

In One Word: MASSACRE

The terrible reports from Beit Hanoun did no make the headlines

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"THANK GOD for the American elections," our ministers and generals sighed with relief.

They were not rejoicing at the kick that the American people delivered to George W. Bush's ass this week. They love Bush, after all.

But more important than the humbling of Bush is the fact that the news from America pushed aside the terrible reports from Beit Hanoun. Instead of making the headlines, they were relegated to the bottom of the page.

THE FIRST revolutionary act is to call things by their true names, Rosa Luxemburg said. So how to call what happened in Beit Hanoun?

"Accident" said a pretty anchorwoman on one of the TV news programs. "Tragedy", said her lovely colleague on another channel. A third one, no less attractive, wavered between "event", "mistake" and "incident".

It was indeed an accident, a tragedy, an event and an incident. But most of all it was a massacre. M-a-s-s-a-c-r-e.

The word "accident" suggests something for which no one is to blame – like being struck by lightning. A tragedy is a sad event or situation, like that of the New Orleans inhabitants after the disaster. The event in Beit Hanoun was sad indeed, but not an act of God – it was an act decided upon and carried out by human beings.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER the facts became known, the entire choir of professional apologists, explainers-away, sorrow-expressers and pretext-inventors, a choir that is in perpetual readiness for such cases, sprang into feverish action.

"An unfortunate mistake? It can happen in the best families? The mechanism of a cannon can malfunction, people can make mistakes? Errare humanum est? We have launched tens of thousands of artillery shells, and there have only been three such accidents. (No. 1 in the Olmert-Peretz-Halutz era was in Qana, in the Second Lebanon War. No. 2 was on the Gaza sea shore, where a whole family was wiped out.) But we apologized, didn't we? What more can they demand from us?"

There were also arguments like "They can only blame themselves." As usual, it was the fault of the victims. The most creative solution came from the Deputy Minister of Defense,

Ephraim Sneh: "The practical responsibility is ours, but the moral responsibility is theirs." If they launch Qassam rockets at us, what else can we do but answer with shells?

Ephraim Sneh was raised to the position of Deputy Minister just now. The appointment was a payment for agreeing to the inclusion of Avigdor Liberman in the government (in biblical Hebrew, the payment would have been called "the hire of a whore", Deut. 23,19). Now, after only a few days in office, Sneh was given the opportunity to express his thanks.

(In the Sneh family, there is a tradition of justifying despicable acts. Ephraim's brilliant father, Moshe Sneh, was the leader of the Israeli Communist Party, and defended all the massacres committed by Stalin, not only the gulag system, but also the murder of the Jewish Communists in the Soviet Union and its satellites and the Jewish "doctors plot").

Any suggestion of equivalence between Qassams and artillery shells, an idea which has been adopted even by some of the Peaceniks, is completely false. And not only because there is no symmetry between occupier and occupied. Hundreds of Qassams launched during more than a year have killed one single Israeli. The shells, missiles and bombs have already killed many hundreds of Palestinians.

DID THE shells hit the homes of people intentionally? There are only two possible answers to that.

The extreme version says: Yes. The sequence of events points in that direction. The Israeli army, one of the most modern in the world, has no answer to the Qassam, one of the most primitive of weapons. This short-range unguided rocket (named after Izz-ad-Din al-Qassam, the first Palestinian fighter, who was killed in 1935 in a battle against the British authorities of Palestine) is little more than a pipe filled with home-made explosives.

In a futile attempt to prevent the launching of Qassams, the Israeli forces invade the towns and villages of the Gaza Strip at regular intervals and institute a reign of terror. A week ago, they invaded Beit-Hanoun and killed more than 50 people, many of them women and children. The moment they left, the Palestinians started to launch as many Qassams as possible against Ashkelon, in order to prove that these incursions do not deter them.

That increased the frustration of the generals even more. Ashkelon is not a remote poverty-stricken little town like Sderot, most of whose inhabitants are of Moroccan origin. In Ashkelon there lives also an elitist population of European descent. The army chiefs, having lost their honor in Lebanon, were eager – according to this version – to teach the Palestinians a lesson, once and for all. According to the Israeli saying: If force doesn't work, use more force.

The other version holds that it was a real mistake, an unfortunate technical hitch. But the commander of an army knows very well that a certain incidence of "hitches" is unavoidable. So-and-so many percent are killed in training, so-and-so many percent die from "friendly fire", so-and-so many percent of shells fall some distance from the target. The ammunition used by the gunners against Beit-Hanoun – the very same 155mm ammunition that was used in Kana – is known for its inaccuracy. Several factors can cause the shells to stray from their course by hundreds of meters.

He who decided to use this ammunition against a target right next to civilians knowingly exposed them to mortal danger. Therefore, there is no essential difference between the two versions.

Who is to blame? First of all, the spirit that has gained ground in the army. Recently, Gideon Levy disclosed that a battalion commander praised his soldiers for killing 12 Palestinians with the words: "We have won by 12:0!"

Guilty are, of course, the gunners and their commanders, including the battery chief. And the General in charge of the Southern Command, Yoav Gallant (sic), who radiates indifference spiked with sanctimonious platitudes. And the Deputy Chief-of-Staff. And the Chief-of-Staff, Dan Halutz, the Air-Force general who said after another such incident that he sleeps well at night after dropping a one-ton super-bomb on a residential area. And, of course, the Minister of Defense, Amir Peretz, who approved the use of artillery after forbidding it in the past – which means that he was aware of the foreseeable consequences.

The guiltiest one is the Great Apologizer: Ehud Olmert, the Prime Minister.

Olmert boasted recently that because of the clever behavior of his government "we were able to kill hundreds of terrorists, and the world has not reacted." According to Olmert, a "terrorist" is any armed Palestinian, including the tens of thousands of Palestinian policemen who carry arms by agreement with Israel. They may now be shot freely. "Terrorists" are also the women and children, who are killed in the street and in their homes. (Some say so openly: the children grow up to be terrorists, the women give birth to children who grow up to be terrorists.)

Olmert can go on with this, as he says, because the world keeps silent. Today the US even vetoed a very mild Security Council resolution against the event. Does this mean that the governments throughout the world – America, Europe, the Arab world – are accessories to the crime at Beit Hanoun? That can best be answered by the citizens of those countries.

THE WORLD did not pay much attention to the massacre, because it happened on US election day. The results of the election may sadden our leaders more than the blood and tears of mothers and children in the Gaza strip, but they were glad that the election diverted attention.

A cynic might say: Democracy is wonderful, it enables the voter to kick out the moron they elected last time and replace them with a new moron.

But let's not be too cynical. The fact is that the American people has accepted, after a delay of three years and tens of thousands of dead, what the advocates of peace around the world – including us here in Israel – were saying already on the first day: that the war will cause a disaster. That it will not solve any problem, but have the opposite effect.

The change will not be quick and dramatic. The US is a huge ship. When it turns around, it makes a very big circle and needs a lot of time – unlike Israel, a small speed-boat that can turn almost on the spot. But the direction is clear.

Of course, in both new houses of Congress, the pro-Israeli lobby (meaning: the supporters of

the Israeli Right) has a huge influence, perhaps even more than in the last ones. But the American army will have to start leaving Iraq. The danger of another military adventure in Iran and/or Syria is much diminished. The crazy neo-conservatives, most of them Jews who support the extreme Right in Israel, are gradually losing power, together with their allies, the crazy Christian fundamentalists.

As former Prime Minister Levy Eshkol once said: when America sneezes, Israel catches cold. When America starts to recover, perhaps there is hope for us, too.

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