

A new Guinness Record

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I DON'T KNOW IF the Guinness Book of World Records has a special section for Chutzpah.

If it does not, it should. That's the one competition where we might take home a few gold medals.

The first one would surely go to Binyamin Netanyahu.

THIS WEEK, on the eve of the first round of serious negotiations between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, Netanyahu did two interesting things: he announced plans for several large new settlement projects and he accused the Palestinians of grievous incitement against Israel.

Let's take the settlements first. As explained by Israeli diplomats to their American colleagues, and repeated by all the Israeli media, poor Netanyahu had no choice. John Kerry compelled him to release 104 Palestinian prisoners as a "confidence building measure". After such a momentous concession, he had to pacify his extremist colleagues in the Likud and in the cabinet. A thousand new housing units in the occupied territories (including East Jerusalem) was the very minimum.

The agreement to release prisoners let loose a veritable Witches' Sabbath. All the newspapers and TV news programs were awash with blood—the blood on the hands of the Palestinian murderers. "*Murderers*" was the de rigueur appellation. Not "*fighters*", not "*militants*", not even "*terrorists*". Just plain "*murderers*".

All the prisoners to be released were convicted before the Oslo agreement was signed, meaning that they have been in prison for at least 20 years. The probability that they would take part in future bloody activity must be minimal.

Some of the victims' families carried out staged stormy protests, with bloody hands and blood-smearred flags. The media vied with each other in publishing pictures of weeping mothers (TV loves weeping women) waving photos of their killed sons and blood-curdling descriptions of the attacks in which they died (some of which were indeed atrocious).

However, not so long ago, Netanyahu had agreed to release more than a thousand prisoners in return for one captured Israeli soldier. This means that one single soldier is ten times more precious than the chances of peace.

The actual release bordered on the grotesque. In order

to avoid photos in the morning papers of the rapturous reception of the prisoners by their families, the actual release of the first 26 prisoners took place after midnight, in a shroud of mystery. Which reminds one of the Biblical passage, in which David mourned for Saul, slain in battle with the Philistines: "Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon (both Philistine towns), lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph." (II Samuel 1)

Does all this testify to an atmosphere of peace on the eve of peacemaking? Wait, there is more to come.

THE DAY the new settlement projects were announced, Netanyahu fired off to John Kerry a furious protest against the ongoing Palestinian "*incitement*" against Israel. This missive could interest the adjudicators of the Guinness record for Chutzpah.

The main evidence for Mahmoud Abbas' perfidy, in Netanyahu's letter, is a text in which a minor Palestinian official called for a Palestinian state "*from Rosh Hanikra to Eilat*." Rosh Hanikra (Ras Naqura in Arabic) is on the Lebanese border, so this state would include all of Israel. Also, during a soccer event in Ramallah, anti-Israeli shouts were heard.

Awful, just awful. Kerry should spring from his seat in fury. Were it not for the fact that almost all leading Likud members proclaim that the whole of historical Palestine belongs to Israel, and Naftali Bennett, a pillar of Netanyahu's government coalition, just announced that the Palestinians "*can forget about*" a Palestinian state.

Not to mention a certain Daniel Seaman, the former director of the Ministry of Explaining (that's its real name. I didn't make it up. Israelis don't do propaganda, God forbid). Seaman has just been appointed to Netanyahu's own office, in charge of "*explaining*" on the internet. This week he posted a message on facebook addressed to Saeb Erekat, the chief of the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks, telling him to "*go and f**k himself*". To the theological declaration by the Church of Scotland that the Jews have no special claim to Palestine he posted the reply: "*We don't give a [obscenity] for what you say.*"

This genius of public relations is now setting up a clandestine group of Israeli university students, who will be paid to flood the international social media with govern-

ment “explaining” material.

As for soccer fans, the Betar stadium, which is linked to the Likud, resounds at every match with shouts of “*Death to the Arabs!*”

So, for what the bell tolls? Nor for peace, it seems.

ONE OF the problems is that absolutely nobody knows what Netanyahu really wants. Perhaps not even he.

The Prime Minister is now the loneliest person in Israel. He has no friends. He trusts nobody, and nobody around him trusts him.

His colleagues in the Likud leadership quite openly despise him, regarding him as a man of no principles, without a backbone, giving in to every pressure. This seems to have been the opinion of his late father, who once declared that Binyamin would make a good foreign minister, but certainly not a prime minister.

In the government he is quite alone. Previous prime ministers had a close group of ministers to consult with. Golda Meir had a “kitchen cabinet”. Netanyahu has no one. He does not consult with anyone. He announces his decisions, and that’s that.

In his previous terms he had at least a group of confidants in his office. These officials have been driven out one by one by Sarah, his wife.

So, as one commentator this week reminded us, this lonely man, unaided by any group of trusted advisors, experts or confidants, is called upon to decide, quite by himself, the fate of Israel for generations to come.

THIS WOULD not have been so dangerous if Netanyahu had been a Charles de Gaulle. Unfortunately, he isn’t.

De Gaulle was one of the towering figures of the 20th century. Cold, aloof, overbearing, intensely disliked by the rest of the world’s leaders, this extreme right-wing general took the historic decision to give up the huge country of Algeria, four times as big as metropolitan France.

Algeria, it must be remembered, was officially not a colony, not an occupied territory, but a part of France proper. It had been under French rule for more than a century. More than a million settlers saw it as their homeland. Yet de Gaulle made the lonely decision to give it up, putting his own life in grave danger.

Since then, Israeli leftists have yearned for “an Israeli de Gaulle”, who would do their job for them, according to the old Hebrew adage that “*the work of the righteous is done by others*”—others meaning, one assumes, people who are not quite so righteous.

There is, of course, one important difference. De Gaulle was supported by his conservative allies, the tycoons of the French economy. These sober-minded capitalists saw how the Germans were taking over the economy of Europe, which was in the process of uniting, while France was wasting its resources on an expensive, totally useless colonial war in North Africa. They wanted to get rid of it as quickly as possible, and de Gaulle was their man.

Netanyahu is as close to the Israeli tycoons as de Gaulle was to his, but our tycoons don’t give a damn about peace. This attitude may change, if ever the de-legitimization of Israel becomes a serious economic burden.

In this context; the boycott imposed by the European Union against the products of the settlements may be a harbinger of things to come.

By the way, the petition submitted by me and Gush Shalom in the Supreme Court, against the new law to penalize advocates of a boycott of the settlements, will be heard only next February. The court is obviously shrinking back from handling this hot potato. But it paid us a unique compliment: “*Avnery v. the Knesset*” will be heard by nine supreme judges, almost the full membership of the court.

SO IS this “peace process” serious? What does Netanyahu want?

Does he want to enter the history books as the “Israeli de Gaulle”, the wise Zionist leader who put an end to 120 years of conflict?

Or is he just another smart guy who is making a tactical move to avoid a tussle with the US and stop the de-legitimization process at least for a while?

As it looks now, de Gaulle in his heaven can relax. No competitor in sight.

There is not the slightest indication of any peace orientation. Quite the contrary. Our government is using the new “peace process” as a smoke screen behind which the settlement bulldozer is working full time.

The government condemns the EU boycott resolution because it “*harms the peace process*”. It rejects all demands for freezing the settlements because this would “*obstruct the peace process*”. Investing hundreds of millions in settlements which under any imaginable peace agreement will have to be evacuated is, it seems, favorable for peace.

So is there hope? Time to quote again the Yiddish saying: “*If God wills, even a broomstick can shoot!*”