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What Sontag Said in Jerusalem

Susan Sontag went to Israel and picked up her Jerusalem Prize on May 9. Ori Nir reported in *Haaretz* the following day that after accepting the prize from Jerusalem's mayor, Ehud Olmert, Sontag told those present at the convention center: "I believe the doctrine of collective responsibility as a rationale for collective punishment is never justified, militarily or ethically. And I mean of course the disproportionate use of firepower against civilians, the demolition of their homes, the destruction of their orchards and groves, the deprivation of their livelihood and access to employment, to schooling, to medical services, or as a punishment for hostile military activities in the vicinity of those civilians."

In her opinion, Sontag said, there will never be peace in the Middle East until Israel first suspends its settlements, and then demolishes them. Some cheered, others left the hall.

Sontag told the *Jerusalem Post* that there'd been a lot of pressure on her not to attend the Jerusalem Book Fair and accept the prize. Publicly—at least in this country—I think my columns (e.g., here on April 23) constituted the only such pressure. Maybe they helped firm up Sontag to make the remarks noted above. Anyway, I'm glad she did. Out of interest, I asked my colleague Jonathan Shainin to check the record to see if she'd said anything critical about Israeli government policies in the past. He didn't find much, but one document she co-signed as a PEN board member a decade ago signals why it still might have been better for her to decline to accept any prize from Mayor Olmert.

Back on February 18, 1991, amid the war with Iraq, the *New York Times* published a letter signed by Sontag along with E.L. Doctorow, Allen Ginsberg, Larry McMurtry, Arthur Miller and Edward Said, all executive board members of PEN American Center. It began as follows:

"We are acutely dismayed by the continuing detention of the Palestinian intellectual and activist Sari Nusseibeh in Jerusalem, for what the Israeli Government first called 'subversive activities of collecting security information for Iraqi intelligence.'"

The letter went on to describe how Nusseibeh, professor of philosophy at Bir Zeit University, had been imprisoned, though Israeli authorities were unable to produce any evidence against him. "We are concerned that the Israeli Government is exploiting these difficult days of war against Iraq to crack down on precisely those figures whose moderation and opposition to violence will be essential to the conclusion of a just and secure peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the aftermath of this war."

This May 10, in the same edition that noted Sontag's public remarks on receiving the Jerusalem Prize, *Haaretz* ran a commentary titled, "What Freedom, What Society?":

Yesterday evening Jerusalem's Mayor conferred the "Jerusalem Prize for the freedom of man and society" to the writer Susan Sontag. At the same hour, a proposal submitted by the Public Security Minister to "shut down for the near future the administra-



tion and presidency of Al-Quds University headed by Sari Nusseibeh" was sitting on the desk of the mayor, who serves on the Jerusalem Affairs Committee, which is appointed by the Prime Minister. It can be assumed that only a few of the hundreds of participants in the festive Jerusalem event (all of them committed cultural figures who fight for human liberty) were conscious of the irony.

In a different world, Sari Nusseibeh would be a leading candidate for such a prize, rather than the Jewish-American writer who was involved naively

in a celebration of self-righteousness and self-congratulation. A Palestinian prince and cordial, dignified philosopher, Sari Nusseibeh has built a splendid academic research framework. Not the type to surrender to threats, or to physical blows or the temptations of power, he had created bridges of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, and furnishes original ideas and plans to resolve the dispute. This is the man depicted by Israel's establishment as "a security threat," rather than a culture hero.... In a different world, people of culture and supporters of freedom would have suspended such an awards celebration, waiting for circumstances to arise under which universal meaning to the concept "freedom and society" might crystallize.... One should marvel at the prize givers' ability to compartmentalize and the ability to reconcile the contradiction between "freedom of man and society," and a "plan" designed not only to ruin human freedom, but also a society located just a few hundred meters from where the prizes were conferred.... One of the last, still operating, joint Al-Quds University-Hebrew University projects is a botanical catalogue, an attempt to identify and describe the flora of the shared homeland. When will these botanists be recognized as the ones whose works should be lauded, rather than those of righteous hypocrites?

So Sontag accepts a prize from a group that's trying to boot Nusseibeh out of East Jerusalem—the very same man whose detention she petitioned to end ten years ago, during the first *intifada*! She deserves credit for condemning the occupation policies, but she could have gone a lot further. For example, she praised the man giving her the prize, Mayor Olmert, as "an extremely persuasive and reasonable person." This is like describing Radovan Karadzic as a moderate in search of multiconfessional tolerance. Olmert is a fanatical ethnic cleanser, one of the roughest of the Likud ultras. During his period in office, he has consistently pushed for the expropriation of Arab property and the revocation of Arab residence permits. Olmert was a principal advocate of the disastrous 1996 tunnel excavation underneath the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. During the ensuing demonstrations, Israeli security forces shot dead about fifty Palestinian civilians. The mayor was also instrumental in the seizure of Palestinian land at the southeastern edge of Jerusalem in order to build the settlement of Har Homa, another link in the encirclement of Arab East Jerusalem. This too led to prolonged rioting.

Such people have no right to award a prize on "freedom." ■

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