

Two Sit-Ins by Uri Avnery

AT THIS moment, two sit-ins are taking place in Jerusalem, two kilometers apart.

In West Jerusalem, the Shalit family is sitting in a protest tent in front of the Prime Minister's residence, swearing to remain there until the return of their son. In East Jerusalem, three members of the Palestinian parliament are holed up in the building of the International Red Cross.

The word that connects the two is: Hamas.

The Shalit family is demanding the release of their son, Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, after four years in captivity. For that purpose they have marched, under the beating sun, 200 kilometers from their home in Galilee to Jerusalem, at the head of tens of thousands. This is a popular movement almost without precedent in Israel: people of the Left and the Right marched together with ordinary people who were touched and united by their concern for the young man. The common demand was for the Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, to agree to the proposed prisoner exchange with Hamas.

The three Palestinian Members of Parliament are protesting against the order to leave the city, in which their forefathers have lived for centuries — perhaps for millennia. Their sin is that they were elected as Hamas candidates to the Palestinian parliament, in democratic elections whose fairness was certified by ex-President Jimmy Carter and his team.

East Jerusalem was indeed formally "annexed" by Israel, but according to the Oslo agreements, its inhabitants have the right to take part in elections to the Palestinian "legislative council". Hamas won the last elections.

The four Jerusalemite Members of Parliament from Hamas were arrested immediately after the capture of Gilad Shalit, in order to serve as "negotiation chips" — a reprehensible practice in itself. They were sentenced to four years in prison by a military court. (It has been said that "a military court is to justice what a military march is to music".) A few weeks ago they were released, after serving their full sentence, only to be informed that their residence status in Jerusalem had been cancelled and that they have to leave the city and move to the West Bank or Gaza within 40 days.

The four refused, of course. The best known among them, Muhammad Abu Ter (also written Abu Tir), was arrested again and is now in prison. The other three avoided arrest by taking refuge in the IRC building in the Sheikh Jarrah quarter. The building does not enjoy extra-territorial immunity, but its invasion by Israeli police could arouse a wave of international protests, and has been avoided, therefore, until now.

I DECIDED to visit both sit-in sites in order to express my solidarity with both protests.

First of all I visited the members of parliament in the Red Cross building. That was not our first meeting: four years ago I visited Muhammad Abu Ter at his home in the Tsur Baher neighborhood. We were joined by Ahmad Attoun, one of the three (the other two are Muhammad Totah and Khaled Abu Arafa.)

On that occasion, I was also a member of a Gush Shalom delegation. The conversation was friendly, but entirely political in character. Our aim was to explore the possibilities for an Israel-Hamas dialogue, as part of the effort for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Abu Ter, a friendly person by nature, is well known in Israel. Everyone can identify him easily because of his beard, which is dyed a flaming red color, following the habit of the prophet, Muhammad, who also dyed his beard with henna.

We gained the clear impression that it is possible to talk with Hamas, and that their positions are far less extreme than they may seem.

Immediately after, all four were arrested. During their "trial" we demonstrated outside the military camp where it took place.

AT THIS week's meeting with the three threatened with expulsion, I voiced the evident: that there is no legal or moral right to expel a person from his home and his town, especially not for his political opinions. East Jerusalem is occupied territory, and the expulsion of people from occupied territories is expressly prohibited by international law.

I could not help remembering the words of the German Martin Niemoeller. a World War I submarine captain who later became a priest and landed in a Nazi concentration camp. "When they took the Jews, I kept silent. After all, I was not a Jew. When they took the communists, I kept silent. After all, I was not a communist. When they took the social democrats, I kept silent. After all, I was not a social democrat. When they came for me, there was no one left to protest."

"Now," I said, "they expel Hamas members. Then they will expel the Fatah people. Then they will expel all the Arabs from East Jerusalem. Then they will cancel the citizenship of Israeli peace activists and expel us, too. This must be a joint struggle of all of us — Israelis and Palestinians, Fatah and Hamas and the Israeli peace camp."

THE ATTEMPT to expel the Hamas members from East Jerusalem is, of course, part of the massive campaign to "Judaize" the East of the city in a thousand and one ways. This campaign is headed by the mayor, Nir Barkat, who wraps himself in the flag of "love for Jerusalem";

Love for Jerusalem is like love for children. Everybody loves children — but not always in the same way.

A father loves his children. A teacher loves the pupils. A paedophile loves the objects of his lust. A cannibal loves them fried.

I love Jerusalem. Nir Barkat loves Jerusalem. But our love is different.

I am a Tel Avivian. It's my home. But Jerusalem I loved. Loved — in the past tense.

During the ten years I served as a member of the Knesset, I spent half of each week in Jerusalem — both before and after the Six-day War.

Every time I came to Jerusalem, I breathed deeply. I loved the city almost physically — its stone houses, the mountains around it, its dry air. And every week, when I went down to Tel-Aviv, I grumbled about its humidity.

After the Six-day War, I came to love Jerusalem even more. The Eastern part of the town added to it what was missing before — the Oriental ambiance, the beautiful mosques, the wonderful wall, Damascus gate, the noisy bazaar, the incredible mixture of languages, types, human beings.

I got to know fascinating people and made new friends — Feisal al-Husseini, Anwar Nusseibeh and his son, Sari Nusseibeh, and many others. For some weeks, it seemed as if Jerusalem was indeed united and returning to its former glory.

And then the process started that destroyed everything — the city, its human fabric, the unique beauty of its manifoldness.

The seven veils of unity began to fall, one after another, and what remained was the ugly reality of occupation. The occupation of East Jerusalem by West Jerusalem, a story of annexation, oppression, expropriation, neglect and creeping ethnic cleansing.

The person who symbolizes this reality more than anyone else is Nir Barkat, the man who never misses an opportunity to provoke a quarrel, to start a fire, to demolish and expel. He reminds me of a pyromaniac who throws burning matches into a gas station.

How did such a person become mayor? The Jerusalemites voted for him for one sole reason: he is secular. Any secular candidate seemed to them preferable to an orthodox one. The orthodox are conquering the city, slowly but surely, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood. The secular public is afraid, rightly afraid. Out of fear, they voted for the only secular person on the stage — though this one is far more dangerous for the future of their city than the most frightening orthodox.

There was no secular, liberal, peace-loving candidate. The choice was only between an aggressive orthodox and an extreme nationalist. The voters (all of them Jews, the Arabs stayed away) did not understand in time that an extreme nationalist can easily embrace the extreme religious — after all, both have their roots in the cult of the "chosen people"; and the hatred of strangers.

The ideology of Barkat pushes him forward, without inhibitions or brakes, until he succeeds in destroying the human fabric of the city, its cultural richness and beauty — see the monstrous buildings — and nothing is left but one monotonous hue, the Jewish-orthodox black.

Barkat is not the first and not the only one who went out to Judaize East Jerusalem. To Judaize means to eradicate all other colors, to demolish the layers left by many generations of lovers, to eliminate thousands of years of history and cultural creation.

He was preceded by Teddy Kollek. But Kollek was a genius. He eradicated the Mugrabi quarter near the Western Wall, expropriated and built new Jewish neighborhoods at a frantic pace, and at the same time collected peace prizes all over the world. If he had lived on, he would surely have received the Nobel Peace Prize, too. Compared to him, Barkat is a primitive, transparent oaf who attracts world-wide loathing. Sheikh-Jarrah, Silwan, Ramat Shlomo, Pisgat Ze'ev – these names have become symbols everywhere.

The myth of “The City That Is Compact Together” (Psalms 122) is being exploded every day. The city has not come together. The two parts are united as a lion is united with the sheep it has swallowed. Barkat is the mayor of West Jerusalem and the military governor of East Jerusalem. He and his accomplice in the holy work, Interior Minister Eli Yishai, do everything possible to push the non-Jewish population out.

But they do not succeed. Barkat & Co are experiencing with the Arabs what Pharaoh experienced with the Children of Israel: “But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew” (Exodus 1:12). In spite of the demolition and new building, the demographic balance in Jerusalem has hardly changed - and if at all, in favor of the Arabs.

I told the members of parliament that in the end, what will be realized will be the vision of two states, because the only alternative is an apartheid state in which the Arabs will be an oppressed majority and the Jews an oppressive minority – until the whole edifice inevitably comes crashing down. Two states mean: two capitals in Jerusalem, the Palestinian in the East and the Israeli in the West. “I hope that we shall all agree on Jerusalem being united on the communal level, under a joint municipality, which will safeguard the rich and unique fabric of its population.”

In spite of Binyamin Netanyahu, Nir Barkat and their colleagues, the destroyers of Jerusalem.

Uri Avnery is the sage of Israel. The founder of the Israeli peace movement, Gush Shalom.