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A Letter to all Good People

By Amos Kenan

Amos Kenan's political outlook is that of the extreme left and would find common ground with only a small minority of Israelis. However, this cry of anguish is relevant precisely because it comes from an articulate Israeli leftist who is outraged at what he considers to be a betrayal of Israel by his leftist comrades abroad.

I am for Cuba. I love Cuba. I am opposed to the genocide perpetrated by the Americans in Vietnam. But I am an Israeli, therefore I am forbidden to take all these stands. Cuba does not want me to love her. Someone has decided that I am permitted to love only the Americans. I don't mind so much that someone, especially the good people everywhere, have decided to outlaw me. I shall be able to get along without their help. But I do mind that I am not permitted any longer to love and hate according to my feelings, and according to my political and moral inclinations, and that I am refused invitation or even admittance to parties held by the good people. I am not permitted any longer to toast justice with a glass of champagne. I am not permitted to eat caviar and denounce the Americans. I am not permitted to stroll in the sun-drenched streets of Havana, arm-in-arm with my erstwhile good friends from St. Germain, Via Veneto and Chelsea, and celebrate the memory of Che Guevara, casting a threatening look at imperialism. I am also finally and absolutely forbidden to sign petitions of all sorts for human rights.

This situation drives me slightly out of my mind. Therefore I wish to relate a few confused, disconnected stories. Perhaps some good man will find the connection. One day an Israeli submarine sank in the Mediterranean with its 69 crew members. Its SOS was answered, among others, by the British, Turkish and Greek fleets. The Russian navy, which cruised very close to the location, did not join in the search. Moscow radio, in its Arab broadcasts, took the trouble to denounce the countries whose ships rushed to help the lost submarine. It is a sacred principle of seamen of all nations to hasten to the aid of distressed vessels. The Israeli submarine was not on a war mission, and Israel is not in a state of war with the Soviet Union.

I am not so naive as to believe that this is anti-semitism, Soviet-style. I have never believed that the Russians are guided, in their calculations, by such powerful and sincere emotions as anti-semitism, which is common to both progressive and reactionary camps. I know that the Russians conduct a cool and considered

pragmatic policy, and are guided by clear political considerations. This was a political move, carried out as a part of a political game. The meaning of this move can only be: Israel must be isolated from the civilised human community. The rules that apply to the civilised community, rules of honour, consideration and mutual aid, do not apply to me. I am out. There is only one more step to the conclusion: the shedding of my blood is no crime.

Forgive my brutal way of putting things. I cannot conceive of it otherwise. If this was a move in a game, the game must have an object. The object is the penetration of the Middle East, and let us assume, for the sake of arguments, that this is for the purpose of advancing world revolution and the overthrow of imperialism. The Middle East contains 100m. Arabs and 2.5m. Israelis. But it is not so easy, in our enlightened world, to wipe out 2.5m. people. A reason, and a justification, are needed. You cannot wipe out just like that. First of all you must outlaw. Therefore you must not invite an Israeli communist party to a convention of communist parties. Therefore you must not invite a leftist Israeli author to a conference of leftist authors in Havana. There are no more class distinctions. There are only national distinctions. Even an Israeli leftist is an imperialist. And an oil sheikh is a socialist. Therefore it is permissible to compare me to the Nazis. It is permissible to call me a Gauleiter. It is permissible to mobilise all of the world's conscientious people against me—and without them you cannot do it—and all this because there is an object looming beyond the horizon, an object for the sake of which this tactic is justifiable and useful.

Until quite recently, I also belonged to the Good People. Meaning that not only did I sit in cafes and sign petitions for the release of political prisoners in countries not my own, not only did I join proclamations, after sipping my aperitif, for the release of the downtrodden from the yoke of imperialism in places I shall never reach; I also did something against what seemed to me to be oppression and injustice in my own country. During the 20 years of the existence of the State of Israel I helped with my pen, in my regular newspaper column, the fight against the injustices committed against the Arab minority. And not by the pen only, but also in demonstrations, and also when arraigned before a military tribunal. I am used to being called a traitor by local patriots. During the Six Day War, in June 1967, the battalion I served in was ordered to supervise the demolition of four Arab villages: I considered it my duty to desert from my unit, to write a report of this action, and to send the copies to the General Staff of the army, to members of the government and to Knesset members. This report has been translated and circulated in the world as a proof of Israel's crimes.

But permit me to conclude the story. The action I undertook was in flagrant violation of any military law. I have no idea what would have happened to a Red Army soldier were he to violate national and military discipline in such a manner. After returning to my unit, I was ordered to present myself—I, in rank a private—before the general commanding all the divisions on that front. He told me that he had read my report, and considered it his duty to inform me that what had occurred was a regrettable error, which will not recur. Deep in my heart I disbelieved his statement that this was only a mistake. I was convinced that whoever ordered such an action did not expect such resistance from within—the men of my battalion refused to carry out the order—and was alarmed at the impression such an action might create abroad. But I was glad that he found it necessary to announce that this was only an error. I asked him how he intended to ensure that the 'error' will never recur. On the spot he signed an order permitting me free movement in all occupied territories, so that I could see with my own eyes that such an action had not recurred.

But since then, in all the peace-papers in the world, my report about the destruction of villages has been reprinted over and over again, as if it happened only yesterday, as if it is happening all the time. And this is a lie. It is like writing that witches have been burnt at the stake in England—omitting the date. I hereby request all those who believed me when I reported a criminal act, to believe me now too. And those who do not believe me now, I hereby request to disbelieve my former report too, and not to believe me selectively, according to their convenience. I should also add that the town of Kalkiliya, which began to be demolished during the writing of my report, is now in the process of being rebuilt, after the expelled inhabitants have been brought back. This does not mean that other injustices are not perpetrated now. The less you fight me, the more you would help me fight them.

Even the most leftist of men will not consent to be slaughtered when a sword is pointed at his throat. Even when the sword is a progressive one, it does not make it any the pleasanter. The trouble is that not a single serious person in the world believes today that Israel was really in danger of being annihilated. This is the optical illusion of 1968. The gigantic Goliath is threatening little David. The fact that Goliath is a giant, and that David is small, is only an optical illusion. If Goliath triumphs and tramples David under his feet, it is a sign that he really is a giant. But if little David beats the giant, people say: the giant David has trampled poor little Goliath in the dust. I claim that Israel played the role of David. And I claim that even now, after the stunning

victory, it still is little David who has indeed beaten the stunned Goliath, but Goliath still is a menacing giant. Today, no less than in June 1967, Israel is in danger of annihilation. Unless the enlightened world mobilises now, immediately, perhaps it will be too late. But I am afraid that there are not many people in the world today who will be sorry if victorious David is destroyed. A bitter suspicion rises in me that even the most enlightened among the most progressive people still adhere to the Christian tradition that they imbibed with their mothers' milk: Jew, stay on the cross. Never get off it. The day you get off the cross and hurl it at the heads of your crucifiers, we shall cease to love you.

Today the Arabs boast of waging a revolutionary guerrilla warfare. They claim to have copied the Viet Cong method of warfare and to apply it in the Middle East. They march with Che Guevara's picture. This makes me laugh. Just as Che Guevara's picture hanging in the luxurious salons of Montparnasse made me laugh. I have always wondered whether Che Guevara had a picture of Che Guevara hanging in his salon. What is a Viet Cong? The Viet Cong is not white flags on buildings. The Viet Cong means fighting to the last man. The Viet Cong of the Middle East, whether those who demonstrate with Che Guevara's picture like it or not, are we. We are prepared, at any moment to wage the battle to the death. After the death camps, we are left with only one supreme value: existence.

Our existence today, is inconvenient for those who work at the global balance of power. It is more convenient that there should be two camps, one white, the other black. We number, as I said before, only 2.5m. people. On the global map, what is the value of a few hundred thousand leftists, opposing the Eshkol government policy and striving for a genuine peace with the Arabs, who strive to liberate themselves from the one-way dependence on American power? Somebody has already decided to sacrifice us. The history of revolution is full of such sacrifices since the days of the Spanish War. At one time world revolution had been sacrificed on the altar of the revolution in one country. Today the calculation is somewhat subtler. Today they try to explain to us that there is an Arab socialism. That there is an Egyptian socialism, and an Algerian socialism. There is a socialism of slave-traders, and a socialism of oil magnates. There are all kinds of socialism, all aiming really at one and the same thing—the overthrow of imperialism, which happens to be one and indivisible. Once there was only a single kind of socialism, which fed on principles, some of them moral. On the day that morality died there was born the particular, conventional socialism, changing from place to place and from time to time, for which I have no other name but National Socialism.

I want to live. What can I do if Russia, China, Vietnam, India, Yugoslavia, Sartre, Russell, Castro, have all decided that I am made all of a piece? It is inconvenient for them to admit that there is an opposition in Israel too. Why should there be an opposition in Israel if in the Popular Democracies in Cuba or Algeria, there is only one party? And perhaps they do have pangs of conscience, but they have made their calculation, and found out that I am only one, only 10, only 100,000; and on the other side there are tens of millions, all led like a single man, in a single party, towards the light, towards the sun. And if so, who am I? I will tell you who I am: I am the man who will confuse and confound your progressive calculations. I have too much love for this vain world, a world of caviar, television, sunny beaches, sex and good wine. You go ahead and toast the revolution with champagne. I shall toast myself, my own life, bottle in one hand, rifle in the other.

You send Soviet arms to Egypt. You isolate me. And in order to make it easier to isolate me, you change my name. My flesh, which you eat, you call fish. You don't want to protect me—neither against the Arabs, nor against the Russians, nor against Dayan or Johnson. Moreover, when I try to call on you and tell you that I am against Dayan, against Eshkol, against Ben-Gurion, and ask for your help, you laugh at me and demand that I should return to the 4 June borders, unconditionally. Hold it! I refuse to play this game. If you give me back the pistol with which I tried to kill you, I won't kill you. Because I am a nice fellow. But if you don't give it back to me, I shall kill you, because you are a bad fellow. Why were the 4 June borders not peace borders on 4 June but will become peace borders now? Why were not the U.N. partition plan borders of 1947 peace borders then but will become so now? Why should I return the bandit his gun as a reward for having failed to kill me? I want peace peace peace peace peace peace. I am ready to give everything back in exchange for peace. And I shall give nothing back without peace. I am ready to solve the refugee problem. I am ready to accept an independent Palestinian state. I am ready to sit and talk. About everything, all at the same time. Direct talks, indirect talks, all this is immaterial. But peace. Until you agree to have peace, I shall give back nothing. And if you force me to become a conqueror, I shall become a conqueror. And if you force me to become an oppressor, I shall become an oppressor. And if you force me into the same camp with all the forces of darkness in the world, there I shall be.

There is no lack in Israel of rabid militarists. Their number is steadily increasing, the more our isolation becomes apparent. Nasser helps Dayan, Kosygin helps Eshkol. Fidel Castro helps the Jewish

chauvinists. Who of the world's giants cares how many more Jews, how many more Arabs, bleed to death in the Sinai sands? There is no lack here of mad hysterical militarists. All those quiet citizens who went out to war with K.L.M. handgrips and in laundry trucks, who scribbled on their tanks: 'We want Home'. All those who fought without anger, without hatred, only for their lives, are becoming militaristic, convinced that only Israeli power, and nothing else in the world, will ever help us.

The only ones who are prepared to defend me, for reasons I don't like at all, are the Americans. It is convenient for them, for the time being. You are flinging me towards America, the bastion of democracy and the murderer of Vietnam, who tramples the downtrodden peoples and spares my life, who oppresses the Negroes and supplies me with arms to save myself. You leave me no other alternative. You don't even offer me humiliating terms, to be admitted through the rear door into the progressive orgy. You don't even want me to overthrow my government. You only want me to surrender, unconditionally, and to believe the spokesmen of the revolution that henceforth no Jewish doctors will be murdered, and that they will limit themselves to the declaration that Zionism is responsible for the riots in Warsaw.

Very funny. The truth is that I and Sartre, two people with the same vision, more or less, with the same ideal, more or less, and if I may be permitted to impertinence, with the same moral level, more or less, are now at the two sides of the barricade. We have been pushed to both sides by the cold calculations of the people who sent us, or abandoned us. But the fact remains—these are not Americans shooting Russians, or capitalists shooting socialists, or freedom-fighters shooting the oppressors. It is I, shooting Sartre. I see him in my gun sights; he sees me in his gun sights. I still don't know which of us is faster, more skilled, or more determined to kill or be killed. Neither do I know who shall be more lucky—the one who has no other alternative, or the one who acts out of choice. One thing is clear to me; if I survive, I shall mourn Sartre's death more than he would mourn mine. And if that happens, I shall never be consoled until I wipe from under the heavens both the capitalists and the communists. Or they me. Or each the other. Or all destroy all. And if I survive even that, without a god but without prophets either, my life will have no sense whatsoever. I shall have nothing else to do but walk on the banks of streams, or on the top of the rocks, watch the wonders of nature, and console myself with words of Ecclesiastes, the wisest of men: "For the light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun."