

A Thought for Today / Dr. Eitan Yudilevich

Cairo is Not So Far Away

I was in Cairo on the Friday of Rage.

When we landed back in Ben Gurion after four fascinating days in Cairo, I was received like a soldier returning from the front. Hugs and expressions of empathy for what I had gone through. Curiosity as to how I had ever managed to get myself into such a situation.

It was hard for me to get the words out of my mouth: "I enjoyed it." At best, it would sound stupid to someone who had sat glued to the television, viewing broadcasts throughout the day of scenes from Tahrir Square and its environs. At worst, it would sound very selfish. "Here at home we were worried to death, and you enjoyed it?"

I came to Cairo with a group to tour and get a sense of the city; after having wanted to visit Cairo for a long time but not having had the opportunity, I had finally been given the chance to join a tour of students of Arabic, and was greatly looking forward to it. I never imagined that we would be meeting a totally different Cairo.

In retrospect we were lucky that there was a break in the demonstrations between the Day of Rage and the Friday of Rage. It was a bright sunny Thursday when we visited the Citadel of Salah Ed-Din, Al-Azhar Mosque, the Muslim city, Khan El-Khalili souk, and more. In the evening we dined in a restaurant with music and dancing. There was a wonderful atmosphere. We stayed in the Zamalek district which is on an island in the Nile, northwest of Tahrir Square-- not very far from it, but far enough for us to feel relatively secure and serene in the hotel. On Friday we headed as planned to Giza, for a visit that is one of the highlights of a trip to the area, the site of the pyramids and the Sphinx.

The tour through the pyramids was breathtaking. Unlike what is written in the guidebooks on Egypt, there were very few tourists and we felt no crowding. It appeared that many tourists had been deterred from continuing as they had planned and did not come to Giza that day. At a certain point that morning we lost cellular service, as the government blocked cell phones and internet in an effort to prevent continued escalation.

When we returned from Giza, a totally different atmosphere was awaiting us. We almost did not manage to get to Zamalek because demonstrators and police were blocking the roads. The smell of tear gas was overwhelming, invading the nose and bringing tears to the eyes. Even in the Zamalek neighborhood where the hotel was located, there was a demonstration. We were forced to get out of the taxi and walk the rest of the way to the hotel. There was much tension in the streets. In the evening we went up to the top floor of the hotel – in downtown Cairo we could see buildings on fire. Al-Jumuah (Friday) of Rage had made its place in history, and I had been there.

In Israel, the developments in Egypt were observed and are still being followed with great interest and concern – how will they affect the entire region, and in particular, how will they

affect the peace agreement with Egypt, an agreement achieved only at a heavy price of wars and casualties. Peace, even if it is considered relatively "cold", is an asset for both peoples.

However, we must also take heed of the feelings of our country's Arab citizens.

In an interview on Reshet Bet following the events in Cairo, a resident of Taibe had this to say, "It's not right that a student studies, graduates, gets a diploma, but has no work... and he ends up performing unskilled labor..." The speaker was talking about young people in Egypt, who do not find suitable employment after completing their degrees. Many of them had crowded into Tahrir Square.

During a conference that took place a few weeks ago there was a keen discussion on the state of Arab society in Israel, and challenges were defined for advancing the Arab sector. Among the issues discussed were: "Promoting employment of Arabsthroughaffirmative action; Creation of employment opportunities by assisting young boys and girls to acquire education and training suitable for the modern labor market"; and "A common vision for both Arabs and Jews. A vision of democracy, partnership, common culture and language, and education for equality."

The OECD report put together in preparation for acceptance of Israel into the organization also stressed the socio-economic gaps in Israeli society. Israel was accepted and enjoys the status of an advanced nation, but we must not forget the dangers inherent in vast economic inequality.

Indeed, in contrast to the opposition of the Egyptian people to the nature of their regime, Israelis live in an atmosphere of democracy, individual rights, freedom of speech and the ability to influence; but at the same time we cannot disregard the relevance of the events in Egypt. They should cause us to urgently focus our attention on reducing the gaps and advancing Arab society in Israel, a policy that has been identified as critical for a common future of economic growth and equality for all.

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