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LETTER DATED 25 JUNE 1971 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF IRAQ
TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

I have the honour, on instructions from my Government, to refer to General Assembly resolution 2443 (XXIII) of 19 December 1968, and to enclose herewith a transcript of the interview given by Israel Shahak, Professor of Organic Chemistry at the Hebrew University and President of the Israeli League of Human Rights, to Pâquerette Villeneuve and published in Témoignage Chrétien of Paris on 13 August 1970.

I have the honour to request that this letter and its enclosure be circulated as official documents of the General Assembly and the Security Council and that their contents be brought to the attention of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories and the Commission on Human Rights.

(Signed) Talib EL-SHIBIB
Permanent Representative of Iraq
to the United Nations

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A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS:

an interview with the new President of the Israeli League
of Human Rights

The positive response from the United Arab Republic and Israel to the United States proposals has now created a glimmer of hope for the restoration of peace in the Middle East. Yet, despite the attempt at negotiations and after the evacuation of the occupied territories, the problem of the Palestinian people themselves will remain. It appears that there can be no real solution to this problem until the very nature of the State of Israel has been radically altered. This is once again clearly illustrated by the remarks made to Pâquerette Villeneuve by the President of the Israeli League of Human Rights.

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With his round, cheerful face, enormous, ungainly build and little blinking eyes, Professor Israel Shahak looks like a snowman, or like one of the absent-minded old scientists one used to see in the strip cartoons of the last century. He is a lover of classical music, and the songs of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" formed the background to our conversation in his Jerusalem apartment. Mr. Shahak teaches chemistry and manipulates the most explosive ideas with a passionate interest.

He is a Spinozist who never leaves for his period of army reserve training without the Ethica in his suitcase. In his view Israel, "by giving top priority to its material survival, is denying two thousand years of Jewish tradition". Anxious to defend the humanitarian values of this tradition, he has just accepted the presidency of the Israeli League of Human Rights, which is resuming its activities after three years of silence. The League will devote its efforts to fighting the Emergency Laws inherited from the United Kingdom Mandate and still applied in Israel.

The new President has many files: "Collective punishment; destruction of houses; ill-treatment of prisoners; administrative detention; we protest against them all."

VILLENEUVE: What have you to say about administrative detention?

SHAHAK: I could mention the case of an Israeli Arab, Mohammed Yusef Sadik, author of an excellent play in Hebrew about Arab-Jewish relations, which the University drama group had decided to put on. The author was arrested shortly before the opening night and the performances were cancelled. Mr. Sadik stayed in prison until August 1969 and was not released until he agreed to emigrate to the United States. Then a professor of comparative religion, Mr. Verblovski, helped him to get his visa.

Kashua Darwish has been in prison for more than a year after having been arrested for no reason. We held a joint meeting with the Arab students to insist that he be released or put on trial. We delivered a petition to this effect to the dean, who has never replied.

We are also concerned about mass emigration. Uri Avnery - author of Israel without Zionists - recently noted something rather strange in his newspaper: the tourist agency Petra, subsidized by the Israeli Government, gives away almost free one-way tickets to Brazil, to encourage Arab emigration. It is quite openly admitted that the aim of the agency is to "dredge" the Gaza zone.

The deed is shocking. But the expression is a hundred times more so.

Here is another example of the same attitude, taken from the daily paper Haaretz: An important official who signs himself X proposes that Israeli society should be "cleansed" of all foreign elements.

To see something like that written in Hebrew! I lived as a child in Hitler's Europe, and I cannot help but remember the "Reich cleansed of Jews". To apply such words to human beings is depraved.

I have talked about these matters twice in public. First, to a committee of "old liberals" to which I still belong because I do not like burning bridges unnecessarily. At a recent meeting the chairman declared himself "against annexation but for a cleansed Israel". I told him that, if one can openly use such an expression in a newspaper and if even a liberal does not hesitate to employ it, then the spirit of Hitler and Goebbels has eaten into us. My words were met with disapproval, but in silence.

VILLENEUVE: And the second time?

SHAHAK: I spoke of this again at a meeting of young people a few days later. There - and this is the ray of hope - everyone was horrified. When we asked for volunteers to set up a committee at Tel-Aviv, over thirty people volunteered their services.

VILLENEUVE: Has this hostility developed recently?

SHAHAK: In an issue of the Histadruth (trade union) journal in September 1967 an important Zionist, who had been director of the Settlement Department for years and who was then adviser on Arab affairs to the Prime Minister, wrote: "Between ourselves it must be clear that there is no room in this country for two nations. As long as the Arabs are here we shall never reach our goal, which is to become an independent nation on this little stretch of territory. The only solution is for at least western Palestine to be without Arabs and to achieve this there is no other way except to displace them towards the neighbouring countries, and to displace them all. No Arab must stay here. We shall find money to do it, a great deal of money, and only if we succeed shall we be able to absorb the millions of our brothers (who are still in the Diaspora). There is no other solution."

On 7 July 1968 a newspaper quoted the following words of General Dayan:

"For a century the nation has been constructing a country by receiving Jewish immigrants and implanting colonies with the aim of enlarging our frontiers. Let no one say that we have already fulfilled our programme; let no one say that we are already nearing the desired goal!"

From the official publication of the Rabbinate of the Army I quote from a text dated April 1969: "The Arabs, who are elements foreign to the essence and destiny of this country, must be considered in all respects like the ancient foreign elements. Our war with them was just as inevitable as were our wars with the nations which ruled the country during our ancient colonization. To live here with the Arabs is impossible, because the Arab turns towards Mecca to say his prayers whereas we turn towards Jerusalem. Only he who turns towards Jerusalem is the true son of this country. The conclusion is simple: either the Arab will cease to honour the ideals of Mecca and will honour those of Zion and Jerusalem or he will return to the country of Mecca and leave the sons of Zion to fulfil their destiny without bothering them. The Bible is the sole and unique basis for the development of this country, it is its very essence. All our steps must be inspired by the Bible."

Believe me, I was never a great Zionist before 1967, but you could have killed me before making me believe they were capable of that! In 1967, when I went to war and the Prime Minister and the others told us that they did not want a single inch of territory, I believed them. How they deceived us!

VILLENEUVE: Many Zionists neither believe nor practise their religion, even some of the politicians who frequently quote the Bible. How do you explain this?

SHAHAK: They are religious. But their God is the Jewish nation. The anti-Christian sentiment that used to be disguised because of fear in the Diaspora is now developing in a very ugly way. We are told that it is a religion without any originality which owes everything good it has to Judaism.

They have found a Spanish book dating from the fourteenth century, which is used as a manual of religious instruction in secondary schools. It explains why non-Jews ought to be the slaves of Jews, "because Jews are the élite of the human race and were specially created to pay homage to the Creator. Because of this they deserve to have slaves, and these must be non-Jews, because a Jewish slave could not devote himself entirely to God. Non-Jews can serve Jews after they have been rid of their idolatry".

No culture in the world, except perhaps the Chinese, tries to seal itself off so hermetically. Even the most chauvinist of Frenchmen is conscious of what he owes to Greco-Roman culture. But we are literally convinced that Adam spoke Hebrew in paradise!

The worst of it is that over the last three years we have become more and more ethnocentric, more and more hostile to European values.

VILLENEUVE: What are the reactions to your activities?

SHAHAK: Most people, here and in the Diaspora, regard us with very little sympathy. The Jews in the Anglo-Saxon countries are the worst.

VILLENEUVE: What do you mean?

SHAHAK: American Jews have an inferiority complex towards Israeli Jews. They deify everything that symbolizes the State. An American university professor who talks to you with enthusiasm about the New Left cries with emotion at the sight of an Israeli tank. How can you interest him in the fate of the Arabs?

In July 1968 I had great hopes. Several hundred Reform rabbis who claimed to be followers of Martin Luther King came here. From the way they talked about the Arabs it was clear that they had absolutely no idea what civil rights are. What hypocrisy!

VILLENEUVE: Were they not active?

SHAHAK: Their action in the United States stemmed far more from their contempt for the Whites of Alabama than from a desire to help the Blacks.

Yet the only way to change Israeli public opinion is through the Diaspora. It is useless for a non-Jew to waste his breath criticizing Israel. A "goy" does not count here. But if American Jews were to criticize our attitude towards the Arabs we would take notice because we need their money!

So far, unfortunately, this has not happened. The fault certainly lies with the leaders, because Jewish students in the United States can be made to understand the Arab problem. The trouble is that when they come here they are closely escorted, are never alone and never see anything that would help them to understand.

VILLENEUVE: You paint a very gloomy picture....

SHAHAK: Perhaps there are a few rays of hope. The younger generation in Israel, particularly the older school-children, are beginning to ask questions. I have some confidence in the Jews of the American New Left, the young ones. They make a better impression on me than their elders. But my greatest hope lies in the Arabs who are now suffering in our prisons. If we fight with them for their rights, we can build something very solid. I have been moved by the profound sympathy built up between the members of our committee and the Arabs with whom we work. I am convinced of one thing: all the Israeli so-called realists are wrong. We cannot buy our security through power. It is only through the restoration of equal rights for all that we shall achieve peace. For me, before the war, Israel counted more than anything else. Today I believe that I was wrong and that we could live together with the Palestinian refugees in a democratic State. Before 1967, I agreed that we should let some refugees return. Now I insist that we give them the basic human right of returning to their homes. I am not a master permitting them to return, but an equal, and I demand equality for them.

VILLENEUVE: Are you not afraid to express these opinions?

SHAHAK: I am not afraid of anything. Someone has to say these things. Those who act according to their conscience are seldom numerous, but they point the way. If they call me mad -- perhaps rightly -- I shall reply that I am a Jewish madman. They will have to listen to me.