

The politics of saying 'I'm sorry'

by Michael Young

An extraordinary epistolary apparition stunned readers of Al-Nahar on Feb. 10. Lodged, somewhat disconsolately, in the upper left-hand corner of page five was a letter by Asaad Shaftari, once deputy head of the Lebanese Forces security services and a close ally of the former electricity minister, Elie Hobeika. Shaftari's was not just any letter, however, but an apology to his wartime victims, dead and alive.

The letter was published at around the same time as Robert Maroun Hatem — better known by his endearing nom de plume, Cobra — made an appearance on al-Jazira television, recounting more stories of debauchery in the republic. Indeed, Shaftari made indirect reference to Cobra's disclosures, but denied that they had anything to do with his desire to atone.

Was Shaftari touched by the backhand of God — forever an alibi for queer, inexplicable action? Certainly, the timbre of his letter suggests reconciliation with the Divine. It was unclear what other motive he could have had, least of all political expediency: Most wartime scoundrels have avoided admitting to murder, fearful that it would undermine their political prospects or, at least, place them under a legal sword of Damocles.

Whatever Shaftari's incentive, salvation or otherwise, he scored an immense blow in favor of memory. For 10 years since war's end, Lebanon has been rebuilt on a foundation of state-sponsored amnesia. Yet, in a few hundred words, a former militiaman exposed this as inane, disclosing how foul the wartime legacy could be, revealing — truthfully or not — how much that legacy still inhabited him, regardless of the legal ramparts put in place by the authorities to protect from retribution the war's assassins.

It was a coincidence that Shaftari's confession came not long after the Hoss government agreed to appoint a commission, made

up of representatives of the security services, to investigate the fate of the 17,000 or so individuals who disappeared during Lebanon's cycle of wars. This came after persistent demands from relatives of the disappeared that the government close the book on one of the war's more sordid melodramas.

One thought comes to mind: The commission should take advantage of Shaftari's act of contrition and interview him first. He presumably remembers the names of several of his quarry, many of whom must be listed as disappeared. This would help dispel a growing view that the government commission is reluctant to seriously investigate the fate of the disappeared, for fear of tormenting their more prominent tormentors.

It has become a maxim that commissions are established to avoid taking decisions. Two parliamentary commissions were set

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up in the 1980s to look into wartime disappearances, and promptly disappeared without a trace. The present commission will most probably play it safe too, concluding merely that it found no signs of survivors, yet stopping short of declaring anyone dead. That is, of course, if it carries through its inquiries to the very end.

A formal determination of death is important. It is a paradox that while many relatives of the disappeared believe that the abducted are alive, the association representing the families once demanded that the government declare them dead. It was only recently that this demand was dropped in favor of three more attainable objectives: the formation of a commission of inquiry — which the government accepted — state-sponsored aid

to relatives of the disappeared, and the building of a memorial to the war's victims.

The families are, generally speaking, of two minds on how to respond to the government's inquiry commission. Some see it as a significant concession after a lengthy period of time when the families were ignored by officialdom. Their tendency is to advise using the commission as a cover to bring to an honorable close the families' 18-year campaign. Implicit is a realization that most, if not all, of the disappeared are dead.

Other relatives, however, demand something more tangible. This group can be roughly divided into two: Those who believe that many of those abducted are alive, and that it is, therefore, the commission's duty to find them. And those who accept that though many, indeed all, might be dead, the commission's findings must be the first step in a process of retribution against those responsible.

The latter outcome is highly improbable, at least in the present environment. Deplorably, the debate over retribution — understandable, yet sterile — has drawn attention away from the more exploitable proposal that a memo-

rial be erected to the victims of Lebanon's wars. Properly executed, a memorial would relentlessly embarrass those — recycled war criminals at the forefront — who would prefer to evade the sneer of memory.

Shaftari's repentance, Cobra's tattling, and the government's newly-found interest in the disappeared suggest that the postwar edifice is not as secure as its architects planned. Ten years on, the dross still floats to the surface. However, before full-scale catharsis is decreed, thought is required. Asaad Shaftari may be a pleasant surprise, but a legion of Shaftaris could drag Lebanon down irreparably.

Michael Young writes a weekly commentary for The Daily Star