

## ARTICLES

# SUSAN SONTAG on COURAGE and RESISTANCE

*The following is the keynote address given at the Rothko Chapel in Houston on March 30 on the occasion of the presentation of the Oscar Romero Award to Ishai Menuchin, chairman of Yesh Gvul ("There Is a Limit"), the Israeli soldiers' movement for selective refusal to serve in the occupied territories.* —The Editors

Allow me to invoke not one but two, only two, who were heroes—among millions of heroes. Who were victims—among tens of millions of victims.

The first: Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, murdered in his vestments, while saying mass in the cathedral on March 24, 1980—twenty-three years ago—because he had become “a vocal advocate of a just peace, and had openly opposed the forces of violence and oppression.” (I am quoting from the description of the Oscar Romero Award, being given today to Ishai Menuchin.)

The second: Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old college student from Olympia, Washington, murdered in the bright neon-orange jacket with Day-Glo striping that “human shields” wear to make themselves quite visible, and possibly safer, while trying to stop one of the almost daily house demolitions by Israeli forces in Rafah, a town in the southern Gaza Strip (where Gaza abuts the Egyptian border), on March 16, 2003. Standing in front of a Palestinian physician’s house that had been targeted for demolition, Corrie, one of eight young American and British human-shield volunteers in Rafah, had been waving and shouting at the driver of an oncoming armored D-9 bulldozer through her megaphone, then dropped to her knees in the path

of the supersized bulldozer...which did not slow down.

Two emblematic figures of sacrifice, killed by the forces of violence and oppression to which they were offering nonviolent, principled, dangerous opposition.

Let’s start with risk. The risk of being punished. The risk of being isolated. The risk of being injured or killed. The risk of being scorned. We are all conscripts in one sense or another. For all of us, it is hard to break ranks; to incur the disapproval, the censure, the violence of an offended majority with a different idea of loyalty. We shelter under banner words like justice, peace and reconciliation that enroll us in new, if much smaller and relatively powerless, communities of the like-minded. That mobilize us for the demonstration, the protest and the public performance of acts of civil disobedience—not for the parade ground and the battlefield.

To fall out of step with one’s tribe; to step beyond one’s tribe into a world that is larger mentally but smaller numerically—if alienation or dissidence is not your habitual or gratifying posture, this is a complex, difficult process. It is hard to defy the wisdom of the tribe, the wisdom that values the lives of members of the tribe above all others. It will always be unpopular—it will always be deemed unpatriotic—to say that the lives of the members of the other tribe are as valuable as one’s own. It is easier to give one’s allegiance to those we know, to those we see, to those with whom we are embedded, to those with whom we share—as we may—a community of fear.

Let’s not underestimate the force of what we oppose. Let’s not underestimate the retaliation that may be visited on those who

dare to dissent from the brutalities and repressions thought justified by the fears of the majority. We are flesh. We can be punctured by a bayonet, torn apart by a suicide bomber. We can be crushed by a bulldozer, gunned down in a cathedral. Fear binds people together. And fear disperses them. Courage inspires communities: the courage of an example—for courage is as contagious as fear. But courage, certain kinds of courage, can also isolate the brave.

The perennial destiny of principles: While everyone professes to have them, they are likely to be sacrificed when they become inconveniencing. Generally a moral principle is something that puts one at variance with accepted practice. And that variance has consequences, sometimes unpleasant consequences, as the community takes its revenge on those who challenge its contradictions—who want a society actually to uphold the principles it professes to defend.

The standard that a society should actually embody its own professed principles is a utopian one, in the sense that moral principles contradict the way things really are—and always will be. How things really are—and always will be—is neither all evil nor all good but deficient, inconsistent, inferior. Principles invite us to do something about the morass of contradictions in which we function morally. Principles invite us to clean up our act, to become intolerant of moral laxity and compromise and cowardice and the turning away from what is upsetting; that secret gnawing of the heart that tells us that what we are doing is not right, and so counsels us that we'd be better off just not thinking about it.

The cry of the anti-principled: "I'm doing the best I can." The best given the circumstances, of course.

Let's say, the principle is: It's wrong to oppress and humiliate a whole people. To deprive them systematically of lodging and proper nutrition; to destroy their habitations, means of livelihood, access to education and medical care, and ability to consort with one another. That these practices are wrong, whatever the provocation. And there is provocation. That, too, should not be denied.

**A**t the center of our moral life and our moral imagination are the great models of resistance: the great stories of those who have said no. No, I will not serve. What models, what stories? A Mormon may resist the outlawing of polygamy. An anti-abortion militant may resist the law that has made abortion legal. They, too, will invoke the claims of religion (or faith) and morality against the edicts of civil society. Appeal to the existence of a higher law that authorizes us to defy the laws of the state can be used to justify criminal transgression as well as the noblest struggle for justice.

Courage has no moral value in itself, for courage is not, in itself, a moral virtue. Vicious scoundrels, murderers, terrorists, may be brave. To describe courage as a virtue, we need an adjective: We speak of "moral courage"—because there is such a thing as amoral courage, too. And resistance has no value in itself. It is

the content of the resistance that determines its merit, its moral necessity. Let's say: resistance to a criminal war. Let's say: resistance to the occupation and annexation of another people's land.

Again: There is nothing inherently superior about resistance. All our claims for the righteousness of resistance rest on the rightness of the claim that the resisters are acting in the name of justice. And the justice of the cause does not depend on, and is not enhanced by, the virtue of those who make the assertion. It depends first and last on the truth of a description of a state of affairs that is, truly, unjust and unnecessary.

**H**ere is what I believe to be a truthful description of a state of affairs that has taken me many years of uncertainty, ignorance and anguish to acknowledge: A wounded and fearful country, Israel, is going through the greatest crisis of its turbulent history, brought about by the policy of steadily increasing and reinforcing settlements on the territories won after its victory in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The decision of successive Israeli governments to retain control over the West Bank and Gaza, thereby denying their Palestinian neighbors a state of their own, is

a catastrophe—moral, human and political—for both peoples. The Palestinians need a sovereign state. Israel needs a sovereign Palestinian state. Those of us abroad who wish

for Israel to survive cannot, should not, wish it to survive no matter what, no matter how. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to courageous Israeli Jewish witnesses, journalists, architects, poets, novelists, professors—among others—who have described and documented and protested and militated against the sufferings of the Palestinians living under the increasingly cruel terms of Israeli military subjugation and settler annexation.

Our greatest admiration must go to the brave Israeli soldiers, represented here by Ishai Menuchin, who refuse to serve beyond the 1967 borders. These soldiers know that all settlements are bound to be evacuated in the end. These soldiers, who are Jews, take seriously the principle put forward at the Nuremberg trials in 1945–46: namely, that a soldier is not obliged to obey unjust orders, orders that contravene the laws of war—indeed, one has an obligation to disobey them.

The Israeli soldiers who are resisting service in the occupied territories are not refusing a particular order. They are refusing to enter the space where illegitimate orders are bound to be given—that is, where it is more than probable that they will be ordered to perform actions that continue the oppression and humiliation of Palestinian civilians. Houses are demolished, groves are uprooted, the stalls of a village market are bulldozed, a cultural center is looted; and now, nearly every day, civilians of all ages are fired on and killed. There can be no disputing the mounting cruelty of the Israeli occupation of the 22 percent of the former territory of British Palestine on which a Palestinian state will be erected. These soldiers believe, as I do, that there should be an unconditional withdrawal from the occupied territories. They have declared collectively that they will not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders "in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people."

What the refuseniks have done—there are now more than

1,000 of them, more than 250 of whom have gone to prison—does not contribute to telling us how the Israelis and Palestinians can make peace, beyond the irrevocable demand that the settlements be disbanded. The actions of this heroic minority cannot contribute to the much-needed reform and democratization of the Palestinian Authority. Their stand will not lessen the grip of religious bigotry and racism in Israeli society or reduce the dissemination of virulent anti-Semitic propaganda in the aggrieved Arab world. It will not stop the suicide bombers.

It simply declares: enough. Or: there is a limit. *Yesh gvul*. It provides a model of resistance. Of disobedience. For which there will always be penalties.

None of us have yet to endure anything like what these brave conscripts are enduring, many of whom have gone to jail. To speak for peace at this moment in this country is merely to be jeered (as in the recent Academy Awards ceremony), harassed, blacklisted (the banning by one powerful chain of radio stations of the Dixie Chicks); in short, to be reviled as unpatriotic.

Our “United We Stand” or “Winner Takes All” ethos: The United States is a country that has made patriotism equivalent to consensus. Tocqueville, still the greatest

observer of the United States, remarked on an unprecedented degree of conformity in the then-new country, and 168 more years have only confirmed his observation.

Sometimes, given the new, radical turn in American foreign policy, it seems as if it was inevitable that the national consensus on the greatness of America, which may be activated to an extraordinary pitch of triumphalist national self-regard, was bound eventually to find expression in wars like the present one, which are assented to by a majority of the population, who have been persuaded that America has the right—even the duty—to dominate the world.

**T**he usual way of heralding people who act on principle is to say that they are the vanguard of an eventually triumphant revolt against injustice. But what if they're not? What if the evil is really unstoppable? At least in the short run. And that short run may be—is going to be—very long indeed.

My admiration for the soldiers who are resisting service in the occupied territories is as fierce as my belief that it will be a long time before their view prevails. But what haunts me at this moment—for obvious reasons—is acting on principle when it isn't going to alter the obvious distribution of force, the rank injustice and murderousness of a government policy that claims to be acting in the name not of peace but of security.

The force of arms has its own logic. If you commit an aggression and others resist, it is easy to convince the home front that the fighting must continue. Once the troops are there, they must be supported. It becomes irrelevant to question why the troops are there in the first place.

The soldiers are there because “we” are being attacked or menaced. Never mind that we may have attacked them first. They are now attacking back, causing casualties. Behaving in ways that defy the “proper” conduct of war. Behaving like “savages,” as people in our part of the world like to call people in

that part of the world. And their “savage” or “unlawful” actions give new justification to new aggressions. And new impetus to repress or censor or persecute citizens who oppose the aggression the government has undertaken.

**L**et's not underestimate the force of what we are opposing. The world is, for almost everyone, that over which we have virtually no control. Common sense and the sense of self-protectiveness tell us to accommodate to what we cannot change.

It's not hard to see how some of us might be persuaded of the justice, the necessity of a war. Especially of a war that is formulated as a small, limited military action that will actually contribute to peace or improve security; of an aggression that announces itself as a campaign of disarmament—admittedly, disarmament of the enemy; and, regrettably, requiring the application of overpowering force. An invasion that calls itself, officially, a liberation.

Every violence in war has been justified as a retaliation. We are threatened. We are defending ourselves. The others, they want to kill us. We must stop them. And from there: We must stop them before they have a chance to carry out their plans. And since those who would attack us are sheltering behind noncombatants, no aspect of civil life can be immune to our depredations.

Never mind the disparity of forces, of wealth, of firepower—or simply of population. How many Americans know that the population of Iraq is 24 million, half of whom are children? (The population of the United States, as you will remember, is 290 million.) Not to support those who are coming under fire from the enemy seems like treason.

It may be that, in some cases, the threat is real. In such circumstances, the bearer of the moral principle seems like someone running alongside a moving train, yelling “Stop! Stop!” Can the train be stopped? No, it can't. At least, not now. Will other people on the train be moved to jump off and join those on the ground? Maybe some will, but most won't. (At least, not until they have a whole new panoply of fears.)

The dramaturgy of “acting on principle” tells us that we don't have to think about whether acting on principle is expedient, or whether we can count on the eventual success of the actions we have undertaken. Acting on principle is, we're told, a good in itself. But it is still a political act, in the sense that you're not doing it for yourself. You don't do it just to be in the right, or to appease your own conscience; much less because you are confident your action will achieve its aim. You resist as an act of solidarity. With communities of the principled and the disobedient: here, elsewhere. In the present. In the future.

Thoreau's going to prison in 1846 for refusing to pay the poll tax in protest against the American war on Mexico hardly stopped the war. But the resonance of that most unpunishing and briefest spell of imprisonment (famously, a single night in jail) has not ceased to inspire principled resistance to injustice through the second half of the twentieth century and into our new era. The movement in the late 1980s to shut down the Nevada Test Site, a key location for the nuclear arms race, failed in its goal; the operations of the test site were unaffected by the protests. But it led directly to

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the formation of a movement of protesters in faraway Alma Ata, who eventually succeeded in shutting down the main Soviet test site in Kazakhstan, citing the Nevada antinuclear activists as their inspiration and expressing solidarity with the Native Americans on whose land the Nevada Test Site had been located.

The likelihood that your acts of resistance cannot stop the injustice does not exempt you from acting in what you sincerely and reflectively hold to be the best interests of your community.

Thus: It is not in the best interests of Israel to be an oppressor.

Thus: It is not in the best interests of the United States to be a hyperpower, capable of imposing its will on any country in the world, as it chooses.

What is in the true interests of a modern community is justice.

It cannot be right to systematically oppress and confine a neighboring people. It is surely false to think that murder, expulsion, annexations, the building of walls—all that has contributed to reducing a whole people to dependence, penury and despair—will bring security and peace to the oppressors. It cannot be right that a President of the United States seems to believe that he has

a mandate to be President of the planet—and announces that those who are not with America are with “the terrorists.”

Those brave Israeli Jews who, in fervent and active opposition to the policies of the present government of their country, have spoken up on behalf of the plight and the rights of Palestinians are defending the true interests of Israel. Those of us who are opposed to the plans of the present government of the United States for global hegemony are patriots speaking for the best interests of the United States.

Beyond these struggles, which are worthy of our passionate adherence, it is important to remember that in programs of political resistance the relation of cause and effect is convoluted, and often indirect. All struggle, all resistance is—must be—concrete. And all struggle has a global resonance.

If not here, then there. If not now, then soon. Elsewhere as well as here.

To Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

To Rachel Corrie.

And to Ishai Menuchin and his comrades. ■

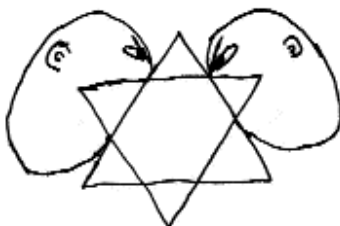
WHO'S REALLY BEHIND THE CRUDE EQUATION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND 'THE JEWS'?

# ‘Anti-Semitism,’ Israel and the Left

PHILIP GREEN

The war on Iraq has unleashed some familiar conspiracy theories in recent months, on both the right and the left. Lyndon LaRouche laid blame for the coming war at the feet of “a nest of Israeli agents inside the US government”; then Pat Buchanan blamed the US invasion of Iraq on a “cabal” of Jewish intellectuals willing to “conscript American blood to make the world safe for Israel.” On the other side of the tally, Democratic Representative James Moran declared, “If it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war in Iraq, we would not be doing this,” while a Democratic New York City Council member, Robert Jackson, attributed opposition to a local antiwar resolution to Jewish colleagues who saw New York only as their “home away from home” and believed the resolution would “not be in the best interests of the State of Israel.” The idea that Jews loyal to Israel over America were driving the United States to war gained enough force to garner mention in the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and finally ended up at the feet of Colin Powell, who, in what was surely a historical first for a Secretary of State on the eve of armed conflict, was asked by a member of Congress to publicly disavow that a “cabal” was behind this war.

Somehow, though, despite the broad circulation—and broad denunciation—of this poisonous idea, only the left seems



doomed to bear the taint of anti-Semitism. Why should this be so?

The furor over events in San Francisco leading up to the massive February antiwar marches is telling. Rabbi Michael Lerner, the founder of *Tikkun*, claimed that he was excluded from a list of potential speakers at the Bay Area event because he had publicly criticized ANSWER, one of the sponsors, for being anti-Israel. What might have been a minor back-room squabble went public when a group of left writers (many affiliated with *The Nation*) circulated a petition on his behalf and Lerner himself detailed his charges in the prowar *Wall Street Journal*. His story, headlined “The Antiwar Anti-Semites,” condemned “anti-Semitism and Israel-bashing on the left.” Letter writers to the *Journal* responded with barely concealed glee at Lerner’s outing of the left, one opining venomously that “the American far left would no more tolerate criticism of its anti-Semitism than the Communists and Nazis tolerated criticism of theirs.” Since that writer has certainly not been threatened with removal to the camps or the gulag, we can take his letter for what it really is: an attempt to blackmail “the far left” into silence on a crucial issue.

This fraught accusation of “left-wing anti-Semitism” surfaces so regularly that before considering it, we need to remind ourselves what anti-Semitism—the real thing—has actually looked like over the centuries. It had (and has) nothing to do with Israel or Zionism, but was rather a prototypical racist stereotyping, by means of which the alleged traits of certain individuals—“money-grubbing,” “pushiness,” moral degener-

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