear war or even a world conflagration.

In the process we can expect anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish postures to grow, which could prove dangerous to the continual integration of American Jews into our own society. Unless thoughtful American Jews reassess their values, and begin to challenge those in Israel who are responsible for what has taken place, as well as those “leaders” of American Jewry who have lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong, all of us will be forced to choose sides as the moderate institutions and personalities collapse into impotence, irresolution and confusion.

Some American Jews and some American Jewish organizations have claimed all along that they are different—that they are fair, that they are not simply apologists for Israel or cowards in the face of community pressures. Where are they?

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