

## Uri Avnery: Peace Warrior

Uri Avnery is a man of principle, who, at every point in Israel's history, acted on the basis of doing what was moral, and could achieve justice for all the human beings concerned. Throughout his long political career, he has organized friends, "enemies," Knesset members, and American Jews, among others, to also act morally. (Gush Shalom, the Israeli Peace Bloc which Avnery heads, has posted an extensive biography of Avnery at <http://www.avnery-news.co.il/english/uri2.html>, of which the following is a condensation.)

Born in Beckum, Westphalia, Germany in 1923, he and his family moved to Palestine in 1933, just after Hitler came to power. His family was very poor, and Avnery left school at age 14 to work. At 15, he joined the Irgun, the underground force fighting the British colonialists, but he left the group after three years because of its anti-Arab attitudes, its terrorist methods, and its right-wing ideology.

Avnery's first political group, in 1946, "Young Palestine," contended that the new Hebrew nation was "part of Asia and the natural ally of the Arab nation." A year later, he published a pamphlet calling for "an alliance of the Hebrew and Arab national movements in order to liberate the common 'Semitic Region' . . . and create a Semitic

community and common market, as part of the emerging third world." He used the term Semitic in order to avoid the colonial designation of "Middle East."

He served in the 1948 war as a combat soldier, and his reports from the battlefield were published in *Ha'aretz*. These reports were collected into a book that became a bestseller, but a follow-up book, *The Other Side of the Coin*, which described the war atrocities and the expulsion of the Palestinians, was boycotted.

Avnery was severely wounded just before the war ended. After a long convalescence, he joined *Ha'aretz* as an editorial writer, but left because he was not allowed to say what he thought, especially about the Ben Gurion government's expropriation of Arab lands. He then started his own mass-circulation magazine, *Haolam Hazeh*, which aggressively attacked the Israeli establishment, exposing political and economic corruption, and proposing alternative national policies. It advocated a secular state, equal rights for all citizens, and, since the 1950s, the creation of a Palestinian state.

Perhaps the most telling compliment paid to Avnery was the accusation by a right-wing ideologue that Avnery had "poisoned" two generations of Israeli youth, turning them toward an ideology of "integration in the Semitic Region." He was also labeled "Public Enemy Number 1," by Israel's secret service chief; his editorial offices were bombed several times, wounding staff members, and he himself was ambushed and had both his hands broken.

Avnery created a new political party in 1965, and gained a seat in the Knesset the same year. In 1969, his party gained two seats. During his years in the Knesset, Avnery made more than 1,000 speeches, and served as a beacon for justice. Golda Meir was so irritated by Avnery that in a Knesset speech she announced, "I am ready to mount the barricades in order to get Avnery out of the Knesset."

As an advocate for Palestinian independence and a two-state solution, Avnery was at first attacked by the Palestine Liberation Organization, but by 1974, as the PLO position changed, he was holding secret meetings with PLO officials. In 1977, he joined with other peace groups to form a new party, and again served in the Knesset in 1979, giving up his seat two years later for an Arab colleague.

Avnery first met with Yasser Arafat at the height of the battle of Beirut in 1982, and subsequently met with him several times. The Gush Shalom group grew out of a Jewish and Arab Israeli protest to expulsions of Palestinians in 1992. In recent years, Avnery and Gush Shalom have held hundreds of joint Israeli-Palestinian demonstrations against settlements in the Occupied Territories, house demolitions, and land confiscation.

Avnery's regular commentaries on the peace front and the crimes of the establishment are available on the Gush Shalom website.

—*Marjorie Mazel Hecht*