

The Eyes of a Nation

by

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A visit to the Palmach museum, not the central exhibits with the movies and the sound effects, but the hall out back with the photographs that grow older by the day. Picture after picture of the fighters, including those in the Har'el (dad's) and Negev (mom's) divisions, the soldier-youths who joined together to create kibbutzim like my parents' Malkia on the Lebanese border – and whose eyes that have been engraved in my mind ever since. These were the sparkling wide eyes of a young generation, handsome and indescribably naive, intending to create here what the majority of outsiders viewed as hopeless.

Readers are invited to put into the “Palmach” rubric other relevant backgrounds – Haganah, Irgun, and so on – since this is not a personal family story, but one of a generation to which were added the immigrants who lost everything, or who were forced to leave everything behind. They were part of a tiny population numbering only 650,000 in 1948, who rebuilt the ancestral home of the Jewish people among millions of Arabs determined to complete what the European pogroms and the death camps began in the first half of that century. Sabras and immigrants, merging unwavering faith in their ability with incredible fortitude and bravery, who were regular people doing the impossible. One percent of the new country's population lost their lives in the process, including a much, much higher proportion of the young, who physically put their bodies in harm's way.

These eyes, so full of life and hope, did not just belong to our parents in their youth. They also belong to our children's generation. I see the spark each day in the university that I teach. I see it in my kids and their friends in the army and in high school. Like their grandparents five decades earlier, they have not only persevered, but have thrived with unbent spirit during four of the worst years that our nation has had to undergo since achieving independence. These are the wondrous eyes of the young, who depend on us to provide them with the conditions and tools for coping in the contemporary labor market of a globally competitive economy so that they will be able to live – and one day, to retire – in comfort. Trusting eyes that depend on us to guide this country to safe shores for them and for their children.

This spark was also once in our eyes, the generation that saved the country during six days in June and one Yom Kippur that lasted three weeks from hell – that was thrust into Lebanon and forgotten there for 18 years. We are the generation that sang “machar” (tomorrow) and “bashana haba'a” (next year) and believed that these promises were possible. This is a generation whose eyes have since lost some of their shine, who has less faith, is more cynical, and in this crazy period in which we are living, also tends to forget what really rests on the shoulders of those who took the baton from their parents and will one day have to pass it along to their children.

The eyes that twinkled in those aging albums are now in their 70s and 80s. Much of that generation invested more of its energy in providing us with a sustainable collective home than in personal pursuits. They had faith that if everyone chipped in for the greater good, then all would turn out well. Over time, many became successful in providing for themselves and their families – and more power to them. But too many were left with nothing as they grew old. Had it not been for our tax and welfare systems, 59% of households headed by seniors in Israel would have lived below the poverty line. Hard to believe how much those pillars of strength are now dependent upon others.

Poverty levels in Israel are among the highest in the western world. According to the Social Security Institute's recently published poverty report comparing net incomes, roughly a fifth of all families living below the poverty line in 2002 were seniors. During 2003, there was a substantial worsening of the situation as an additional 26,400 families fell below the poverty line on their way down – and more than 50% of these were seniors. And what what was the height of this poverty line beyond the reach of so many in 2003? 1,736 shekels (\$359) per month for a single person and 2,777 shekels (\$574) for a couple.

It is possible to understand and even agree with the desire of the government to implement policies that will raise an Israeli labor participation rate that is among the lowest in the west. But we should have moved a long time ago from echoing shallow slogans to employing common sense. Open the albums with the yellowing pictures and look into the eyes of the young generation that built this country. They have already provided their contribution.

The government budget in Israel, excluding defense expenditures – that is, the civilian budget only – is tens of billions of shekels above the western average. We spend huge amounts in non-military expenditures that are far beyond what is considered normal in enlightened countries. In other words, we do not lack the funds to do what needs to be done.

There is enough to enable our country's founding generation to live decently and to age honorably, to provide them and subsequent generations with medical attention befitting the modern world rather than the all-too-prevalent degradation in the corridors of bursting hospitals with insufficient beds. There is enough money for adequately funding the country's medicine basket to take care of the proud – and in retrospect, larger-than-life – youths in those pictures.

We owe them a huge debt. It is budget season now, and the baton is in our hands. It is all an issue of national priorities.