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A Panther Indeed!: Saadia Marziano

Saturday 29 December 2007, by [WARSCHAWSKI Michael](#) (Date first published: 25 December 2007).

Numerous people wished to commemorate the life of Saadia Marziano, founder of the Black Panthers movement in Israel, who died last week. However, their speeches were mostly garbled and lacking in content. This is a shame.

In contrast to the majority of those commemorating him, Saadia wrote an important page in the chronicles of Israeli history, and the demonstration of the Black Panthers on the lawn across from the Jerusalem Municipality belongs to a small number of events that mark significant historical turning points.

In Israel, following the 1967 war, when the state was transforming into a military and economic power, a group of young people from Jerusalem's weakened neighborhood of Musrarra, with Saadia at the head of this group, placed the question of ethnic discrimination and social oppression on the Israeli public agenda. While the press and politicians were preoccupied with the War of Attrition on the Suez Canal and the rise of the Soviet Union, Saadia, Charlie Biton, Reuven Abergil and tens of other young Jerusalemites shouted "When Will Abutbul be Like Feigin!?" Feigin was the name of a "Prisoner of Zion" in the Soviet Union, who enjoyed local and international support, and, when he arrived in Israel, generous assistance by the State.

Golda Meir said of the Black Panthers: "They are not nice." Meir was the same Prime Minister, who, in her well-known stupidity and racism, contended that one who does not speak Yiddish cannot be a real Jew. This is the last time in Israel's history that a prime minister, government minister, or member of Knesset allowed her/himself to openly say such things: in wake of the demonstration of the Black Panthers in 1971, Israeli society in its entirety was forced to accept the fact that Israel is a multiethnic society. And this was their first achievement: transforming the weakened neighborhoods, the immigrant towns and their residents—Mizrachim—into a part of Israel, subjects with aspirations and rights and not simply "human material" intended to serve the plans of others who reserve the right to the exclusive title "Israeli" for themselves.

Following the appearance of the Black Panthers, no one—except the serial racist Ehud Barak and his typical slip of the tongue—dares to openly speak about "Israelis" and "members of the Mizrachi groups." Saadia and his friends are the instigators of this Israeli political correctness.

The second achievement of the Black Panthers was to place social issues on the public agenda. Today, it is difficult to imagine Israeli politics without a "social agenda," a "social lobby," or "social problems." However, prior to the Black Panthers, these topics were nearly nonexistent, and those who did deal with them, did so, in the best case, with a combination of arrogance and charity.

Saadia and his friends can claim parenthood of the Tami and Shas political parties, the "tents" and the Keshet Democratic Rainbow, of "lessening social gaps." Who amongst the leaders of the Meretz political party can speak of such a rich heritage?

I will finish this analogy with a personal memory. At the conclusion of one of the first demonstrations of the Black Panthers during which the notorious police officer Turgeman went particularly wild, we

sat as usual, a few Panthers and activists from Matzpen, in detention at the Russian Compound. The beautiful face of Saadia was beaten, but a smile did not leave his face. Suddenly he turned to me and said: "You, the people of Matzpen, believe that peace with the Arabs is the most important thing, but you cannot make that peace without us. And those sitting in places of power are smart: they will do everything to prevent us, residents of the neighborhoods, from seeing Arabs as partners. Through the relationship with you, we have gained one thing: they suddenly remember that we are brothers, Israelis like them, and they now warn us not to get close to Arabs and Matzpen activists. And just watch, they will find jobs and budgets for the neighborhoods, just so we don't get too close to you..." Saadia closed by saying: "You see that not only Ashkenazis are smart, Moroccans can also play the game..."

And indeed, his forecast came true. This strategy in fact worked on some of his Panther friends. But Saadia Marziano was a proud Moroccan, and they never succeed in buying him off.

P.S.

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