

**"Israel and the World
at the Dawn of 2006"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 12th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES AND PREOCCUPATIONS

Participants were invited to identify, share and explore their experiences and preoccupations in their various social roles - at work or in the community; in other words, this part was concerned with the participants' external social world.

Part 2: THE IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

In collecting the points that arose from the discussion in Part One, it was fairly easy to identify three major themes:

1. Rapid pace of life and pressure: much "doing" and not enough "being".
2. Crisis of identity - accommodation of the "other"; immigration and cultural displacement; problems of pluralism; fundamentalism; blurring of boundaries; tension between expanding global possibilities and withdrawal and reductionism; economic and ideological polarities in society.
3. Fatherlessness - tension between fear of and longing for strong leadership around Sharon's tenure as Prime Minister; corruption; fear of invasion.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Analysis:

The first theme that emerged quite forcefully was the shared feeling of the pressure of everyday life, the feeling of a race against time. In one instance this was expressed in the feeling of being overwhelmed by responsibilities and the need to reduce activities; in another, there was the feeling of not keeping up with reading and learning. The first associations revealed a fear of underlying chaos, both on the personal and the socio-political level, as if the social and political structures formed only a thin layer that could be easily destroyed to reveal the disorder underneath. As the discussion developed, it was suggested that the increased "doing" was the result of anxiety, and most of the ensuing discussion focused on identifying and analyzing the sources of this anxiety, a discussion which revealed the underlying connection between the three identified themes.

One source of the anxiety was felt to be the tension between the expanding, seemingly endless possibilities opened up by globalization, wealth, new avenues of discourse, increased creativity and almost instant achievements, such as the young millionaires of hi-tech, and the accompanying fears of blurring of boundaries and difficulty in dealing with affluence and complexity. An example of new possibilities of interaction was the mention of a conference on the influence of poverty groups on mass communication in which both researchers and members of poor communities participated. In contrast, there was an awareness of the widening of the gaps between rich and poor as a result of the affluence.

The affluence, expansion and complexity inevitably threaten communal cohesion and boundaries and were seen by the group to be the major cause of an identity crisis (the second theme). Cultural pluralism, for example, encourages friction among groups and animosity towards outsiders, including increased Anti-Semitism and hostility towards Moslem communities. This leads to withdrawal and a desire to re-find oneself and one's identity in more traditional and local values and structures. For example, it was noted that despite the fact that the global listening post was advertised among all Ofek members, almost all the attendees (with two exceptions) were regular participants of the At Ptah Forum, which has held the global listening post in the past. Another instance of this inward-looking impulse was the impulsive reaction of one of the members (of a strong European affiliation) to a reference made concerning the wearing of the veil in Holland. "What do I care about the veil in Holland," he said, suggesting that we look to our Jewish roots and our problems here. The group was also very much aware of the difficulty experienced by the two non-Jewish (Arab and Druze) members of Ofek to become fully integrated into Ofek activities. A vivid example relating to the identity crisis was brought by one of the members, who related that at some Bar-Mitzvah parties in New York, it was now fashionable to include blow jobs given by the girls to the boys as part of the entertainment. What made this a grotesque, even horrifying phenomenon to some, was felt to be the confusion and mixture of rites of passage of totally different origins.

Both the threat from and the attraction towards a potential powerful invader, such as El-Queida, emerged in the discussion in the symbolic form of a black cock (derived from a play on words from the Yiddish expression "it is difficult to be a Jew").

The black cock became a recurring symbol in the discussion relating to the third theme, fatherlessness, in its dual signification as a source of power both to be feared and longed-for. Sharon's illness, the disengagement from Gaza and the ensuing transitional state of Israel's government yielded a wealth of associations around the death of fathers (Rabin, for example) and abandoned children, expressing a yearning for strong leadership. One member expressed the wish that there would be a governmental edict calling on parents to work less hours and not leave their children home alone. Another member remembered a single-mother patient whose son wished to see in his grandfather a father. It was felt that the early successes of the young in the world of business, and the lack of hierarchy in our world of peer competition was a form of Oedipal victory that leads to a great amount of guilt. At the same time, a leader who gets a stroke becomes "just another person", losing his power and authority, but gaining sympathy. On the other hand, there was a general fear of the consequences of "democratization" and a one-dimensional equal society. The resultant feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness could easily create a vacuum making it easy for a powerful "black cock," a fundamentalist group to take over. An interesting counteraction to the polarization into the "good" and "bad" cock was the call expressed by one of the

members to create some sort of integration by recognizing the positive aspects of the new age, such as inter-generational communication, and bringing tenderness (which is not necessarily softness), as neither an exclusively female or male quality, into play in individual and societal relations.

In the group dynamics that evolved in this part, two interesting phenomena were observed. One was the group's creation of a "pair" consisting of the two oldest male members, dubbed "Peres and Sharon". Although not usually of one mind, they here acted in unison to shake the group out of its "negative" and "boring" attitudes. It was noted, again, that the need for fathers is deep-rooted, and that when there is no father, a grandfather might suffice. The other aspect of the dynamics emerged around the question of the role of women in this fatherless world. A polarization between the men and women in the group became apparent first around the question whether tenderness is an exclusively female quality, and second around the observation that neither in the fatherless society nor in the leading pair that the group threw up was there any mention of women. This led to a realization that the men and women in the group were seated in two separate blocs, with the exception of one woman, one of the youngest, who was seated among the men and was being flirted with by one of the older men. The powerful image of an abducted bride came up but could not be developed as the session came to an end.

Hypothesis:

The demise of the patriarchal order in the West, leading to a world in which the father is either weakened or absent, first creates a state of euphoria - a feeling of liberation, openness, abundance and creativity. These, in turn, encourage the young, Oedipus-like, to do away with their fathers at a very early stage, leading to anxiety, guilt and loss of identity. There is a growing feeling of emptiness at the center, which is filled with overdoing (an inflated ego-ideal); however, paradoxically, the very richness of activity, the broadening of the horizons, the great complexity of the world and the severing of ties with traditional structures, weaken the sense of security and identity even more. In an attempt to cope with this threat, societies, groups and individuals seek the lowest common denominators - money, sex, fashion, media spins - to create a feeling of belonging, or turn to simple easy truths in the form of religious fundamentalism (severe superego) to substitute for the vanished hierarchies. Similarly, there is both a longing for a strong father who will reestablish order, identity and security, and yet great fear of the invasion of a foreign, dark, father-power. It would seem that salvation will come neither in the form of a grandfatherly father figure, nor in the image of a child spoiled by permissiveness and affluence giving a blow-job to another. All we can count on are our inner resources and inner strengths to deal with an increasingly complex and contradictory world and to take personal and collective responsibility.

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and

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