

**"Israel and the World
at the Dawn of 2004"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 15th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

Participants were invited to identify, share and explore their experiences and preoccupations as they took up their various roles in the external social world. There was a great eagerness on the part of the participants to share their experiences and ideas.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this part the participants were asked to collectively identify the major themes arising from the material of Part One.

The very active participation in Part One and the diversity of interesting motifs continued in Part Two, to the extent that not all the smaller groups, into which the participants were divided in order to formulate major themes, succeeded in carrying out the task. Half of the groups presented long, non-selective lists of topics.

Eventually, two major themes were identified:

1. *From radical changes to disintegration or liberation.*

A deep distress concerning the shattering of national myths and the collapse of structures and ideologies intensifies the uncertainty about the future. Inundation with local and global information destabilizes and blurs familiar boundaries. These changes are experienced in the group in two contrasting ways: as leading to destruction and disintegration or as an opportunity for liberation and renewal. "Disintegration" included growing socio-economic differences arising from the global economy; corruption in the governing political party; increasing violence in schools and in society at large; and loneliness, dissociation and helplessness in dealing with the situation. "Liberation" emphasized the enormous scope for personal activism in society at present and the increase in opportunities for social activity and creativity in many areas.

2. *Israel's complex position in the world.*

The participants oscillated between resentfulness of the watchful, even persecutory eye of Europe and guilt over the violence coming out of Israel. Some members wondered whether Israel is being used as a laboratory for the world to test relations between religions and nations; others weighed up the pros and cons of an alliance with the United States versus an alliance with Europe, if that were at all possible. The question arose whether Israel can still serve as a "light to the nations".

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Analysis:

The third part began with a feeling of dissatisfaction with the group's tendency to formulate very abstract themes which did not clearly express the social phenomena preoccupying the members. One member drew attention to the fact that it was difficult to speak "here" (in the listening post), because he was disturbed by the idea that the Israeli listening post would probably be the object of the most intense interest on the part of the other nations participating in the event. From here on, the major part of the work of the group revolved around the relationship and relatedness between Israel and Europe. These relations were described with the help of a number of metaphors that continued the dichotomizing tendency from Part One. The group fantasized about the role that Israel plays for Europe, shifting between the image of a weapon and that of a dove. Does Europe wish to use Israelis to represent its own aggressiveness and combativeness, so that it doesn't have to own those aspects of itself? Or does Europe wish to impose on Israel the position of a dove, more in tune with the ideals of a unified Europe than with the Middle Eastern cauldron? The peaceful dove, it was felt, could easily turn into a slaughtered dove. Another metaphor used to characterize Israel-Europe relations was that of parents and children. Some members of the group spoke of Europe from the position of children, eager to please their critical parents and fearful of rejection. Others spoke as parents, wishing to remind Europe of the origins of Western culture and complaining about Europe's inability to understand us Israelis.

Caught between these extremes, the group voiced a dilemma: can Israel and Israelis be aligned with European culture and yet remain autonomous and creative? At the same time, in juxtaposition to these extremes, there was also a strong voice in the group reminding us that the local reality is a far more complex network of real relations between Israelis and Palestinians, a fact which goes virtually unrecognized both in internal discussions and in Israel's dialogue with Europe. The group wondered how this centre got silenced.

Out of this rather guilty and depressed position of self-abnegation before Europe, a wish was expressed by one of the participants "to have a little Yona (Yona [Jonah] - the name of one of the members of the group, and also meaning "dove") growing in me that would find the good things". This wish was interpreted by the convenor as the wish of the group to replace the *bulbul* (children's nickname for penis and also the name of a bird) with a dove in order to look better in the eyes of the world. At this point mention was also made of an incident that occurred just before the beginning of the meeting. Noticing that one of the participants entered the room with an earphone in his ear, another participant remarked that "[her] ear refuses to hold an earphone." It seemed as if the earphone symbolized at one and the same time the inundation with global information and our feeling of being listened to. From here on, more space was given to the search for what is autonomous and unique in Israeli society. This, among other things, took the form of mentioning and playing with the meaning of new Hebrew words, both "high" and "low", a process which was accompanied by a great deal of pleasure from the intimacy involved in the creation of a language "which only we can understand". There was a burst of merriment when one member reminded the group of the song "*abanibi*" (the title of the song comprises the word "I" in a well-known children's secret language), which won the Eurovision song contest a number of years ago. The energy in the group rose even further and triggered further associations related to sexuality and

fertilization. Amid much laughter and relaxation of tension the convenor commented that perhaps there was a fantasy in the group that Israel could fertilize Europe.

The event ended with the euphoric feeling that the group had rediscovered its vitality and uniqueness. One of the members wondered, as we were going out the door, whether we did not have the potential for "Euro-vision".

Four interrelated hypotheses were formulated on the basis of the material from this session:

Hypothesis 1:

When there is an absence of a strong ideology, such as religion, or a socio-political doctrine, that holds the wider center together, and in the time of a glut in global information which overwhelms and undoes known and familiar boundaries, the voices that are heard most vociferously are those of the political, religious, social and economic extremes. The result is a conversation in which nobody is heard, in which the center is silenced and "cannot hold". There is much anxiety concerning the uncertainty inherent in the present state, whether it is a situation that will lead to change and renewal or one that will bring about destruction.

Hypothesis 2:

The dynamics of uncertainty and the disappearance of the moderate center's voice suggest the dominance of the paranoid-schizoid position in this country and the world over ("we have lost the capacity to mourn"). This clarifies many aspects of the relationship and relatedness between Israel and Europe: the way each side tends to split off and project unwanted and uncontained parts on the other. Thus, Europe wants to export aggression and its utopian desire for European unification to the turbulent Middle-East, while Israel turns Europe into a persecutor so that it can remain the eternal victim. Even more acute splitting and projection is apparent between the West and "third world" nations, and between the Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures.

Hypothesis 3:

The tension in Europe and in the Western World in general regarding Israel and its relations with the Arab world and particularly with the Palestinians is very troublesome and adds a great deal of tension both to life within Israel and to Israel's external relations. This over-involvement on the part of Europe seems to suggest that Israel is perceived as Europe's front line with the mysterious Moslem world which is threatening it. Israel, then, for the West, is a kind of frontier laboratory for the investigation of conflict resolution. The reason for Europe's insistence on a definitive solution on the Israel-Palestinian front may stem from its own growing fear of the dangers inherent in the blurring of internal boundaries and the problematic relations between nations and religions. The interference and pressure for a solution, although well-intentioned and important, do not always appear to derive from a real attentiveness and interest in the inhabitants of this area and their problems. It is as if a quick solution in the Middle East will be proof that the dangers threatening Europe can also be eliminated.

Hypothesis 4:

The release from the necessity of "marching in tune" with a unified Western block in an overly politically correct stance, the "refusal of an earphone" representing the resistance to listening to the outside, and the possibility of talking in a unique, even "low" language, energized the group into spontaneity and creativity. Could it be that this

"separation fence" constructed by the group is also a formula for liberation on the national level? Does Europe, which still adheres to the ideals of unification and open boundaries, faces a similar dilemma? And is there anything in the state of affairs in the Middle-East that could serve as a "Euro-vision"?

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