The Most Moral Army by Uri Avnery

March 17, 2017

A FEW days ago I happened upon an excellent British movie, "Testament of Youth", based on the memoirs of Vera Brittain.

Vera tells her story, the story of a British girl who grew up in a bourgeois family without worries or sorrows, when World War I put an end to that paradise. Her brother, her friends and her fiancée were killed one by one in the terrible mudscapes of France. She enlisted as a nurse near the front and dealt with hundreds of wounded and dead. The tender country girl turned into a hardened woman.

The scene which impressed me most occurs when she is posted to a hut full of wounded Germans. A German officer, not so young, is dying. In his delirium he sees his beloved, catches the hands of Vera and whispers "Is that you, Clara?" and Vera answers in German "Ich bin hier", I am here. With a happy smile on his lips, the German dies.

On the morrow of the war, an English crowd demands a vengeful peace. Vera takes the stage and tells of this experience. The crowd falls silent.

THE MOVIE brought me back to the affair of Elor Azaria, the soldier who killed a seriously wounded Arab attacker lying helpless on the ground. He has been sharply condemned by the military court but punished with the ridiculously light prison term of a year and a half. His publicity-grabbing attorney has appealed.

Killing a wounded or captured enemy is a war crime. Why?

For many people, this is a mystery. War is the realm of killing and destroying. Soldiers are decorated for killing. So why is it suddenly a crime to kill a wounded enemy? How is it possible to talk about a law of war when war itself breaks all laws? An army that trains its soldiers to kill, how can it demand from them to show mercy?

From the beginnings of humankind, war has been a human condition. It started from the primitive tribe, which defended its limited resources of food from preying neighbors. Neighbors killed were resources gained.

The limits to the ravages of war were fixed after one of the most awful conflicts in history – the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648). Its main battlefield was Germany – a flat country in the center of Europe, without defensible borders. Foreign armies entered it from all sides to fight it out between themselves. Armies devastated entire cities, killing, raping and looting.

It started as a war of religion, but became a war for supremacy and gain.

Millions died. In the end, two thirds of Germany was devastated, one third of the German population exterminated. One of the results was that the Germans, lacking any natural, defensible borders like seas and mountains, created an artificial

border: a powerful army. It was the beginning of German militarism, which reached its climax in the Nazi frenzy.

WITNESSING THE atrocities of the Thirty Years’ War, humanists pondered ways to limit warfare and create a core of international law. The outstanding proponent was a Dutchman Hugo de Groot ("Grotius"), who laid the foundations for the rules of war.

How can a war be limited? How can arms be "pure", when their very purpose is to kill and destroy? Grotius laid down a simple principle: nothing can be done to limit the means and practices necessary for winning a war. No army will respect such limitations.

But in war, terrible things happen which have nothing to do with victory. Killing civilians, prisoners and the wounded does not contribute to victory. Sparing their lives is good for all sides. If I spare the lives of captured enemy soldiers and the enemy spares the lives of my own soldiers who are captured, everybody wins.

Thus the modern laws of war are not only moral and humane, they are also sensible. All civilized nations recognize them. Breaking them is a crime.

At the beginning, the law forbidding the killing of the captured and the wounded applied only to uniformed soldiers. But in recent generations, the dividing line between uniformed soldiers and fighting civilians has become more and more blurred. Guerrillas, partisans, underground fighters, terrorists have become a part of recognized warfare. International law was widened to include them, too.

(What is the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter? I am proud of having discovered long ago the only scientific formula: "Freedom fighters are on my side, terrorists are on the other side.")

Thus we come back to Elor Azaria. Killing a wounded, neutralized enemy "terrorist" is a war crime, pure and simple. Wounded "terrorists" have to be treated. They are not enemies anymore, they are just injured human beings. Like the dying German in the movie.

SARAH NETANYAHU, the widely unpopular wife of our Prime Minister, recently said in an interview: "I believe that the Israeli Army is the most moral army in the world!"

She was only quoting an Israeli article of faith, repeated endlessly in all Israeli media, schools and political speeches.

Some might think that a "moral army" is an oxymoron. Armies are immoral by their very nature. Armies are there to make war, and war is basically immoral.

One might wonder how war has survived all these millennia. Humanity has made enormous progress in all fields of endeavor, yet war has endured. It seems that it is too deeply entrenched in human nature and human society.

When two citizens quarrel, they are no longer allowed to kill each other. They have to go to court and accept the verdict,

based on a law accepted by all. Common sense would say that the same should apply to nations. When two states have a quarrel, they should go to an international court and accept its judgment peacefully.

How far are we from such a reality? Centuries? Millennia? An eternity?

In the 17th century, war was conducted by mercenaries, who fought for gain. Regiments sometimes changed sides on the battlefield. Soldiers were out for loot. The "Sack of Magdeburg" during the Thirty Years’ War lives in German history to this very day. It was an orgy of looting, killing and rape in that town, west of Berlin.

A century later, war was conducted by professional national armies, and became a bit more civilized. The wars of Louis the 16th and Friedrich the Great left the civilian population largely unmolested.

With the French revolution, the modern mass armies came into being. General conscription became the rule, and is still in force in Israel and some other countries.

Conscription means that almost everybody serves side by side – the good and the bad, the normal and the depraved. I have seen well-educated sons of "good families" commit terrible war crimes. When I met them again a few years later, they were law-abiding citizens, proud fathers of families.

My own observation was that if, in an ordinary squad, a couple of stable, moral soldiers face a few bad apples, with the majority of the soldiers in between, there is a chance that the better ones would set the tone.

But there is also the possibility that the better ones assimilate to the others, and in the end the whole lot become dehumanized. That is one good argument for conscientious objection.

(I must admit that I am torn on this issue. On the one hand, I would like morally sound men and women to serve and influence their units, on the other side I deeply sympathize with those who follow the call of their conscience - and pay the price.)

WHEN I see a soldier who shoots a wounded enemy in cold blood, I ask myself: Who are his parents? In what home did he grow up? Who are his commanders?

The major blame must go to the officers, from company leader up to front commander. In an army, the commanders must always bear the main responsibility. Everything depends on the moral standards they impress upon their subordinates. I always blame them first and foremost.

Right at the beginning of this affair I proposed sentencing Azaria to a harsh prison term, for all to see. Then I would pardon him, but only on condition that he publicly admits his crime and asks for forgiveness. Until now, he has refused to do so, and suns himself in the glow of his status as a hero to some parts of the population. So do his parents, who visibly enjoy their public exposure.

SO HOW moral is the Israeli army?

Even before the State of Israel was founded, the underground paramilitary organization (the Haganah) which formed its base prided itself on its morality. "The Purity of Hebrew Arms" was the slogan then, and still is. It was true then as it is now, but It created the belief in the "Most Moral Army in the World".

There is no such thing as a really moral army. Unfortunately armies are necessary in this world, but their morality is always questionable.

If I were to grade our army, I would guess that it is more moral than the Russian army and less moral than, say, the Swiss army.

The only completely moral army is the army that does not fight.