

November 6, 2001

CURSE OF THE TONGUE-TIED

In the discussion initiated last August by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on what hasbara line Israel should pursue, the Foreign Office Director-General Avi Gil suggested (according to Ha'aretz) that what should be emphasized was that 'Israel's hand is extended in peace.' Sharon interjected: 'Who would buy it? The Palestinians want to blow us up, and we are extending our hand in peace? We need to explain our right to the land.'

Over the years, however, it has been Gil's vision that has dominated Israeli hasbara as promoted by the foreign office. Thus, when the Arabs claimed that the Jews stole Palestine from them, and the representative Jews said they wanted only 'peace,' unbiased foreign observers could neatly accommodate both Jews and Arabs: 'the Jews stole the Arabs' land, and now they want peace.' Who could blame them?

In earlier days, it would have been said that a curse has been laid on the Jewish people: that it should be lied about, defamed, maligned, its history distorted or obliterated, its enemies extolled - and itself tongue-tied, so as not to tell the truth about itself. (Worst of all, it does little or nothing to 'untie' its tongue.)

The severity of that curse is demonstrated by the unbelievable fact that we - arguably the most maligned nation in the world, beset by recurrent bouts of anti-Semitism in the Christian world and with the high-powered Arab propaganda machine waging a day-and-night war against us and our State - have no machine even remotely adequate for exposing the lies and telling the world the truth. In military terms our existing hasbara could be likened to a single fishing smack confronting a fleet of a dozen battle ships firing all its guns.

Whoever has heard, in our day, of a sophisticated country at war - and Israel has been in an enforced war since its birth - that has not established a special department, manned and equipped for dealing with 'Information?' When Winston Churchill became prime minister of a Britain-at-war in 1940, one of his earliest decisions was to set up a ministry of information, which was soon built up as one of the largest ministries in his administration. His foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, protested vigorously, but to no avail. He simply did not understand the problem and, for that reason, was piqued at being deprived of a part of what he saw as his domain. Indeed, most foreign ministers traditionally fight hard to prevent the establishment of a separate information office.

Our foreign ministers have been uniformly successful in this endeavor. Some of them have even had an ideological explanation. Moshe Dayan said that there was no need for hasbara. 'What's important,' he said, 'is not what we say, but what we do.' Shimon Peres in his turn, tells us that history is not important. Meanwhile the Arabs have been putting together and energetically disseminating a fantastic fabrication of history, and half a world has accepted it as true.

Thus we have left the propaganda field almost entirely in the hands of the Arabs - aided by considerable Saudi funding and wickedly biased media (like the BBC or CNN). Israeli hasbara efforts have consisted, at moments of crisis, of sudden sorties of two or three emissaries who spend a few weeks in the United States and, as Israeli consul-general in New York Alon Pinkas has wittily hinted (October 25), what they achieve is to increase the consumption of bagels and smoked salmon.

What then should be done?

We have to start from scratch; but this means first of all that the government recognizes that there is a propaganda war in progress, and that conducting a war requires a strategy and an army. Just as our military has to be run by the Ministry of Defense, a many-faceted propaganda war against powerful enemies cannot be conducted from a subsection, as a secondary chore, of some other ministry. A responsible minister must be appointed and hasbara must be his or her exclusive occupation. In these times, the minister must inject the hasbara consideration into every relevant cabinet discussion. And his office must be open 24 hours a day.

He would appoint a 'General Staff' and would choose people who are expert in the subjects required, chief among which must be Jewish and Arab history in relation to Eretz Israel. A curriculum would be constructed in cooperation with mavens from the United States, where the first 'base' must be established. Indeed, the minister would send members of his general staff to the US, where they would seek out organizations and individuals who have for years been fighting, with limited resources, Israel's information battle. They would then proceed to develop the kind of 'information' army that we badly need.

Unless this, or a similar plan based on permanence, separate ministerial responsibility and Diaspora cooperation is put into operation, the widespread incapacity to confront hostile propaganda will become a real and present danger to the Jewish state.