

PERSPECTIVES

A dialog for Israeli-Palestinian peace



Mordechai Bar-on, an Israeli leader of the Labor Party and Peace Now, toured with Mohammed Milhelm (right), former mayor of the West Bank town Halhoul.

By Richard Miller

IN A MANHATTAN SYNAGOGUE during Passover, the week celebrating exodus and liberation from Egypt, a Palestinian and an Israeli shared the pulpit to discuss the Middle East. The Palestinian, in a Jewish temple for the first time, talked of his life in the West Bank and of how his five-year-old son wonders if all Israelis are soldiers. The Israeli spoke of his country's growing peace movement and of the fears that still grip many of his people.

In New York and 16 other cities in March and April, these two men spoke to Jewish community groups, Arab-Americans and the general population about the process of peace in the Mideast. The tour was sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the New Jewish Agenda (NJA).

Mordechai Bar-on, a veteran of the Israeli Defense Forces, a member of the Central Committee of the Labor Party and of Peace Now, was the Israeli speaker. Mohammed Milhelm, mayor of the West Bank town of Halhoul from 1976 until he was deported to Jordan in 1980 by Israeli military authorities, was the initial Palestinian participant. When Milhelm's father became ill, his place was taken by Nafez Nazzal, a history professor at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank, now on sabbatical at the University of Pennsylvania.

The participants did not represent any organization. Bar-on stressed that although a member of Peace Now and the Labor Party, he was on the tour as an individual. "We wanted people who would be perceived in the U.S. and the Mideast as coming from the mainstream of their society," said Gail Pressberg, director of AFSC's Middle East Project.

Milhelm, who in 1976 called for the

formation of a democratic, secular state in Palestine, now advocates a two-state solution, the state of Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Agreeing, Bar-on said a Palestinian state is "the least dangerous solution for Israel," and Nazzal concurred, saying, "A Palestinian state will be easier to live with than a Palestinian guerrilla movement."

The bottom line for the tour's speakers was that a solution include Israeli recognition of Israel's right to exist within the pre-1967 borders. "But we also wanted people with political differences," Pressberg said. "There is no point in telling Americans we need a real dialog—and then bring people who always agree with each other."

A key difference that Bar-on highlighted on several occasions was the "basic asymmetry" between their positions, with him living in a powerful nation, a regional superpower, while Milhelm has been expelled by Israel from his home and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live in camps and under an Israeli occupation in the West Bank, which Nazzal described as "an iron boot."

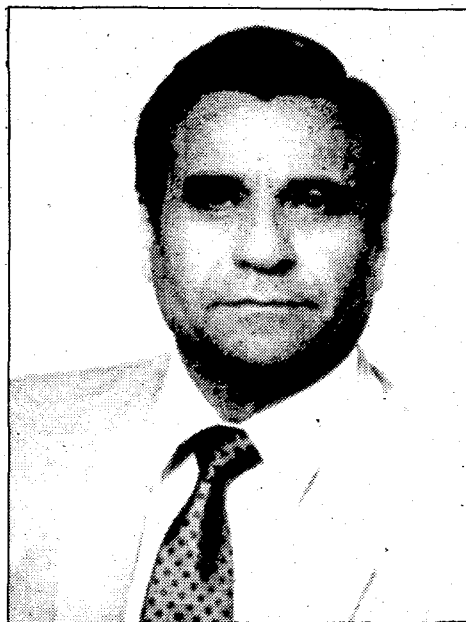
The issue of recognition dominated many of the appearances. "Why don't Arafat and the PLO come out and recognize Israel?" was a question we heard all the time," Pressberg said. "We never once heard the opposite—why doesn't Israel recognize the PLO?" Nazzal said the concept of co-existence is accepted now in the minds of the majority of Palestinians and the PLO leadership. Although they haven't said it clearly yet, there have been signs—the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Fez resolution, and acceptance of UN resolutions. "But it would be unfair to ask the Palestinians—who were expelled and now are occupied—to recognize Israel first. Israel is the superpower; if they can't make a gesture at the peak of their power, when will they?"

But Bar-on argued it would help the process if a clear pronouncement came forth, although he understands the subtleties and difficulties of politics in the Middle East. There is, he said, still a large element of fear—even among Peace Now members—that the PLO "hasn't really had a change of heart on the historical question of Israel's right to exist.... Peace won't be achieved unless the minds of a majority of Israelis are changed on this issue."

For NJA and AFSC the goal was to bring to American audiences the message that there is still time for peace in the Middle East, but that each day without a start of a peace process makes the solution more difficult. Both NJA and AFSC call for a process of mutual recognition and a negotiated settlement. Since both peoples have historical rights to the land, they advocate a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and some solution to the Palestinian diaspora and security for Israel within its pre-1967 borders.

The tour was designed to create a dialog, particularly in the American Jewish community, by giving people an op-

*For the first time,
a Palestinian spoke
in U.S. synagogues.*



portunity to hear a Palestinian describe life in the occupied West Bank, which Nazzal said is "corrupting and dehumanizing Israel and Jews throughout the world, and destroying the Palestinian community economically, politically, demographically and socially."

"It was an opportunity to provide an opening for creative thought and leadership on the part of the Jewish community," said Joel Gayman, Los Angeles representative of NJA. "The recent Cohen report showed that a majority of American Jews and an even larger percentage of American Jewish leaders, when asked by the American Jewish Congress, believe that Israel should stop the West Bank settlements, offer the Arabs territorial compromise in the West Bank and Gaza in return for credible guarantees of peace and talk with the PLO, if it recognizes Israel and renounces terrorism. This feeling and desire must be communicated, forcibly, to the press and the American and Israeli governments."

But not all of the Jewish community reacted positively. In a few cities opposition to the tour arose from the Jewish Defense League (JDL) and Americans for a Safe Israel. The JDL in Los Angeles said, "To allow murderers of Jewish lives to speak in a place where the Torah is kept is a desecration of God himself.... We must not allow PLO terrorists to desecrate a house of worship." Pressberg

said the opposition from the right-wing JDL and Americans for a Safe Israel made the tour more credible in the eyes of some mainstream Jewish organizations. "They do not put up with that sort of thing.... They may not agree totally with the speakers, but they are not prepared to cut off debate," she said.

In a few cases, however, opposition came from establishment organizations. The March 30 *Cleveland Jewish News* printed two letters denouncing invitations that were extended to Milhelm and Baron by the Workmen's Circle and the Cleveland Board of Rabbis. Rabbi Yaakov Feitman of Young Israel and Bob Flacks of the Cleveland Young Zionist Division of the Zionist Organization of America opposed allowing a Palestinian to speak. They argued that if Israel would not talk with the PLO, then American Jews should not give them a platform in this country. "There is a consensus among national Jewish and Zionist organizations not to sponsor or provide platforms to individuals connected to the PLO or those who are judged as subversive by due process of Israeli law. Milhelm is just such a person," Flacks wrote.

Rabbi Balfour Brickner of the Stephen S. Wise Free Synagogue in New York said the tour was important in giving Americans the possibility of learning of disquiet in Israel at the Likud policies and in hearing a Palestinian moderate's views on a two-state solution. "They do not read about these ideas very often in the U.S. press, Brickner said. "The evening was a success—there was a ring in the hall afterwards, people heard new ideas and points of view."

Pressberg, Gayman and Reena Bernards, co-director of NJA, said the opposition to the tour was minimal compared to similar projects in years past. They see an evolution in the Jewish community, a desire to hear both sides of the issue. The change in attitude was ascribed to several things: the invasion of Lebanon and the massacres in the Palestinian camps, the growth of the Israeli peace camp; and the recognition that the Likud policies are tearing Israel apart, economically and morally. It is now easier for American Jews to criticize Israeli government policies. "The changes in the U.S. mirror what has occurred in Israel," Bernards said. "This tour highlighted the progress we are making."

As elections in Israel approach, many Israelis agree that a labor victory might provide the framework for a peace process to unfold.

Bar-on and Nazzal agreed in New York that prospects do "not exist at the present time," yet there are encouraging signs. Bar-on was scheduled to appear on Israel's most popular talk show upon his return to describe what happened on the tour. Thousands of Americans had a chance to hear courageous people from both camps come forward to explain how things might be changed in the Mideast. A crew from PBS taped most of the tour and a one-hour documentary is scheduled to air in the fall, "reaching a potential audience, not of 10,000 like the tour, but of 10 million," according to filmmaker Steve York.

On several occasions Bar-on referred to the Israelis and Palestinians as "Siamese twins who are locked in a head-on struggle between two national movements. We are locked in the conflict now and we must begin to find a road out of it. We need each other to be able to attain full legitimacy. Palestinians can't have sovereignty without Israel's recognition, and Israel needs the Palestinians to accept Israel's right to exist."

Richard Miller is a member of New Jewish Agenda in New York.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being
By Milan Kundera
Harper and Row, 320 pp., \$15.95

By Paul Skenazy

Rarely do I have the chance to review a book as good as this one. It is a peculiar work stamped with that intelligence and philosophic daring, that wry spirit and aphoristic splendor that are the mark of a Milan Kundera fiction. Whatever its minor problems, whatever my occasional arguments with its ideas, it is a book of great wisdom and compassion.

Kundera's first novel, *The Joke*, was an instant best seller in his native Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1968, just before the Russian invasion ended that country's moves toward liberalization. But he first came to the attention of most American readers through the wonderful "Writers from the Other Europe" series of translations Philip Roth has been editing for Penguin Books, and through the pages of *The New Yorker*, where portions of his most recent works have appeared (the first three of the seven sections of this novel, for example).

Although Kundera is never a polemicist arguing for or against any specific political doctrine,

He doesn't so much create believable characters as develop speculative landscapes in which people like those he writes about might exist.

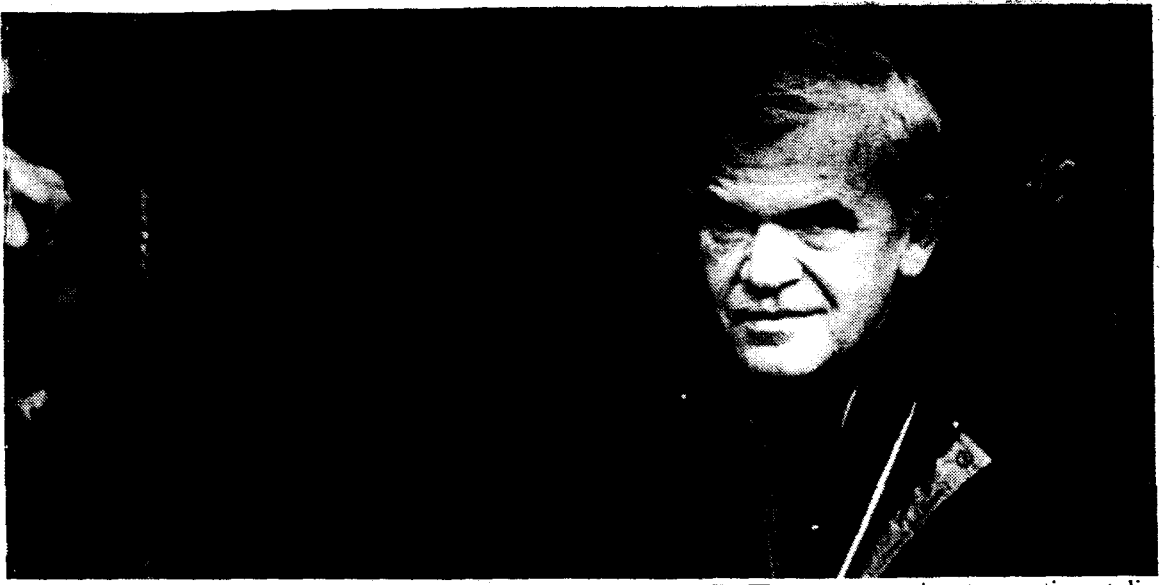
For Kundera, a novel is something between a dream and an essay, a meandering lyrical musing on the events and people he has invented for our entertainment and education.

"I have been thinking about Tomas for many years," he says to introduce the plot, or "now we return to a moment we already know about," he explains after a lengthy digression. For each step forward there are two to the side, each moment served to us smothered in questions.

What plot there is goes something like this: Tomas, a noted Czech surgeon living in Prague and given to affairs with women, meets and soon falls in love with Tereza, a young woman of the provinces with an impulsive, romantic attachment to Beethoven and books and an equally passionate desire to escape from her mother. The lovers start living together; later they are married. They get a dog named Karenin. Happy by day but overcome each night by jealousy over Tomas' philandering, Tereza dreams out her rage and terror in a series of death fantasies suggesting her passivity before Tomas' womanizing. Yet she remains loyal, and he remains dedicated if unfaithful.

Meanwhile, Tereza becomes a photographer, memorializing the fight of the Czechs against the Russian troops during the invasion. The couple leave Prague briefly after the invasion, hoping to settle in Geneva, but Tereza's unhappiness in exile quickly brings them home. Tomas loses his medical position through political pressures and becomes a window washer. He chooses both not to renounce his earlier pre-purge political comments and not to sign petitions of protest against the invading forces. He continues to sleep with other women.

Tereza finds work in a bar, has a brief sexual encounter, and then turns paranoid with fear of



FICTION

Kundera's new radiant creation

the state police. She continues her terrified dreams. The two move to a collective farm in the country. Karenin grows old, develops cancer.

Interwoven with their stories are the trials and travels of Sabina, an artist and one of Tomas' lovers who becomes a permanent Czech exile, and Franz, a music professor Sabina is involved with in Geneva. As Tereza's life is dominated by patterns of loyalty, Sabina's is controlled by her need to betray.

Franz can feel only guilt for the pleasures and privilege of his Swiss citizenship that allows him to indulge in music studies. He even projects a political significance into Sabina's exile she herself never feels. He leaves his wife for his Czech lover. In turn, she leaves him for his pain and moves to Paris. He finds his way to a perverse kind of fulfillment during a protest march in Thailand to the Cambodian border, while she eventually achieves some commercial success in America.

This brief on the characters can only suggest the curious disjunctions, surprises and strange twists of fate Kundera details. We receive events from him in patches that are sewn fragilely together by speculation.

Kundera has said that "the novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question." He aims to challenge the authority of our commonplaces through his tales by illuminating the paradoxes he finds characteristic of life at this particular historical moment. The title of the novel refers to how the transitory nature of experience—the lightness of being—produces a horrifying, unbearable relativism: if events occur only once, how can we know what they signify, how can we learn to choose with authority, how can we interpret experience or develop defensible moral codes?

Confronted by such dilemmas, the imaginative novelist must reinvent the world, beginning with the word. So, for example, Kundera interrupts the action with comments on etymologies and a brief dictionary of misunderstood terms. He inverts logic, subverts expectations and surprises us with discourses on everything from the erotic nature of bowler hats to human excrement, Stalin's son and myths of divine creation.

Kundera's own political, moral, aesthetic and philosophical stances are not easily defined. The issues he raises as central to a country like Czechoslovakia that has seen its culture eradicated—threats to privacy, the terror and memory of invasion and betrayal, programmatic forms of cultural amnesia—are also threats to his individual characters in their personal relations. The public and the private realms bleed together. It is the psychology of guardedness in Prague, not the tanks, that he discusses, as well as the constant need to retain nonbelief in others and the literal demoralization that occurs when the assumptions and strictures that support ethical traditions are deliberately and systematically undermined.

But on the whole, he devotes more attention to the dangers of *kitsch* than to the consequences of political destruction. His enemy is our romantic mawkishness—the way we are controlled by "fantasies, images, words and archetypes" fed us by our belief systems, whether political, religious or interpersonal. It be-

comes easier to sentimentalize than to imagine, distinguish, feel or choose. His weapon against such unthinking piety is his curiosity and associative range. His own tentative faith, such as it is, rests on discovered moments of beauty and perception, unsolicited acts of kindness.

Amid the upheavals and betrayals, people get by and remain loyal, are joyful and feel guilty when cruel. Sometimes they even seem to learn something. For want of a better term, Kundera might be called a suspicionist: the kind of deeply patriotic, darkly brooding, semi-committed partisan who suspects the language of any proclamation as a trap to continued thought and renewal that is built into the structure of citizenship, love and all other ties that bind.

If there is a redemptive theme in the novel, it is the possibility for discovery provided by contemplating various forms of repetition: Nietzsche's idea of "eternal return" (with which the book begins) that belies our nostalgia for the past and so its authority to proscribe our fates; the round of habits and daily devotions we expend on animals, land and other people (with which the book ends) that stabilize our lives, demonstrate our love and affirm our continued ability to maintain a hold on the proximate environment; and the recycling of idea and memory in the imagination (the book's method) that helps us shuffle the deck of time and circumstances into new and meaningful combinations.

There are some obvious limits built into Kundera's method of writing. There is something slightly chilling in Kundera's pursuit of idea, something almost condescending—albeit tenderly condescending—in his appropriation of these lives to his purpose. Also, the equation of private and public has its limits. There is something historically distorting in talk of the "concentration camp" of a woman's childhood, however psychologically true or metaphorically effective the image might be.

But in the end, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a complex, radiant creation. In the superb translation by Michael Henry Heim (who seems well on his way to acquiring the same significance as a force in the dissemination of Kundera's work as Gregory Rabassa has had through his translations of Gabriel Garcia Marquez), the prose is lean and direct, the sentences supple in implication while declarative in form. It is the kind of challenging text that can be comprehended but not entirely absorbed in an initial reading, that takes on an afterlife in the mind—the kind that helps rewrite the shape of fictions to come.

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