

“Vehareshoot Netuna” (“Authority Granted: Corruption and Terrorism in the Palestinian Authority”) by Ronen Bergman, Yedioth Ahronoth, Sifrei Hemed, 397 pages, NIS 88

Shaul Mishal

Prof. Shaul Mishal’s book “The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Co-existence” was published by Columbia University Press.

When the battle ends, and Israelis and Palestinians sit around the table, quarreling like Siamese twins forever joined at the hip, Ronen Bergman’s book will certainly come in handy for the Israeli side. The Palestinian Authority will probably translate it into Arabic to find out what is happening at home, and to discover how much Israel and the Palestinians knew and never understood, or never knew and thought they understood.

These are not easy days for bridging the yawning gap between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Inveterate opponents of Oslo, those who were hopeful but have become disillusioned since the outbreak of Palestinian terror, and those who are looking for good reasons to cut ties and forget about an agreement, will find in this book plenty of damning evidence against the Palestinian Authority. For readers who still cling to the hope of a political settlement, Bergman’s book is a bitter lesson in how hard it is to separate the cure (an overhaul of the PA) from the poison (corruption and terror), and the essential (a peace treaty) from the fatal (severing contact and loss of faith).

As an investigative reporter, Ronen Bergman exposes the shadowy world of the PA, its inept administration, the terror industry at its core, the support for terrorism among its leaders and the direct involvement in terror of Yasser Arafat. Bergman says the book is based on some 10,000 Israeli, Palestinian, American and other documents, among them records seized during IDF raids, chiefly during Operation Defensive Shield. These documents prove beyond a doubt that the PA is involved in planning, financing and implementing terror. Also described in minute detail are the encouragement and backing of bodies that are not formally affiliated with the PA, such as the Tanzim and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, which collaborate closely with PA departments and senior officials. Bergman writes at length about the corruption rampant in the economic and service sectors, the monopoly enjoyed by senior officials in the energy business and importing, and Arafat’s control over aid money transferred to PA institutions, which is used to finance terror and slipped into private pockets.

Bergman also traces hidden funding sources, such as the enormous interest earned by the PLO on overseas assets: bank accounts, real-estate and stock market investments. These assets are worth anywhere between \$1.5 billion, according to Military Intelligence, and \$7 billion, according to the Shin Bet. Hamas drums up money from the Arab, and especially Palestinian communities in Europe and the United States. As authentic documents and foreign intelligence sources show, funds raised for education and charity are used, in part, to foot the bill for terrorist activities carried out by the military arm of Hamas.

The author has conducted 250 interviews, mostly with Israelis and Palestinians, to hear responses and seek further clarification on critical issues: the leadership of Arafat, the monopolization of goods and services, PA budgets, contributions from overseas, Palestinian security forces, the financial channels of Hamas, violation of agreements on both sides and loss of mutual trust.

As a journalist who covers criminal affairs in the PA, there is no question that Bergman has done a thorough job. Like a prosecutor who begins to identify with the “body of evidence,” he even comes up with the theory, which becomes the major thread of his book, that Arafat never intended to uphold the Oslo accords. Arafat, he says, devised a carefully-crafted plot to exploit the political process in order to continue the violent struggle against Israel under conditions that were more convenient for him. From here, the road is short to Bergman’s final conclusion: “Until today, the ‘peace of the brave’ has been nothing but a hollow slogan from the point of view of the Palestinians. Arafat and his associates have consistently avoided confronting their people... [They are] a band of cowards, corrupt and weak, unwilling – or incapable - of insuring the safety of the citizens of Israel while talks proceed. This is an important factor that must be taken into account, if and when the peace process resumes.”

But those who are not fond of conspiracy theories (especially when there is no solid proof, as in this case), and those who seek a more profound understanding, so that they can be better judges and more accurately assess the factors that brought the Palestinians to the threshold of this cruel and militant reality, will have to supply the missing information themselves.

As we read, a number of important questions come to mind, none of which are answered: What is the organizational structure of the PA, and how does it operate vis a vis the citizen? What bodies handle the day-to-day problems faced by a population of 2.5 million in Gaza and 1.3 million in the West Bank? How do these bodies handle the health and educational needs of a population which is 50 percent below the age of 14? What is the civilian budget of the PA and how is it divided up? How much power and influence is in the hands of local leaders and authorities? What is their relationship with the higher authorities? How does the PA deal with informal organizational activity in which young criminal elements join local cells that manufacture bombs and commit murder without coordination or orders from above? How does one explain the broad public support for Arafat at a time when support for Hamas and the Islamic Jihad is on the rise? How are decisions reached at different echelons, and to what extent do the leaders reexamine their goals and strategies? How were negotiations with Israel conducted? Was there any discussion of alternatives? Were position papers drawn up? How does Arafat make decisions? Does he have the final word in all matters?

Lack of attention to questions that lurk beneath the surface is not uncommon among researchers who belong to one of the parties in a prolonged national, local or religious conflict. Their sense of fellowship and inevitable identification with the loss and great human tragedy suffered by the group to which they belong often leads to conceptual blindness and a selective approach toward issues that concern the other side. Exposing the misdeeds and conspiracies of the adversary become the primary objective.

Understanding the complex reality in which the adversary operates, which affects his motives and his reasons for choosing a specific course of action out of the range of possibilities that lie before him, ends up becoming less important.

In an article called “People – Not History,” which appeared in Ha’aretz over 20 years ago, historian Emmanuel Sivan offers a pithy and enlightening description of the work of the historical researcher in exploring the constraints and options that are part of the decision-making process: “The primary goal of the historian,” writes Sivan, “is not just to expose ‘dirty laundry’ and show where the parties went wrong, but also to gain an understanding of their decisions and actions. When they decided what they decided, and they did what they did, what alternatives were open to them? Only then should the historian ask why one alternative was chosen over another. And if there was an alternative that did not enter their mind... was it due to insufficient information, conceptual limitations or advance judgment? The work of the historian demands a great deal of imagination and empathy – the ability to put oneself in someone else’s shoes and think like he does...”

Adopting the mindset of the “other” requires the historian to pay attention to the tensions and ideological contradictions, to the dilemmas which preoccupy the political leadership and civilian population, impacting on the way things are done at both levels. In the Palestinian context, this means approaching the PA and its mechanisms as a dynamic system reflecting multiple political identities rather than a single one, shifting rather than immutable loyalties, and many interests undergoing a process of consolidation rather than a permanent set.

The PA is thus a reflection of the aspirations of a national movement that claims to have a deep connection to all the territories of the Palestinian homeland, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. At the same time, the PA is also a political entity that derives legitimacy from its aspiration to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel in keeping with the 1967 borders, and a representative of sectorial and communal interests based on geographical, familial, religious and professional factors.

In a world of multiple identities and interests, which sometimes clash, sometimes compete and sometimes cooperate, rivalries are never over, pacts are never stable, tensions never subside and suspicion never ends. In the kind of dynamic reality which prevails in Palestinian politics, coalitions are fluid, adversaries change sides, allies drop out, victors disappear and losers reorganize. In short, unexpected developments are inevitable, and politicians, groups and organizations quickly realign themselves in the political game without regrets or pangs of conscience.

The difficulty – if not refusal, or inability – of the Israeli side to think like Palestinians and judge their actions accordingly, is one of the prominent features of Israeli political discourse. Despite spending lengthy periods at the negotiating table and investing much effort in deciphering the Palestinian political code, many Israeli politicians, doves and hawks alike, are still caught up in the delusion that the Palestinians have ironclad views and clear-cut preferences that are immune to change.

According to the optimistic approach of the dovish camp, a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is the only, and inevitable, solution. If Israel is sufficiently daring and creative, the thinking goes, such an agreement is reachable. The hawks are

pessimistic: No matter what Israel does and how much it is prepared to relinquish, an agreement with the PA is unlikely, because “the Arabs don’t know what compromise is and don’t want peace.”

To adhere to these essentialist views is to establish a hierarchy of Palestinian values and interests – what they think, what they aspire to, what they hope for and what they can expect – in Israeli terms. In this discourse, the hopes and dreams, constraints and dilemmas, contradictions and tensions of the Palestinian side are couched in the terminology of the Israeli side, attributing to the Palestinians outlooks and interests that are convenient for Israel. As the conflict rages, and political and defense systems are caught in a dizzying whirl, it is hard to imagine that the political echelons in Israel will adopt new conceptions and re-examine the views and opinions of the Palestinians from scratch.

This is not so for researchers and journalists, who are supposed to be emotionally detached and strictly professional in their reporting and analysis of all sides in the conflict. From a researcher and journalist of Ronen Bergman’s caliber, it seems fair to expect a more punctilious examination of the source material that not only draws on Israeli thinking but also the logic of the Palestinians. To do so means staying clear of conceptual traps, dichotomic thinking and the illusion that there is one, all-embracing truth, one certainty, one sweeping prototype.

In the end, if we want to avoid sounding like a broken record, forever cranking out the same tune, be it a military march or an ode to peace, we will have to give up the great dream of getting down to the roots of the conflict. We will have a hard time understanding how identities take shape, conflicts develop and lines are drawn unless we attune ourselves to the half-tones of the Palestinian melody. It is a melody played by many groups and individuals, modulated by the broad range of aspirations, contradictions and mood swings that make up the reality of Palestinian existence.

The Greeks knew what they were talking about when they said that hope was the last plague in Pandora’s box. It is supposed to be preceded by soberness – in our case, sobering up from sanctimonious scholarship, conceptual smugness and the urge to jump in with the answers before the question is asked. History knows no mercy. It has no forgiveness for the non-sober. All it can say is: Too bad.