

Young Zionist

The Middle East and the Worst Kind of Attitude

Anonymous

A skill that FZY has always strongly encouraged is Israel Advocacy. **The aim of *Magen*, or the defence of Jewish rights, has at its core a desire to equip members to be capable of engaging in dialogue over Israel in a positive way.** So, as young people who take this desire to heart, we have over the years developed an interest in knowing the facts of Middle Eastern politics, we have learnt how to debate in a constructive manner, and we have most probably at some point put those skills into practice, as much out of necessity as out of an eagerness to convince others of Israel's positive value. I'm sure each of you can relate to having been faced with those who stubbornly refuse to listen, those who will repeat over and over that Israel should not exist and will never be swayed from their viewpoint. This can be frustrating, but it isn't the worst thing that an advocate of Israel can face.

Far worse is the interlocutor who claims to have an open mind, who will discuss Israel as a topic of interest, but is in reality anything but open-minded. Some background: this occurred to me when I recently read a blog written by a student at my University for a very renowned student newspaper. The student in question is currently travelling the Middle East, and writing a section of his blog from each country, describing each place in detail, with witty anecdotes on his varied experiences and suggestions on how to make the most of travelling that part of the world. So far so good. However, each blog, around two thirds of the way through, turns its attention towards the Middle Eastern conflict, never failing to show Israel as the oppressor. For example, when in Jordan, after describing the delights of sunbathing on the shores of the Dead Sea, he writes:

'Jordan is an island of calm in an otherwise turbulent area [...] the view on the other side of the water is not so pretty. Jordan borders both Israel and the West Bank, and it is estimated that a third of Jordan's six million inhabitants are Palestinian refugees. Add to that the refugees of the current conflict in Iraq (which some estimates put upwards of 700,000), and it is clear how important Jordan is as a safe haven within the Middle East.'

When in Syria,

'We took a car for the day and headed to Quneitra, in the Syrian controlled Golan Heights. It is here that one can see why Syrians loathe the Israelis so, and why they resent Arab nations, such as Jordan, which are willing to converse with Israel. The city was captured by Israel in the six day war, and was returned to Syria in 1974 as little more than a pile of rubble. The Israelis had removed everything that could be taken, down to coat pegs and light fittings, before bulldozing the entire town. Perhaps most shocking are the two main religious sights, the church and the mosque. Both were treated with the same level of wanton vandalism. The town's only human inhabitants now are some Syrian and UN peacekeepers, yet even they are ever watched by the Israeli telescopes that sit on the hill opposite. As an exercise in anti-Israeli propaganda it is awfully successful.'

Of course each should be entitled to his own opinion, but for me, suspicion creeps in when

this so-called tour of the Middle East includes Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, but not Israel. Surely, if he's interested in learning about and commenting on life in the Middle East, he will be taking the trouble to do the job properly, and visit all of it? Without doubt he will be anxious to hear the other side of the story and gain a complete picture, because unquestionably that is the only way to see if and how either party is justified in their behaviour? And if he does not visit Israel, and sunbathe on the opposite shores of the Dead Sea, or stand on the hilltops facing Quneitra to hear the post-67 story from the mouth of an Israeli, then surely this blogger cannot consider himself adequately informed to express an educated opinion?

And yet he does. I had discussed the Middle East with this student prior to him leaving to go on his travels, and I remember coming away from the conversation feeling quite heartened at his seeming open-mindedness, and at his potential acceptance of there being a place for Israel in the Middle East. The fact that his attempt to explore and understand the Middle East has been so one-sided has upset and offended me greatly, and has shown me that his attitude is far more frightening than those who claim open hatred. At least then in terms of advocacy one knows where one stands and can formulate an argument to attempt to show them another way, whereas in this instance I am caught completely off my guard and realise that, **when not provoked to enter into an argument, there is no need to defend Israel, and therefore Israel is not defended.** When bias like this does then exist under the surface, even if subconsciously as in this case, how can we hope to even begin to advocate? This is a genuine question; I do not have a clue.

Sadly, none of us are innocent. This type of bias is not exclusive to those who slant towards the anti-Israel camp. I was equally upset last week when telling an FZY friend of mine over Facebook, about my recent endeavours to learn Arabic. Instead of receiving the expected "Oo, good for you", or "Wow, that must be difficult", mundane sort of comment, he posted a Youtube clip of Mickey Mouse, the Hamas version, on my wall. Was this some sort of warning? Did it imply that I should not be learning Arabic because of the existence of this clip? I find it hard to believe that he was being consciously offensive, yet this kind of instinctive reaction is undeniably biased, unhelpful, and quite dangerous in terms of eventually reaching a peace agreement.

I would like to hope that one day each country will learn to support rather than suspect the others in the region, and that development will take the place of destruction, but until each of us takes the time to visit both sides of the Dead Sea, to appreciate Arabic and Hebrew alike, to absorb culture from every corner of the Middle East, and to engage in dialogue that is truly open-minded, then the future will continue to look bleak for a long time to come. If like me, you're more into art than words, take a look at Jan Svankmajer's Dimensions of Dialogue, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhX1tvTgqC8&NR=1>), which in my opinion illustrates beautifully the consequences of conflicting ideologies who refuse to see another's point of view. Right now, it's not about who may be right and who may be wrong; instead it's about drastically overhauling each and every one of our attitudes and ending a very long tradition of jumping to conclusions that are both hasty and invalid.