

# Blunt and controversial

**D**R Israel Shahak, Holocaust survivor, professor of chemistry at Hebrew University, outspoken advocate of Palestinian rights, and a unique analyst of the Israeli scene, is also one of the most controversial personalities one can come across.

He's terribly blunt, extremely analytical, at times quite difficult to understand because of a very peculiar accent, and partially deformed because of a chemistry lab accident some years ago. But he's also one of the most refreshingly candid and concise observers of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.

You may not like Israel Shahak—many don't—and you may not agree with him on crucial points. But you do have to respect him. And you do have to ponder his meticulously detailed and always provocative analysis.

For Israel Shahak is a tireless worker, a one-man "truth squad" roving from audience to audience illuminating the often hidden depths of the realpolitik political landscape as he goes. As a totally independent analyst he's free to speak his mind unlike most commentators who have to tread carefully on matters Mid-eastern.

And speak his mind is indeed what he does best.

"All the demands for a Palestinian state are useless" Shahak boldly asserts in his characteristic direct, no-nonsense manner. "I don't mean don't make them, I mean don't make them to (the US) Congress and the State Department. And because of this...the more the PLO is...threatening the American officials the more they are despised by them. The purpose of the 'dialogue' is to give time to the Israelis to crush the Intifada."

"What is important is to get the American Congress to quarrel with the Israelis", Shahak added in a talk we had over lunch during his recent visit to Washington.

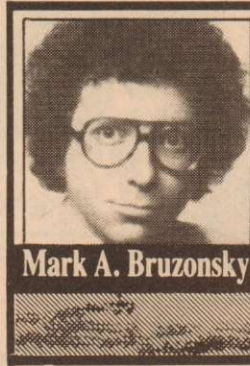
And to try to get just such a process started Shahak spent much of his time during his recent visit to the American seat-of-government on Capitol Hill proposing four specifics designed to get a quarrel going:

"While Secretary Baker has asked Israel to open schools, I am even more moderate. I give them (the Congressman) only the fact that even private lessons are prohibited on the West Bank. None of them, including the Black Congressmen's aides, knew about it. It's also prohibited for private Israelis to give lessons to West Bankers. I gave them the precedent of Soviet Jews, when the Soviet Union five or six years ago used to prohibit private lessons in Hebrew.

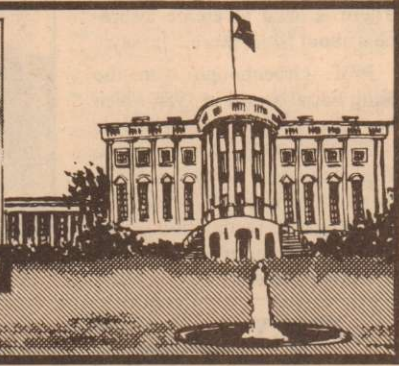
"The second suggestion is that American medical supplies are being held for up to a year. Let them exert pressure that medical supplies donated in this country will reach the Palestinians.

"Three. The Israeli policy about passes for doctors has been changed since April. Before this

## From



Mark A. Bruzonsky



## Washington

doctors and nurses during curfews had passes to attend to patients. So they should demand that doctors and nurses are given passes.

"Number four. They should demand that the rubber bullets with metal ball inside not be used any more."

Shahak is quite obviously far more than a tireless analyst. He's become a major activist and dedicated advocate. In a very real sense he's a one-man political lobby, a most unlikely Don Quixote without the romanticism, a man of courage and vision standing up to the powers that run both Israel and the US.

To my surprise, Shahak was greatly encouraged by his visit to Washington. Public opinion is shifting, he rightly discussed with me over lunch. But when the discussion turned to Congress I got the repeated impression that maybe because he's been in the political wilderness so long he misinterprets when a variety of congressional aides are willing to talk with and listen to him.

It's understandable I guess that he mistakes heightened interest for serious concern and allows discussion in itself to substitute for tangible forms of action.

Indeed in his conversation Shahak wavers between utter despair and a personal resurgence that seems to have him willing to personally lead the way forward in the new political battles now beginning to emerge.

In a sense it's a necessary contradiction combining Shahak's two basic dimensions—his analytical realism with his abundant personal hope that his personal mission really matters.

Actually Shahak's translations from the Hebrew press have been circulating in typewritten form for many years—a kind of Left Israeli *samizdat*—the word used in the 1970s and early 1980s to describe the underground "typewriter press" in the Soviet Union.

Behind the hard work though has always been a very clear sense of mission—the cause of justice and full human rights for both Israelis and Palestinians. Shahak clearly remembers the "Good Germans" who claimed they did not know as well as the

followers of Stalin who justified the purges, the mass slaughter, and the Gulag of prison camps all in the name of communism. For Shahak, the past as his guide, there is power in an individual's willingness to tirelessly translate, educate, advocate.

Beyond all else Shahak is a man of deep convictions who is pursuing a nearly religious personal political campaign.

Shahak has friends on the anti-Zionist Jewish Left in the US and more recently in the anti-Israel community that has been growing over the past few years. These friends are the ones who come up with the funds to bring him to the US for his more frequent speaking tours. His papers—translations from the Hebrew press that are of considerable value to those who cannot read Hebrew—are now much more widely distributed than ever before with AET, the American Educational Trust, which publishes *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, offering them to its audience.

"The important thing," Shahak continues, "is let them (Congress) begin to quarrel with Israel, and during this quarrelling they themselves will begin to get angry."

"The Israelis are trying to smash the Intifada. As enunciated by Shamir at the 'Solidarity Conference' in March he wants to hold what he has and not to give in to any threats. In America this means establishing a sort of veto power based on four groups: organised Jews, which is by far in terms of immediate power the most important and they are 100% behind Shamir. I say 'organised', I don't mean 'individual Jews', I mean 'organised.' The second group is the fundamentalists. Then the third group is the organised labour, I mean the AFL-CIO. And the fourth group can be summarised as the followers of Senator Helms on foreign policy.

"Those four groups give Israel, in Shamir's opinion, a very great power, especially negative power not to allow the US to make any initiatives that the Israelis strongly oppose."

"But at the same time when the pressure of American Jews becomes more negative, and therefore more obvious, they arouse an enormous amount of anger," Shahak adds.

"Therefore, my second aim is

to make any possible attacks, and any possible bad blood, between the American establishment and American public opinion and the organised Jews.

"I like to quote an article from *Haaretz* in which it is noted that the loyalty of American Jews to Israel is comparable to the loyalty of members of the Communist Party to Stalin. I've been quoting this article that appeared in *Haaretz* which compares the Jewish organisations in the Diaspora and their loyalty to Shamir with the loyalty of the Communist Party to Stalin. And I draw from this the conclusion that just as glasnost was established first in the Soviet Union and then the other communist parties followed out of loyalty or out of fashion, that the first change will take place in Israel and if organised Jewry here in the US will change it will be only out of loyalty or fashion and therefore it is useless to have anything to do with them. They are enemies and they are hopeless."

Asked if he has told this to the PLO which seems to be courting various American Jewish groups and personalities, and even sometimes taking their advice, Shahak responds that he tells the same thing to everyone with whom he speaks and that he's spoken with many Palestinians. Indeed, he was accompanied to lunch by a Palestinian journalist friend of his.

Asked then for his explanation of why the PLO is acting as it is, what he thinks, for instance, of what Nabeel Sha'ath has been saying and doing on his trips to Washington, Shahak's reaction takes a surprising turn.

He does not trust Nabeel Sha'ath.

Quite startled by this unequivocal assessment I then asked him what reaction he's had to his making a statement like that. "Everyone has either agreed or been silent, no one has said no", was Shahak's response.

Then asked for his views on why Yasser Arafat has been acting as he has, Shahak for the first time didn't try to offer an analysis. "I don't understand. I can tell you that the course (of Arafat) is disastrous, but I cannot understand why he is doing it. I am a scientist by training and the description of phenomena is one thing and particular reasons is quite another thing."

Asked what he thought the Israelis might do if things continue to get worse and they cannot stop the Intifada, Shahak doesn't back away from candidness. "The possibility of expelling a hundred thousand Palestinians always exists."

And asked what he thinks his contacts in Congress might do about that he again calls it straight. "Little could be expected but that they would provide blankets and tents and food."

More next week about Israel Shahak's outspoken views and how his materials are now being circulated in Washington and around the US.