

Freeing the Press

By David Kraemer

The following brief political comment, speaking of the policies of the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, was quoted in *The New York Times* on Tuesday, May 15, 2001:

Only a revenge-seeking fool could believe that eliminations and missile fire, the demolition of neighborhoods, the killing of soldiers and civilians, and the destruction of homes could restore personal calm and security.

The source? Given the harsh tenor of the critique, one might suppose that this comment comes from the pen of a Palestinian journalist. Or perhaps from a left leaning European paper. Or even from an American paper with an anti-Israel bias (as many assume of *The Times* itself). But, in actuality, the quote is from an editorial in the right leaning Israeli paper, *Yediot Ahronot*. The critique is an Israeli critique of the policies of Israel's own government, and it is only the tip of the iceberg.

On a trip to Israel over this past Passover holiday, I was reminded of how open and direct the Israeli press can be. I was stimulated by critiques the likes of which I haven't seen articulated (in the American press, Jewish or general) in months, and I was excited by debates I had forgotten could take place. There, in the Hebrew press, I found a healthy exchange of ideas—precisely the sorts of comments one would expect and hope for in a healthy democracy.

Let me share another example. An op-ed piece published in *Ha'aretz* (liberal) for Yom Ha-atzmaut questioned the nature of an Independence Day celebration that ignores a substantial minority of the nation's population (Israeli Palestinian Arabs). The piece accused Israel's Jewish citizens of ignoring the history of the Arab minority completely in its celebrations. It remarked that the early Zionist myth was always built on a lie: the (false) notion that a people without a land returned to "a land without a people." It observed that Israel, in its early years, went out of its way to erase any trace of the 418 Arab towns and villages that were abandoned and destroyed during the War of Independence. It lamented the fact that Israeli Palestinian Arabs were never permitted to mourn their losses and publicly preserve their memories. And this was only the beginning.

When was the last time you read comments like this in the American Jewish press? How many American Jews even know the facts and realities recalled in this column?

The truth is that American Jews are remarkably ignorant about the history of the modern state of Israel. They are similarly ignorant about the range of political

discourse that typifies the Israeli body politic. And this ignorance leads to a narrow and impoverished Israel-discourse amongst Jews in this country. But this lamentable situation is not the fault of American Jews in general, for they have no access to the Israeli press. They depend upon their local papers or, at best, upon local Jewish papers to learn what they can about Israeli news and analysis. It is the Jewish communal leadership and the Jewish papers they control (directly or by indirect influence) that are at fault in this matter, and they are doing no one a favor by perpetuating the narrow Israel-orthodoxy that characterizes American-Jewish reportage and commentary.

American Jewish papers can vastly improve the quality of discourse about Israel by taking one simple step: in their weekly editions, they should include translations of a representative range of political commentary from the editorial and op-ed pages of the Israeli papers. By doing so, they would help assure that American Jews (and others who follow events in the Mideast) understand that few things can be taken for granted when talking about Israel, its government and its policies. They would learn that critique is healthy and that those who express critique are neither anti-Israel nor anti-Semitic. As it is reasonable to believe that Israel, at present, has no partners for peace and that only an iron fist will suppress the Palestinian insurrection, it is also reasonable to believe that Sharon is a “revenge-seeking fool,” governing as though nothing fundamental has changed since the 1950s. Both views are legitimate; neither expression is the mark of a “traitor” to Israel’s cause.

By opening the range of commentary and reportage on Israel—by taking advantage of what Israel herself already produces—we would overcome more than the current American Jewish ignorance. The narrowness of discourse concerning Israel has taught many younger Jews that there is little to engage in this discussion that is of any interest. The lack of interest experienced by many is only aggravated by the lack of open debate. If they were to learn of the debates already conducted in Israel, debates that would immeasurably enliven American discussion as well, their interest might well be piqued. Perhaps, if the discussion were to be opened, more Jews of all kinds would find a way in.