Editorials

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Mississippi Burning

It's the classic trade-off when liberals work in the mainstream cultural institutions of American society. On the one hand, they get to present some important truths. On the other hand, they reinforce so many other distortions, misperceptions, and cultural stereotypes that it's hard to say if the net effect is more positive than negative.

So it is with *Mississippi Burning*. On the one hand, would that every person in America were required to see it, so that they could remind themselves of the violence that accompanies American racism and that sets the context for Black rage. And yet, how powerfully this film misses or distorts reality.

Much of the discussion about *Mississippi Burning* has focused on its most obvious distortion: that the FBI is portrayed as an organization of heroes, when, in fact, it was a *part of the problem*. The FBI played an integral role in fostering the political mentality that saw civil rights workers, indeed *all* social change agents, as subversive outsiders who were either Communists or dupes of the Communists, aiming to overthrow the American system. This way of seeing the world helped strengthen the conviction of the racists that it was appropriate for them to use violence to defend "a way of life" that was being threatened by the movement for equality. The FBI surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the dirty tricks used against social change organizations were only the most obvious manifestations of an organizational culture that was suffused with racism and bigotry.

Still, what is most glaringly missing from the film is the powerful role that social change movements actually played in altering the character of Southern politics. It was the willingness of thousands of Blacks and whites to risk their lives for their principles that made the civil rights movement's victories possible. The movement is invisible in the film, just as it is becoming increasingly invisible in the public discussion of our past.

It's easy for American culture to place our major racial problems in the past and to valorize individual heroes for saving us. Racism translates into "those bad Southerners in the past." And the heroes? The film says—the federal government working through the FBI. Popular culture says—Martin Luther King, who died for our sins.

Meanwhile, the week before the Super Bowl, an unarmed Black man in Miami is shot and killed by the police for a traffic violation. Miami's Black community explodes into a race riot—and many more Blacks are killed, wounded, or arrested by the police. In Long Beach, California, a Black policeman from a nearby community convinces a camera crew to follow him as he drives undercover through the city streets—so that the crew members can film the way innocent Blacks are harassed daily by white police officers in America's cities. The crew films an officer stopping the car, shoving the undercover policeman against the plate glass window of an adjacent store (shattering the glass), beating and then arresting him. Quite apart from poverty and discrimination in the world of work, this daily harassment of Blacks plays a major role in creating the "culture of the underclass" that conservatives blame on the victims. Racism has not been defeated; it is still pervasive in American society.

So where are our heroes? Only you and the people around you are possible candidates. And that is precisely what the search for heroes obscures. The only thing that can change our world is a social movement made up of ordinary, flawed human beings. It takes *our* actions, sometimes small actions, sometimes heroic actions, to change things.

The focus on heroes, whether they be the FBI or even, on the other hand, Martin Luther King, obscures this reality. It takes all of us off the moral hook—because we can tell ourselves: "I don't have the moral stature or courage of one of those heroes, so I'll just have to keep doing what I'm doing until some great leader comes along to do it for me. Those social problems are too big for me to handle."

Of course these problems are too big for any one of us. That's why political movements are necessary: these movements are composed of all the rest of us. Regular people who have decided to sacrifice part of their personal lives in order to make the world better in some way. These kinds of people were the ones who joined the civil rights and antiwar movements of the sixties and made decisive changes. Conversely, when these movements declined in the seventies and eighties (in part because the movement's participants mistakenly undervalued their own achievements), the media were able to rewrite history, eliminating the role of mass

participation and retelling the story as one of contending elites, with the occasional intervention of lone individual heroes "bucking the system."

Despite all the attempts to make us invisible, there are still millions of Americans who remain committed to the spirit of social change, and tens of millions more who would be involved if they could find a plausible way. George Bush's proposals to disperse this energy through "a thousand points of light" is one strategy to prevent this energy from coalescing into political action. If everyone is involved in local self-help projects that have been explicitly formed as the alternative to a national plan for solving the problems, these people are unlikely to be mobilized into national movements.

Still, Bush's plan may backfire. Anything that encourages people to act on their idealism can potentially get out of hand. If principled liberals involve themselves in the thousand-points-of-light projects, they may begin to raise important questions about the economic and social reforms that are necessary to solve the problem rather than merely ameliorate the situation. Indeed, why not call for a national convention of all these local helpers (say, in two years from now) to discuss our experiences and suggest what national programs might make this local work more effective? Let's call the convention "A Thousand Points of Light"—won't its call for new national policies shine brightly?

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The bottom line is this: there is an intense and ongoing struggle in America about how much we can do to change this society. That battle rages not just in newspapers or in Congress but in the psyche of every American. Every one of us is constantly trying to decide how much energy we should expend on larger causes outside our personal lives. Movies, TV shows, news reports, and other media tend to reinforce the position of one side or the other in this struggle—either making us believe that there is no point in worrying about anything other than ourselves (because the world is too scary and irrational, because everyone else is out for themselves so we'd be foolish to act on any other principle, because the people who make a difference are better than we, because you can't count on other people to be guided by moral motives, because nothing ever changes in the world, because things are changing anyway and we'd be fooling ourselves to think we make a difference, and so on), or else giving us some reason to hope that in trusting others and working with them something might be accomplished. Next time you watch a seemingly apolitical movie or TV show or news report, ask yourself which message is being conveyed.

Shamir: New Packaging, Old Intransigence

We would rejoice if Yitzhak Shamir's "new" peace proposals actually represented a change of heart, a sign that Shamir was going to be like Begin and de Gaulle and Nixon—right-wingers who decided that their national self-interest required a willingness to make peace with their enemies. Unfortunately, Shamir's message as he visits the U.S. in the spring of 1989 is the old intransigence with new packaging. His goal is a PR victory that will give him political capital to prolong the occupation and avoid talking to the PLO.

Shamir needs a PR victory in the U.S. because he is losing the battle for public opinion in Israel. Polls in Israel now indicate that a majority of Israelis favor direct negotiations with the PLO. The Bush administration should be aware that Shamir is not speaking for a majority of Israelis when he refuses to talk directly with the Palestinian leadership.

Shortly before introducing his new peace plan, Shamir told Menachem Shalev of the *Jerusalem Post* why he was desperately seeking non-PLO Palestinians with whom to negotiate. Since the PLO has an "ideological commitment" to a Palestinian state, reasoned Shamir, "it cannot agree to less. The [non-PLO] Palestinians, on the other hand, those who want to live their lives freely, they are capable of realizing that they cannot attain everything they want."

The point is significant because it helps make clear that Israel's refusal to negotiate with the PLO is not merely a blind spot—a reaction to the past deeds of terrorists. In light of the dramatic moves by Yasir Arafat to jump through all the linguistic hoops set up for him—renouncing terrorism and accepting the existence of the State of Israel—and the consequent U.S. decision to open direct discussions with the PLO, one might have hoped that Shamir would change his stance.

Instead, Shamir and Rabin continue to make themselves look ridiculous by attempting to anoint West Bank Palestinians as "the alternative" to the PLO. The latest such move, Yitzhak Rabin's consecration of Faisal al-Husseini as a bright new hope—only a few days after Husseini had been released from "administrative detention" where he had been held without charge for

five months and labeled a promoter of terrorism—was repudiated by Husseini himself. "It's a desperate attempt to create an alternative to the PLO," he told the *New York Times* on February 1, 1989. "It will just delay the peace process." Husseini went on to say what everyone but the Israelis already recognize: If the Israelis want peace negotiations, "they must talk to the PLO." Israelis must, Husseini continued, "confront the monster, and the monster is their own fear."

There has been considerable debate about how seriously one should take Arafat's renunciation of terrorism and his recognition of Israel. As Letty Cottin Pogrebin points out in this issue, if the words were meaningless, it would have been easier for Arafat to have said them long ago in order to achieve propaganda advantages. The intense denunciations of Arafat's words by Islamic fundamentalists and extremist factions of the PLO show that *they* take the words *very* seriously—which is precisely why Arafat was unwilling to risk saying them until he was sure he could get the majority support of his own organization.

In January, two months after Arafat's renunciation of terror, Israeli Defense Force (IDF) leaders confirmed that Fatah, Arafat's majority faction of the PLO, had not been involved in any terrorist activity since the time of Arafat's statement. Could there be a more reliable source than the IDF to validate that Fatah was in fact attempting to comply with Arafat's promises?

Yet, in some fundamental way, the question of trusting the PLO misses the point. None of us in the peace camp is urging Israel to accept a solution that would require trust. Our call for a demilitarized Palestinian state whose borders and demilitarization would be carefully supervised does not rely on the belief either that Arafat is in fact a moderate, or that Palestinian moderates will always be in power in a Palestinian state. Once Israel was genuinely committed to a demilitarized Palestinian state, we would certainly support its demands for iron-clad guarantees on the issue of demilitarization. The point is that negotiating directly with the PLO does *not* commit Israel to accepting an adverse outcome to the negotiations—or to a solution that would depend on the good faith of any present or future Palestinian leadership.

Once negotiations begin, Israel should settle for nothing less than a demilitarization that its military leaders judge to be enforceable. So, those of us in the peace camp who support direct negotiations with the PLO do so not because we necessarily trust Arafat or think that the PLO has undergone a recent collective conversion. While there is no doubt that a growing number of Palestinian leaders *are* adopting a new realism and accepting the necessity of living in peace with Israel, one need only study recent statements by PLO leaders, or "slips" by Arafat, to see that many Palestinians still hope to conquer all of Israel. Yet, the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state—giving the Palestinians something to lose, a stake in the existing reality—will probably weaken these fantasies; and, in any case, a carefully enforced demilitarization would render the Palestinian destruction of Israel militarily impossible.

In fact, once Israel seriously commits itself to a demilitarized Palestinian state, the Palestinians will be the ones who are on the spot. They will have to produce a leadership willing to accept a solution that permanently dashes the hopes of the Palestinian expansionists. There are many signs that the Palestinian movement is beginning to create such leaders. And if we are wrong here—wrong that new Palestinian leaders are willing to live alongside Israel—then an offer of a demilitarized Palestinian state will not hurt us. On the contrary, it will show that the Palestinians are the rejectionists, and Israel will thereby regain the moral high ground.

But the shocking fact is this: Shamir is ideologically locked into a rejection of any Palestinian state, even if that state were prepared to live in peace with Israel. And that is why his peace-package charade must be rejected as fundamentally meaningless. Shamir tests every aspect of his plans against one criterion: is it sure to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state? If he can be reasonably sure that it blocks that development, he is for it.

Is it any wonder, then, that most Palestinians will not agree to a plan that calls for a cessation of the *intifada,* in exchange for elections to choose representatives to negotiate? The negotiations are defined from the start as concerned solely with how to implement the very "autonomy" plan that Shamir now thinks will best prevent the development of a Palestinian state.

Meanwhile, we are likely to see the predictable gang of American Jewish leaders lining up to have their pictures taken with Shamir, rejoicing in his proposals, declaring them a great advance toward peace, and otherwise yipping it up for the newest strategy of Israeli rejectionism. Will the American and Israeli media once again represent to the public that these people speak

Tikkun Interns

Tikkun interns work on all aspects of the magazine—editorial, production, promotion, education (for example, conferences and the Committee for Judaism and Social Justice), and office work. The internships require a minimum of twenty-five hours per week from September 1989 to June 1990. We will also accept interns for the summer of 1989, to work at least thirty-five hours per week. Send writing samples and a detailed self-revealing letter discussing why you should be accepted as an intern and what ideas you have for the magazine.

for all American Jews? Or is there a growing awareness, perhaps sparked by the *Tikkun* conference, that many of these leaders don't even represent their own members when it comes to the issues upon which they pontificate?

There is one encouraging development from Israel. A significant group of Labor party Knesset members, as well as others in the party, have rallied around Uzi Baram, the Labor party chair who resigned his position in protest after Labor joined the national unity government. Of course, there's an element of rational self-interest in their opposition to Peres's capitulation to Shamir: they understand that at the next election Labor voters may wonder if voting for other parties like Ratz or Mapam might not be a more effective way to show their displeasure with Likud than voting for a Labor party that has twice in a row formed governments that allowed Likud to determine policy toward the Palestinians. But there is also a growing moral revulsion—extending far beyond the Israeli left into the heartland of Israeli voters—at the Shamir-Peres-Rabin axis. Many Labor voters would have voted differently had they thought they were empowering a government with Shamir as prime minister, Moshe Arens as foreign minister, and Rabin as defense minister. Unfortunately, it will be many years before Israelis will be able to express that revulsion in a new election.

Meanwhile, our task as American Jews is simple: to make clear to Israel that Shamir does not have a blank check from us to continue the occupation. Israel must negotiate with the PLO about the conditions under which Israel would allow for Palestinian self-determination and the creation of a Palestinian state. Mr. Shamir, can you read our lips? Negotiations now.

Yitzhak Rabin: Repeating the Mistakes of Pharaoh

Every Passover we remind ourselves of the incredible self-delusions that seem to cloud the vision of oppressors. Intoxicated with their own power, surrounded by advisers who tell them they can perform magic to sustain the status quo, these oppressors lose their ability to hear the cries of those upon whom they inflict pain. Even when the oppressed begin to rise in rebellion, the oppressors are unable to see them as anything more than a petty annoyance whose demands cannot be taken seriously.

This is what the Torah means when it says that "God hardened the heart of Pharaoh." At the beginning of the process, during the first plagues, it was Pharaoh himself who freely chose to harden his own position. Yet eventually, once Pharaoh had been on his path long enough, it was almost as though the choices were out of his control; almost as though God had hardened his will, eliminated his flexibility, made him into a rigid and unbending person.

Neither Yitzhak Shamir nor Yitzhak Rabin are Pharaoh. They have not ordered the annihilation of a people in the way that Pharaoh ordained the death of all first-born Jewish males.

Yet they resemble the prototypical oppressor whom Pharaoh has come to symbolize for most of Jewish history. It is sometimes hard to tell whether their actions are still under their own control, whether they can be faulted for continuing to make immoral and stupid judgments—or whether their inflexibility and rigidity have become so great that they are like Pharaoh, victims of a hardened heart.

Consider Rabin, the Israeli Labor party's contribution to the newly formed national unity government. When the *intifada* began some sixteen months ago, Rabin promised it would be quickly suppressed. When normal levels of force didn't work, he ordered physical beatings. When physical beatings didn't work, he ordered arrests and "administrative detentions," which have resulted in thousands of Palestinians' continuing to sit without trial in hot desert camps for months on end. When detentions didn't work, he ordered expulsions. When expulsions didn't work, he ordered the use of plastic bullets. When the bullets didn't work (because of restrictions on their use), he ordered that they be used against people burning tires or erecting barricades. When that didn't work, he ordered entire towns of people confined to their homes under extended curfews—collective punishment for the offenses of a few. When the curfews didn't work, he ordered the dynamiting of the homes of people whose children had been accused of throwing stones. When the dynamiting didn't work, he ordered that all schools be closed indefinitely. And still nothing works.

Do you think he'd get the message that he can't use force to stop a mass insurrection of an oppressed people? No. Not for a minute.

Or do you think that Shamir would listen to his own soldiers in the IDF who plead with him to stop attempting to suppress the *intifada*? When confronted by angry soldiers who repeatedly told him that there was no way to carry out their job except to use oppressive methods that made them ashamed and that violated their ethical standards, Shamir refused to pay attention.

A growing number of Israelis are beginning to talk about immediate withdrawal as the only practical solution to the *intifada*. Their argument is simple. There is no plausible way to construe the Palestinians as a military threat to the State of Israel. All that Israel need do is withdraw its army to the current borders (the Jordan River and the Green Line) and use the army (and the

air force) to interdict the delivery of any heavy armaments. Small contingents of soldiers could be left inside the existing Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza to defend the Jewish settlers from attack, but all other new settlements should be canceled and settler attacks on Palestinians vigorously prosecuted as an offense under military law. Without Israeli troops to patrol Palestinian cities and villages, there would be a dramatic de-escalation in the confrontation with the Palestinian people. Similarly, if Israeli troops stopped trying to "show them who is boss" (the stock-in-trade of every oppressor—see also Pharaoh in Exodus) by insisting that stores open when *they* say they should open and close when *they* say they should close, and by insisting that no Palestinian flags or slogans or parades or demonstrations be allowed—confrontations would be far less likely.

We prefer a negotiated settlement rather than immediate withdrawal. But we can easily understand why, if negotiations are simply another method to prolong the occupation, some Israelis are discussing withdrawal as an intermediate step. It would certainly save lives and injuries on both sides of the conflict.

Still, oppressors are not always able to hear even the cries of those *on their own side* who are beginning to realize that the cost of repression is too high. Plague after plague was visited on the Egyptians, yet Pharaoh hardened his own heart. It was only after his own son had been killed that Pharaoh had a temporary change of heart—and even that change was quickly repudiated as he sent his hosts to their deaths in the Red Sea in a vain attempt to retake the Israelites.

What price will Israelis have to pay before their leaders realize that the occupation and oppression of another people must be terminated? We know the price that the Palestinians have paid: hundreds of people killed, thousands of young children injured, tens of thousands of people beaten or hurt. But how many more Israelis must die; how many more must be injured; how many more must grow ashamed of their own country and its army; how many more must become *yordim* (emigrants) seeking an alternative home in the U.S.; how many more—before Yitzhak Rabin realizes that his name will live in history as a disgrace to the Jewish people and to the Zionist vision of Israel?

This Passover many of us will be thinking of the Palestinians as we celebrate our own national liberation struggle. What a tragedy that today a group of Jews is playing a role that in important ways is similar to that of Pharaoh. Today the Palestinian people are the ones who cry "Let My People Go." *Tikkun* has prepared a supplement to the Passover haggadah, which you can pull out of the current issue and use during your seder. It's an old Jewish tradition to use the seder as a time to discuss the current state of our struggle for liberation. This year, our struggle for our own liberation requires us to disentangle ourselves from the role of being another people's oppressors.

There are many Jews around the world who are sickened by the recent actions of the Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank. Stop the killings; stop the beatings; stop the destruction of houses; stop the curfews. Stop soiling the sacred history of our people.

No Arms for the Saudis

Saudi Arabia is one of the most oppressive and inhumane societies in today's world. But, because of its immense oil reserves, when the Saudis' interests are threatened (as they were perceived to be during the recent Iran-Iraq war), Saudi Arabia can count on direct U.S. intervention on its behalf. Recent history demonstrates that the Saudis do not need and would not use the U.S. weapons currently being proposed for sale to defend themselves against a perceived threat from neighboring Arab states. The only possible use of these weapons is against Israel—whose destruction remains a central focus of Saudi political and religious aspirations. America should be telling Israel that it can count on U.S. support and defense if Israel were to create a demilitarized Palestinian state. Selling arms to the Saudis gives the opposite message: that America is an unreliable friend more interested in the economic benefits of its own corporations than in the military survival of Israel. Those Congressional leaders who support pressuring Israel to move forward on peace talks with the Palestinians have an obligation to reject any new arms deals for Saudi Arabia or other Arab states that continue to show hostility toward Israel. □

Assistant Editor Position at *Tikkun*

Being an editor at *Tikkun* requires top notch editorial and language skills, a deep understanding and commitment to the editorial philosophy and perspective of the magazine, a sophisticated understanding of contemporary issues in American politics and culture, Judaism and Israel, plus a willingness to work endless hours editing, reading and responding to manuscripts, and promoting the magazine in public forums. Salary $22–$38,000 depending on experience. Send a self-revealing letter telling us in detail (1) why you're the person for this job (2) a few paragraphs on what you understand to be the central ideas that make *Tikkun* unique, and (3) your specific suggestions for articles, direction, or changes in the magazine. Send also a sample of your writing. Job will begin summer 1989.