

Prologue: Hope Is a Security Asset

Until I turned off my cell phone around midnight, it had been buzzing nonstop with friends and complete strangers calling to give me a piece of their mind. The prime-time interview I had given earlier that evening on the Channel Two news program had scandalized many of the one million viewers. “What the fuck were you thinking?” one particularly indignant fellow asked.

Who could blame them? It was late October 2000, and Israelis were reeling from a resurgence of terror attacks. The day before, a mob in Ramallah had murdered two Israeli reservists with metal bars and knives. Had I been a peacenik who denied our right to defend ourselves, with lethal force when necessary, people wouldn’t have minded what I said because they wouldn’t have listened. But for the former director of the Shin Bet, or “Shabak” — the Israeli mash-up of the FBI and the Secret Service — to express the slightest empathy for our enemies was like spitting on the country I had served since I was an eighteen-year-old sea commando.

Instead of calling for Palestinian heads on pikes, I had come out with the unalloyed truth: PLO leader Yasser Arafat, the man Israelis loved to blame for all the mayhem, couldn’t have stopped the bloodletting even if he’d wanted to. His people would have lynched him had he tried. My experiences in and out of the Shabak interrogation room — along with the friends I’ve buried and enemies I’ve killed — shattered my lifelong preconceptions about Palestinians. If we wanted to end terrorism, we couldn’t continue regarding them as eternal enemies, and we needed to stop dehumanizing them as animals on the prowl. They are people who desire, and deserve,

the same national rights we have. The people who lynched our two soldiers had lost hope that the Israeli government would ever end the occupation and allow the Palestinians to be free. “And we’ve given them little reason to trust us,” I concluded.

I’ve always been a strange bird, an outsider to the society I served, and I lost no sleep over people’s recriminations that night. The following morning at around six, my wife Biba and I set out on an early walk with our two dogs from our home in Kerem Maharal, a moshav, or cooperative community, on the southern slopes of Mount Carmel. After passing through the high white security fence the government erected around our home during my years at the Shabak to prevent a potential assassin from getting a clear shot at me, we headed down a dirt path to tend our olive grove. If you look around our moshav — and for years I was too blinkered to do so — you’ll find traces of the past at every turn. The newer part of our house was built in the early 1950s to shelter Holocaust survivors from Czechoslovakia; the much older part, made of quarried stone, once belonged to an Arab family who built it when Kerem Maharal was still the prosperous Arab village of Ijzim, the second largest in the Haifa District, home to doctors and teachers and to the farmers who tended the fields that now belong to us. Whoever owned our house fled when Israeli forces took the town during the 1948 war.

On the right side of the dirt path is another Arab-built house with trees growing from cracks in the walls, and at the end of the path, just past the stables, is an old farm building with a lock still hanging from a broken front door. I can imagine someone showing the rusty key to his grandchildren in the West Bank, Jordan, or Lebanon while retelling the story of their loss of Palestine — what they call the *Nakba*. The Catastrophe.

History is everywhere in a country where you can't dig a hole without turning up some trace from eight strata of time. Canaanites, Israelites from the First and Second Temple periods, Persians, Greeks, Byzantines, Arabs, and Ottomans all established settlements in our area, and a Roman road leads up from our valley to a hilltop, from which you can see the Mediterranean several miles away.

But I didn't have the luxury of contemplating ancient history that morning. In the fields, just as we began pruning branches, my cell phone buzzed with a call from a man whose name I recognized, Aryeh Rutenberg. I didn't need a secret police file on him to know he was a big shot in Israel's media and advertising world, a man adept at branding banks, yogurt, rock stars — and politicians: He was one of the pundits who helped the Labor Party's Ehud Barak beat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party in the elections a couple of years earlier.

Without explaining why, he asked to see me in person, so I invited him to my cramped office in Tel Aviv where I worked as chairman of a drip irrigation company, the job I took after retiring from the Shabak.

Two days later I greeted Rutenberg with a firm handshake.

"Thanks for taking the time to meet me, Mr. Ayalon."

"Please, call me Ami."

I asked what I could do for him, though I assumed he was there to do in person what people had been doing for two days straight, denounce me as a turncoat.

"Ami, that interview the other night . . ." he began, just as I had expected. He went on to explain that he had been taking out the trash when his wife, ill with terminal cancer, called out, "Aryeh, come, come! You're not going to believe this!" Seeing a

former director of the Shabak on TV was shocking enough. From the Shin Bet's beginning in the 1940s until 1996, when with great reluctance I took over the agency in the wake of Yitzhak Rabin's murder, the identity of the organization's director was a closely held state secret. He remained a shadowy figure working behind a curtain of anonymity and intrigue, the agency's motto being "Defender That Shall Not Be Seen." My predecessor was known simply as "K," like the protagonist in Kafka's *The Castle*, or "M" in the James Bond movies. Now the newly retired "Defender" not only was on TV but was spouting heresies.

Aryeh, a rational-minded conservative in the world of Israeli politics, said his jaw dropped when he heard what I had to say. He then lectured me on what I and every Israeli knew: As Prime Minister Barak had declared, Arafat and the Palestinians paid lip service to peace but really wanted to drive the Jews into the sea. They were no partners. Behind Arafat's mask was an incorrigible enemy. What I had to say was, in his opinion, "bullshit."

I repeated to Aryeh what I had said on TV, that this "no partner" business was claptrap. I had said the same to Prime Minister Barak when, following the failed summit organized by President Clinton at Camp David, he had asked for my help as the former Shin Bet director selling his "no partner" mantra to the international press.

"Does Arafat deep down really want peace with us?" I asked Aryeh rhetorically. "Go ask a psychiatrist what's deep down inside him. But I can tell you this: Barak never even tried to find a partner in him."

During our short conversation I didn't have time to take him through my personal history and all of the changes I'd gone through over the years. Growing up on a kibbutz I

had been taught that not only were we Jews a people fighting for our survival, demanding rights like everyone else and resolved to fight for them; we were also revolutionaries whose Zionism gave us the right to expand our settlements to all areas of the Land of Israel. I entered military service at the age of eighteen prepared to defend a three-thousand-year-old connection that nothing, not the Romans, not the Arab conquest, not the Crusades, and not the Holocaust, had severed.

In Flotilla 13, the Israeli version of the Navy SEALs, where I served for nearly twenty years, Palestinian militants were mere targets I took out without flinching. The essence of my ethos as a fighter was an unswerving fidelity to facts as I saw them: My men and I had to kill the enemy because the Arabs would never willingly accept our claims. Killing for survival and defense of our rights as Jews to the Land of Israel would be our fate probably until the end of time.

As commander of the Israeli navy for four years, my views remained the same.

During my time in the Shabak, however, this way of seeing the world gave way to a new set of facts. In the sea commandos and later in the navy I had learned that our five senses are frequently incapable of detecting what is below the surface. To do this we need a different set of sensors: in the case of submarine warfare, for instance, sonar. But fighting terrorism as director of the Shin Bet required developing sensors that took me beyond my customary us-versus-them thinking. Whatever you call it — empathy, understanding, pulling my head out of the sand — to address the root causes of terrorism, I had to first try to actually understand the terrorists, as well as their families, neighbors, and friends. I had to reckon with Palestinians' stories — their psychology, their feelings of humiliation, their rage.

Seeing Palestinians as people changed me. I saw them no longer as abstract targets but as people with dreams mostly thwarted because of Israelis' determination to actualize our own dreams. Learning to view Palestinians as human beings with rights alerted me to a basic flaw in our approach to security: Our absence of empathy corrupted our ability to assess dangers and opportunities. Fear made us overreact.

My work in combating Islamist terror was still so highly classified that I couldn't give Aryeh details about working with Arafat and his top security people, men who at one time I would have shot without blinking. What I said, instead, was the simple truth: Palestinians had been my partners, and they could be Israel's partners in the future. Of that I hadn't the slightest doubt. Politicians, journalists, and people sitting in front of the TV after dinner could perhaps be forgiven for neatly dividing up the world into groups of friends or foes; those of us on the front line could not. I told Aryeh I could prove with almost mathematical precision that when Israel carries out anti-terrorist operations in a political context of hopelessness, the Palestinian public supports violence, because they have nothing to lose.

Aryeh wasn't buying it. "I'll believe you when I hear Palestinian leaders publicly affirm Israel's right to exist as a state," he said. "If they do, I'll gladly help you convince the Israeli public that we have partners for peace."

"I'll do it," I shot back. I told him I'd make it my business to seek Palestinian leaders willing to do exactly that.

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My pledge to Aryeh, coupled with the Holy Land's rapid descent into a terrorist bloodbath, led me to travel to London the next year, 2001, for a panel discussion among

prominent Israelis and Palestinians of the ongoing mutual slaughter I had worked in vain for years to prevent.¹

With the blessing of Prime Minister Tony Blair, the British Foreign Office served as official host to a meeting organized by the London School of Economics professor Mary Kaldor. We met on a drizzly day in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office building in Whitehall. Ascending the stone steps off King Charles Street, I admired the allegorical statues representing the gods of art, law, and commerce. *Funny*, I thought while closing my umbrella, *the sculptor left out Ares, the god of war*. Inside the imposing stone structure, constructed for administering the world's greatest empire, I continued up the grand marble staircase and then down a corridor to a room lined with polished oak panels. During World War II code breakers had done their work inside this chamber, as good a place as any to try to decipher where the explosion of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories was taking us.

Among the Palestinians invited to the talks, I recognized three. One was the pollster Khalil Shikaki. I knew his family well. His brother was assassinated for his role as a founder of the terror group Islamic Jihad. At the Shabak I studied Khalil's scientifically conducted polls, because they explained the thinking of ordinary Palestinians in a way that no blindfolded prisoner in a dungeon ever could.

Another participant familiar to me was the philosopher Sari Nusseibeh, the president of Al Quds University in East Jerusalem and Arafat's top man in Jerusalem.

Finally there was Dr. Eyad Sarraj, a Palestinian psychiatrist, another man whose work I had studied during my days at the Shin Bet. I'd come to regard him as a useful sensor for detecting and interpreting the psychological undercurrents of the terrorist

mind. Born in Beersheba in 1944, a year before I came into the world, Sarraj fled with his family to Gaza in 1948. In 2001 he was the head of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights, a watchdog organization in Gaza. And as a psychiatrist he worked with children suffering from the post-traumatic stress of having parents or family members arrested, maimed, or killed — by us. Children beaten by our soldiers, I read in his extensive publications on the subject, all too often grow up to commit acts of terrorist violence. Or as W. H. Auden famously observed in a poem marking the outbreak of World War II:

*I and the public know
what all schoolchildren learn
those to whom evil is done
do evil in return.*

Sarraj's curriculum vitae also includes time in a Gaza prison because he wrote publicly against Arafat's dictatorial regime.

The first session was surprisingly absent of rancor. The soft carpeted magnificence of the commonwealth building exerted a calming effect. During the break I headed to a table piled high with refreshments. Just as I was stirring creamer into bad English coffee, I noticed out of the corner of my eye — I was trained to pick up on such things — Dr. Sarraj peering at me through steel-rimmed glasses. I turned to meet his gaze, and he said, "Hi, Ami, how are you?"

I appreciated hearing him call me by my first name.

We stood for a moment assessing each other. His bearing, in a stylish blue suit, was almost aristocratic. Though it wasn't yet noon, he wore a five-o'clock shadow, and a bright white T-shirt peeked out from behind the unbuttoned top button of his dress shirt,

which was a shade of blue that matched his suit. I was wearing a dress shirt and jacket my wife Biba had packed for me, a departure from the anti-bourgeois aesthetic of my socialist kibbutz upbringing.

When I took his hand and gripped it firmly, the tenderness in his twinkling brown eyes surprised me. I can only imagine what he was thinking at that moment. In the popular Palestinian imagination, the head of the Shabak is a vicious bone-breaker and ruthless executioner.

“So good to finally meet you,” I said.

“Likewise, though I won’t conceal my disappointment with you,” he said with a half smile, like a man laying a snare.

“And why is that?” I took another sip of bad coffee.

“Why, for not congratulating us. That’s not very sporting of you.” His English sounded like he learned it from the BBC World Service or *Masterpiece Theatre*. Dr. Sarraj poured himself a cup of coffee, blew on it a bit, and slurped it black. With his other hand he shook out a neatly folded handkerchief to wipe off the sweat that had formed on his forehead since I’d approached.

“I would be happy to congratulate you, my friend, just tell me for what.”

“Why, for defeating you!”

“You defeating us?” I stammered back, incredulous. By that stage in what was now being called the Second Intifada, the proportion of Palestinians to Israelis killed was in the range of one hundred to one. We were mowing them down by the dozens.

“Indeed, at long last we are on the side of victory,” he continued, with the same pleasant countenance, the sweat still gleaming on his forehead. “What do you military

men call it? Oh yes, we have achieved a balance of power. In the end Hamas's suicide bombings have canceled out your F-16s. For such a feat, we are savoring our victory."

Nothing inflames me more than praising terrorism. I jabbed my finger at his chest. "Dr. Sarraj, let me remind you that we've killed hundreds of your people in just the last few weeks." I thought simple facts could wipe the cheerful look off his face. "What's worse, you're about to lose the crumbs of liberation you have. You've fought for decades to win your freedom, and for what? Martyrs and graveyards? You call that *victory*?"

Moving two or three steps backward, almost as if he expected me to splash coffee in his face, he grabbed a Danish and took a quick bite. "Yes, that's precisely what I'm saying."

His next remark offended my professional pride: "After all this time, you still don't understand us, do you?" His liquid brown eyes widened. "We've lived in terror since 1967. That both our peoples now live in fear is a victory for us."

My thoughts turned to a recent Hamas attack. Twenty-two-year-old Saeed Hotari, a pious Muslim and karate aficionado, left the West Bank town of Qalqilya disguised as an Orthodox Jew in a kaftan. No one paid him any mind when he boarded a bus to Tel Aviv. His target was the Dolphinarium, a beachside discotheque popular with Russian Jewish teenagers. The young girls standing in line outside the club dismissed Saeed as a religious nut pounding on his chest like an angry Moses and rambling on in bad Hebrew that "something's going to happen." No one suspected that behind his costume was a suicide vest tightly packed with hundreds of ball bearings as lethal as bullets.

The ensuing explosion killed fourteen Israeli teenagers. After the massacre, Saeed's neighbors in Qalqilya arranged flowers in his honor in the shapes of a heart and of a suicide vest. Children vowed to follow him to the martyrs' paradise.

"In our mutual experience of collective trauma," he said, adjusting his spectacles, "we are at long last equals."

That maddening smile returned to his face gradually, the way you squeeze a trigger. I pride myself on my quick comebacks, but words failed me. All I managed to do was spit out, "Go to hell, Doctor!"

I had stuck out my neck on Israeli television by insisting the Palestinian people are not our enemies, and here comes this man I'd long respected seemingly justifying the kind of mass murder I'd spent my lifetime fighting. *Fuck you!* was what I really wanted to say.

"As you wish, Ami." With a gentlemanly nod of his head, he swallowed the rest of his pastry and returned to his table.

My heart rate slowly returned to normal as I walked back to my table to prepare for the next panel discussion. From my seat I noticed the doctor watching me, his expression unchanged, lips pressed tightly together, as though he had slipped something in my coffee and was expecting me to crumble to the carpet.

My stomach in knots, I scratched at the scar tissue on my neck, a reminder of my own history of armed conflict. What the devil did he mean by victory? In pure military terms our dominance was overwhelming. With one word from the minister of defense, our fighter pilots could pulverize Gaza.

The more I thought about it, however, the more I had to acknowledge that we Israelis had never felt more defeated. How could we call ourselves winners if we were afraid to board a bus or sit in a bar? I can't say how long I remained lost in thought, but in that interlude, all my assumptions of war crumbled. In classical war theory, massive force is supposed to compel the enemy leadership to submit to the victor's will. Here the opposite was happening. The more we employed our vast military superiority to pound the Palestinian population, the more Hamas grew in strength. It was a variation on the old dilemma of winning every battle and losing the war. We Israelis had become like the ancient Egyptians facing our own biblical ancestors in the Book of Exodus: "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad." The irony did not escape me. In fact, it overwhelmed me.

Something the wheelchair-bound founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, told his followers in his high-pitched whisper before we assassinated him suddenly clicked: "The Jews are stupid. They think with their atom bombs they can defeat Islam; no, faith and patience will lead to victory." Those of us in Israel's massive and sophisticated security apparatus — the IDF, the Mossad, and the Shin Bet — thought we were always one step ahead of our Islamist enemies. But they'd been watching us even more closely, and we hadn't even noticed. Hamas terror masters didn't expect to defeat us militarily. Through fear, they wanted us to overreach, to employ tanks and hundred-million-dollar fighter planes. They wanted to bankrupt our treasuries and our democratic ideals. Most of all, they wanted to show us that they would never surrender, and for us, in turn, to demonstrate to the Palestinian population, and to people around the world, that Israelis could never be their partners — and we'd fallen for it.

Now I understood the peace-loving, violence-hating doctor's point. The Islamists were winning because most Israelis were out for Palestinian blood. They were winning because each time a bereaved Palestinian mother wept on CNN she undermined what we needed most: confidence that we could win the war on terror without betraying our values. They were winning because everyone, from the prime minister down to the cabdriver and the advertising executive, repeated like a mantra, "No partner." This ideological us-versus-them approach, I suddenly realized, was the most lethal threat to Israeli security, and to our survival as a democratic Jewish state, because it left the Palestinians with nothing to lose.

Our most pressing security question was, therefore, no longer a military one. It was how best to foster hope among Palestinians. Our security was contingent upon millions of Palestinians, in their ramshackle cities and squalid camps, believing they could soon be free from our domination. Hope, Palestinian hope, was essential to Israel's security. Only when the Palestinians believe that the political process will lead to an end to the occupation and discrimination, and to the establishment of their own state alongside Israel, will they stop supporting terror. My mind returning to the pledge I had given Aryeh, I said to myself, *I need to find a partner. Right here. Right now.*

I returned to the panel table and proposed to Professor Kaldor that we scrap the planned discussion and instead probe the meaning of victory in the modern Middle East. Shedding all pretenses, we began shouting over one another as if we were haggling in a bazaar. Partway through the rowdy debate, I quietly sketched on a napkin several points that, if agreed to by all parties, I thought could give Israelis sustainable security, and deliver hope to the Palestinians.

When there was an opening, I held up the napkin and read my list of points. I then asked who among my fellow Israelis or Palestinians would be willing to publicly support a document based on the principles I had just outlined. An awkward silence ensued, and most of my fellow panelists averted their eyes, with one exception. The philosopher Sari Nusseibeh raised his hand.

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Sari and I would eventually launch a grassroots peace movement based on the notes I'd written on the napkin. By 2004 more than 450,000 Israelis and Palestinians had signed off on our plan to end the occupation and establish a Palestinian state in the ancient biblical lands we Jews call Judea and Samaria.

The genesis of this book came five years later, after an Israeli publisher asked me to write my memoirs. I wanted to tell the truth, to write frankly about my personal involvement combating terrorism — battles fought, men killed, friends buried, and attacks thwarted — and to update war theory by exploring and extolling the importance of hope.

But years then passed without my writing a word. In retrospect, it was for the best. Until 2013, the same year Dr. Sarraj died of cancer, I had not gained an understanding of two elemental things: myself and my country.

In 2013 a book of philosophy shattered my lifelong views of myself and of my country: *A Political Theory for the Jewish People* by Tel Aviv University law professor Chaim Gans. Gans translated for me the story of my life into a meaningful theoretical framework. As individuals, we Israelis, citizens of the Start-Up Nation, are optimists with can-do attitudes. But our body politic — our voting habits, military tactics, and sense of

our place in the world — are dominated by fear. From his book's opening pages, Gans forced me to turn my tools of interrogation inward. At long last I began to understand myself — and to understand the country I had served all of my life. The source of Israeli pessimism is not Palestinian hostility. It came from us — or more precisely, from the fatally flawed Zionist stories we tell ourselves about the past.

Reading Gans's book set me on a painful inner journey, a harsh cross-examination of the previous decades of my past, and a clear-eyed consideration of my own core beliefs and my country's identity. At the same time, his book awakened me to the need to change the Zionist narrative I was raised on, and to look for an alternative one, a way of viewing the past that could restore our faith in the future, and quite possibly save Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

I make no claim to superior intelligence or morality. I'm not a historian or scholar, nor am I plagued by guilt for the people I've killed. I don't believe in utopias. No matter what we do, terrorism, like violent crime, will continue to plague our society and other Western-style democracies. To quote a 2007 book by the British general Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, "War no longer exists. Confrontation, conflict, and combat undoubtedly exist all around the world." War today is "war amongst the people." To win this kind of war, our missiles do more harm than good because they wreak so much collateral damage that entire populations rush into the arms of our enemies. To kill terrorist leaders without addressing the despair of their supporters is a fool's errand and produces more frustration, more despair, and more terrorism. The more we "win" such a misbegotten war — the more we debase civil society and democratic norms — the more we turn our society into an Orwellian dystopia where truth and lies are indistinguishable.

I am also not trying to place the blame on others in Israeli society, such as West Bank settlers who proclaim the Jews' God-given right to Greater Israel. If Israel becomes an Orwellian dystopia, it won't be thanks to a handful of armed theologians dragging us into the dark past. The secular majority will lead us there motivated by fear and propelled by silence.

Through this book, I hope to show that democracies can only win their ongoing struggle against terror by taking up the humanistic values upon which our societies are based as both our sword and our shield. Crude nationalism, a resort to lies and propaganda, fearmongering, and what I've come to call the "incremental tyranny" that increasingly plagues modern democracies will not defeat terror. Only the liberal values of pluralism and equality can, and hopefully will.