

Hi everyone,

When the Kol-Nidrey prayer was heard in Israel, one of the most controversial affairs in recent American history which jolted the entire nation reached its climax: at 10:08AM, Pacific time, the verdict of the jurors in the OJ Simpson's trial was released - "Not Guilty!". That was the most awaited moment in America since the first landing on the moon; the reading of the verdict found almost everyone glued to the screen or to the radio. On this day there was nothing else - no Bosnia, no Middle-East, nothing. The President of the US could have confessed to having an ex-marital affair with an under-aged black male goat and it wouldn't have distracted the public's attention from the court house in downtown LA. And the verdict, though predicted, still transfixed the people in this country, as well as outside. Rest assured that these descriptions are not exaggerated (except for the goat thing). Even I, who deeply resented the annoying title that the even-more-annoying electronic media here attached to this trial - "The trial of the century" (!!!) - agree that it was much more than just entertainment for the masses.

Until recently I paid no attention to this bothersome trial. While everyone else around me was obsessed with it, the media couldn't have enough of discussing it and each person had sound opinions about it, I just ducked whenever I saw a Simpson-related report/article/discussion coming in my direction. I didn't want to hear anything about it, and couldn't find any interest in the DNA-experts' lengthy testimonies or in a fascinating interview with the neighbor of the sister in law of OJ's first girlfriend. There was a price to pay for that - I found myself many times left out of conversations and not being able to understand some jokes.

However, when time passed by it became clearer and clearer that this is not just another murder trial. The issue of race, the so-called "race card", played a central role in this drama from the very beginning (as expected in a trial where a black man is accused of murdering his white ex-wife). It began with the long process of choosing the jurors which hinged on their race (eventually, there were 9 blacks, 1 Hispanic and only 2 whites; it's interesting to note also that 10 were women); today, most people, including blacks, agree that the verdict would have been different had there been more white jurors. It continued with the defense strategy to focus on the racist nature of detective Mark Furman from the LAPD and his credibility, trying to imply that the entire LAPD is racist and corrupted and seeks only to nail down blacks (no matter the pile of evidence which may incriminate that black person). Namely, they "upgraded" Mr. Simpson from a defendant to a victim. In his closing arguments, Johnny Cochran - the despicable black attorney of OJ Simpson - dared to compare the little low-life Mark Furman to Adolph Hitler and racism to The Holocaust! After the verdict was heard, the scenes from all over the country formed a very sharp and disturbing picture: jubilation on the black side, shock and frustration on the other side. And then I sit in front of the TV and have to hear the honorable Mr. Cochran or an intelligent juror claiming that justice was blind and that the verdict was determined only on the basis of the evidence. . . Mr. Bob Shapiro, the first lawyer on the "dream team" of lawyers that OJ hired (who later on had to step aside and let Mr. Cochran take the lead), said to Barbara Walters in a dynamite interview on ABC after the trial was over: "I said from the beginning that the race card shouldn't and wouldn't be played. I was wrong. Not only did we play the race card, we dealt it from the bottom of the deck!". He was really frustrated by this change of strategy that Mr. Cochran dictated after taking over the defense team and by the low levels to which the latter sunk (for instance, appearing to court accompanied by gorillas from The Nation of Islam). Mr. Shapiro's facial expression after his team won simply shouted frustration and reservation (although he still claims that he believes OJ is innocent). Also Mr. Goldman, the father of Ron Goldman (the second victim) and a most impressive man, was furious after hearing the closing arguments of Mr. Cochran: that slippery attorney stood in front of a mostly-uneducated and mostly-black jury, talked

about racism in LAPD and generally in America in terms of Holocaust and Hitler and delivered the message that if you want to fight those horrible things, you must acquit Mr. Simpson. And it worked.

Last February, I took a shuttle service to the airport. I was the only one in the van and the driver, a black man, listened to the radio report from the court in very full volume. After 20 minutes I couldn't take it anymore and asked him if he could lower down the volume just a bit. He asked me, surprised, whether I'm not following the trial. After telling him that I'm sick of hearing about OJ, and after he recovered from his shock, he decided that he simply must share with me his illuminating point of view: "OJ may be guilty morally, but not ethically!"... Perhaps you'd like to read this last sentence once again; there's no mistake in this quote. What this man tried to say in this stupid sentence (and later on he said it more directly) seems to reflect the thoughts of more than few among the African-American community: Yes, we know that OJ did it (or was responsible for this murder, as some say); but he can't be found guilty because he's a super-hero who reached the top and proved to us all that even blacks can make it to the top in America; if he goes down - so do our hope, spirit and pride. More importantly - convicting OJ means a victory for the hated and distrusted LAPD; the same LAPD that was responsible for the beating of Rodney King; the same LAPD that harasses black people every day just because of their color; the same LAPD that fabricates evidence in order to incriminate blacks. On the other hand, acquitting OJ means that "we are in control" and would demonstrate "the black power" (quotes from two black jubilants after the verdict was given).

The scientific evidence against OJ Simpson was overwhelming. The DNA tests connected him to the murder scene beyond any reasonable doubt. He also had an history of very fierce violence against his wife. Throughout the entire trial all you could hear was "he murdered and he's gonna get away with this". Nicole Brown herself said exactly the same sentence several days before she was murdered, only in future tense. Marcia Clark, in her closing arguments, told the jurors: "You know that he did it; EVERYONE knows that he did it"! I saw enough LA-Law episodes to know that this sentence should have been crossed out of the record. And indeed, someone from the defense table shouted immediately "objection!". I expected Judge Ito to mutter "sustained", but, to my surprise, he said "overruled"! Maybe he saw the verdict that was coming and tried to do his best to change it.

What did America learn from all this? First, and foremost, it found out that even today - three decades after the sixties and closer than ever to seeing the first black man in the White House - the racial polarization is still very strong and dangerous. America also learned what was already known before - that if you are rich and famous (and, preferably, of the "right" color) you can get anything. This trial also raised the issue of domestic violence and, hopefully, will place the subject of violence (in the streets, in schools, behind closed doors) high on the national agenda. Also the jury system and the legal system in general is being questioned again; the very hard feelings of many people in this country were expressed beautifully by Mr. Goldman: "Justice was not served. It is not the prosecution who lost here today; it's the country who lost". And with all the just anger that white America may feel right now toward the blacks, there's one more lesson to learn: that the African-Americans will never feel equal and will never trust the white authorities, when these authorities (and the police departments are first on the list) employ Mark Furmans. Furman's testimony that fabricating evidence against "The Usual Suspects" (the title of a new film) is a norm, shouldn't be a surprise; it was known before and steps should have been taken against that and any other racist acts.

Many other discussions were opened in the aftermath of this trial (such as the influence of TV presence in courts on the judicial process) and it will take a long time until the high waves created by this bomb gradually ebb.

Tamir