

Uri Avnery
17.04.10

A Birthday Present

YESTERDAY I went to the health clinic to get a vaccination. It was a pleasant day, sunny but not too hot. The trip to the clinic and back, including the waiting, took just over an hour. During this time, I had the following experiences:

The taxi driver told me that years ago he was living next to Asher Yadlin, the man at the center of a major corruption affair in the 70s, which was uncovered by my magazine, Haolam Hazeh. "How we were shocked then!" he exclaimed, "we did not believe that such a thing was possible! And look what's happening now!" He meant the scandal around the huge Holyland housing project in West Jerusalem, involving a former prime minister, two former mayors and an assortment of business tycoons and senior officials – a bribery affair a hundred times bigger than the Yadlin business.

While waiting at the clinic, I was accosted by an old man (who turned out to be a year younger than I), a thin person who wore a golf cap and started to tell me his life story. "I fought in the Warsaw ghetto uprising," he started. I searched for an escape route, but before I could spot one I was captured by his story.

When the Ghetto revolt started in 1943, he was living opposite the home of the legendary leader, Antek Zuckerman, in the famous Milla street. He was then hardly 18 years old. Somehow he survived and landed (I didn't get how) into the central Warsaw prison, where the Germans were executing people every day. Since there were no Jews left by that stage, the victims were Poles – priests and members of the intelligentsia.

In August, 1944, when the great Warsaw Uprising broke out, the rebels freed him from prison. They were of two kinds: the rightist faction - the Homeland Army - which was anti-Semitic, and the leftist one, which was composed of socialists and communists. Yachek (as he was called then) was freed by the rightists, but they treated him well, gave him a gun and a white-and-red armband.

The Polish insurgents did not cooperate with the Russians, who were already nearby ("They hated the Russians more than the Germans," Yachek commented). Stalin stopped his forces, and the rebels were compelled to capitulate to the Germans after 63 days of fighting. Yachek and another Jewish boy found a bunker in the destroyed ghetto where they hid below ground for 10 months, until the arrival of the Red Army.

All this he told me while we were standing, his face a few inches from mine, his light blue eyes betraying his frustration at having to tell his story in this manner, when dozens of hours would not have sufficed. I was glad to hear that somebody was writing a book about him.

In the middle of it, a man of about 60 approached us and told me that he had twice voted for me. "Not that I agreed with your views," he confided, "but I wanted to have intelligent people in the Knesset." I must admit that

this motive was new to me.

Before going home I entered a nearby store. There I met a woman I had known some 40 years ago, when her husband had been the manager of the "Chamber Quartet", perhaps the most outstanding satire group in the annals of Israel. Her brother-in-law, Yehiel Kadishai, had been the loyal secretary of Menachem Begin. He was famous for his total devotion to his leader, for no personal gain whatsoever. We briefly compared Israel as it was then to the Israel of today.

The cab driver who brought me home told me that he had recently moved back from Las Vegas. He had come to the US in the wake of his wife, who had worked for Binyamin Netanyahu when he served as Israel's envoy to the UN. After he had lived a few happy years in the gambling capital, the company he worked for dismissed 17 thousand employees at one stroke. He was left without a job for seven months. When he went back to Israel for a family wedding, he saw that the Israeli economy was booming and decided to stay for the time being. An Israeli flag was waving over his taxi, and he sounded eminently satisfied.

THIS IS a random sample of Israelis on the eve of the 2010 Independence Day. Memories from the Holocaust, nostalgia for a more innocent Israel, anger about corruption, satisfaction with the Israeli economy which is flourishing at a time when the entire world is still stuck in an economic crisis. Not a single word about peace. Not a single word about the occupation.

If I had asked these people what they think about it, I would probably have received one and the same answer from all of them: Peace is a good thing. We want peace. For peace we are ready to give up occupied territories, even East Jerusalem, and to hell with the settlements. But what? We have no partner. The Arabs don't want peace. Therefore there will be no peace – not tomorrow, not in ten years, not in fifty years. Nothing to be done. That's how it is.

If I had spent the same hour in similar company in Ramallah, the answers I received would probably not have been very different. Bitter memories from the Naqba, anger about the corruption in high circles, perhaps even some satisfaction about the improvement of the economic situation in the West Bank. And a total lack of belief in peace. They would certainly have said: "The Israelis don't want peace. Nothing to be done. That's how it is."

If Barack Obama and his assistants intend to start a serious peace effort, as it now seems, that is the main thing they have to take into consideration: before addressing the hard problems of peacemaking, the profound lack of belief on both sides has to be overcome. Either side is completely convinced that the other side does not want peace and will bring a dozen proofs from real life.

This lack of belief is the product of 120 years of the

conflict, an endless chain of violence, wars and crises, for which each side blames the other. The Palestinians see the Israelis as land-grabbing robbers, the Israelis see the Arabs as cannibals with knives between their teeth.

This lack of belief is also somehow comfortable. When there is no chance, there is no need to do anything. No need to rise up, to act, to demonstrate, to change. Nothing can be done anyhow. That's how it is.

SOME DAYS ago, two American personalities published an important document.

Zbigniew Brzezinski was the national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter. He was considered a hawk, but first of all a realist. He played an important role in bringing China closer to the US, armed the Mujahidin in Afghanistan against the Soviet invaders, was one of the hosts at the 1978 Camp David conference which laid the foundation to the Israeli-Egyptian peace. There he played chess with Begin. (I don't know if they spoke Polish together.) Some years ago he called upon President George W. Bush to change American policy in the Middle East, including dropping the negative attitude towards Hamas.

Stephen Solarz was a congressman. A Jewish New-Yorker, he specialized in foreign affairs and played a role in American relations with North Korea and the Philippines. I had a talk with him many years ago and was impressed by his emotional involvement with Israeli-Palestinian peace.

When two such persons publish a manifesto together, they are bound to attract attention in the US. But the contents of the document are no less important than the identity of the authors.

The two put on the table a practical and detailed proposal, which includes the following steps:

President Obama will come to Jerusalem and address the Israeli public directly from the Knesset rostrum.

He will do the same in Ramallah and address the Palestinian public.

He will make a speech in the Old City of Jerusalem and address all the peoples of the Middle East.

To all these audiences, Obama will submit an American peace plan.

I BELIEVE that this is an excellent idea (and not only because President Anwar Sadat of Egypt took the first step with considerable success, and not only because I suggested some months ago that Obama make a speech in the Knesset.) It is reasonable, practical and realizable.

For many years I believed that there is no substitute for a direct face-to-face dialogue, without a third party. Peace is a framework for life for the two peoples, and the very mechanism of peacemaking can contribute much to their reconciliation. Moreover, when there is a third party, each side addresses it and not the adversary, at the same time radicalizing its position so as to have something to compromise on.

The Oslo experience proved this point. Agreement was reached behind the back of the Americans and the whole world in direct talks, without intermediaries. The Norwegians acted only as discreet hosts. History brought together two brave leaders – Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin - who might have been able to proceed from there to real peace.

But it failed. When one side is immensely stronger than the other, the stronger one is tempted to dictate its will. Rabin was publicly murdered, and Arafat died in circumstances that leave little room for doubt that he, too, was murdered. The grand experiment foundered and left behind a situation worse than the one before. In such a situation, the involvement of a third party – the US – is necessary.

People speak of an "imposed peace". But that is not the right expression. It is impossible to impose peace on peoples which do not want it. In the best case, that would lead to a signature on a piece of paper that had no chance of being implemented.

The task of the US is not to "impose" but to "convince" – and I don't use the word cynically.

To convince means: to lead Israeli and Palestinian public opinion to the conviction that peace is possible, that the other side also needs it, that somebody will see to it that the terms are fully kept, that somebody will guarantee their security in the short and long term. And the main point: that each party has got to gain from it.

In Israel, Obama will have to take into consideration the real fears of a Holocaust-troubled people, to plant again the seeds of hope, to create the faith that there is a place for Israel in the family of Middle Eastern nations, to reinforce the conviction that the US will not abandon Israel in any future crisis, but also to warn of the severe dangers facing Israel if the two-state solution is not realized very soon.

In Palestine he will have to take into consideration the fears of a Naqba-injured and occupation-damaged people; to promise the realization of the Palestinians' hope for independence within two years, to guarantee that the US will not allow ethnic cleansing, but also to point out the existential danger that threatens them if the State of Palestine does not soon come into being next to Israel. He must also lift the veto the US has imposed on Fatah-Hamas reconciliation.

To both peoples Obama must submit a fair, balanced and realistic peace plan, going into the smallest details and with a reasonable yet fixed time-table, a plan that allows each side to claim victory.

OBAMA IS a man of many talents, but most of all he has the ability to convince. He is capable of touching the profoundest emotions of people and peoples. I hope he uses this talent for the good of the two long-suffering peoples of this tortured country.

On the 62nd anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, I cannot conceive of a more beautiful present.

permalink: <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avner/1271528100>