

Biberman & Co.

IS THIS the government of Biberman (Bibi Netanyahu and Avigdor Liberman) or perhaps of Bibarak (Bibi and Ehud Barak)?

Neither. It is the government of Bibiyahu.

Binyamin Netanyahu has proven that he is a consummate politician. He has realized the dream of every politician (and theatergoer): a good place in the middle. In his new government he can play off the fascists on the right against the socialists on the left, Liberman's secularists against the orthodox of Shas. An ideal situation.

The coalition is large enough to be immune from blackmail by any of its component parties. If some Labor members break coalition discipline, Netanyahu will still command a majority. Or if the rightists make trouble. Or if the orthodox try to stick a knife in his back.

This government is committed to nothing. Its written "Basic Guidelines" – a document signed by all partners of a new Israeli government – are completely nebulous. (And anyhow, Basic Guidelines are worthless. All Israeli governments have broken their agreed Basic Guidelines without batting an eyelid. They always prove to be rubber checks.)

All this was acquired by Netanyahu on the cheap – a few billions of economic promises that he would not dream of fulfilling. The treasury is empty. As one of his predecessors in the Prime Minister's office, Levy Eshkol, famously said: "I promised, but I did not promise to keep my promises."

He also bestowed ministries on all and sundry. This little country will have 27 ministers and six deputy ministers. So what? If necessary, Netanyahu would have given a ministerial chair to each of the 74 members of the coalition.

THE PINNACLE of his achievement was the acquisition of the Labor party for his government.

In one stroke he turned a government of lepers, which would have been viewed by the whole world as a crazy bunch of ultra-nationalists, racists and fascists, into a sane and balanced government of the center. All this without changing its character in the least.

The most ardent supporter of this feat was Liberman, the new Foreign Minister of Israel. This extreme racist, this spiritual brother of the French Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Austrian Joerg Haider (I hope both, the living and the dead, will not feel insulted), was very anxious about what was awaiting him. In his imagination he saw himself extending his hand to Hillary Clinton and being left with his arm dangling in the air. Leaning forward to kiss Angela Merkel only to see her draw back in horror. Unpleasant.

The addition of the Labor Party solves everybody's problem. If the social democrats are joining the government, all this talk of fascism must be nonsense.

Obviously, Liberman has been misunderstood. He has been misrepresented. He is not a fascist at all, God forbid. He is not a racist. He is just a traditional right-wing demagogue who exploits the primitive emotions of the masses to garner votes. Which elected politician could object to that?

Indeed, the whole government has been given a kosher certificate by Ehud Barak. He continues the glorious Labor Party tradition of political prostitution. In 1977, Moshe Dayan entered the new government of Menachem Begin and gave it a kosher certificate, when the entire world considered Begin a dangerous nationalist adventurer. In 2001, Shimon Peres entered the new government of Ariel Sharon and gave him a kosher certificate, when the entire world saw in Sharon the man responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacre. WHY DID Barak do this? And why did the majority of the Labor Party support him?

Labor is a government party. It has never been anything else. As early as 1933 it took over the Zionist movement, and since then it ruled the Yishuv (the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine) and the state without interruption until Begin's ascent to power in 1977. For 44 consecutive years it held unchallenged power over the economy, the army, the police, the security services, the education system, the health system and the Histadrut, the then all-powerful labor federation.

Power is encoded in the party's DNA. It's much more than a political matter – it's its whole character, its mentality, its world view. The party is unable to be an opposition. It does not know what that is, and even less what to do with it.

I observed the Labor members in the Knesset, during the short periods they were stuck in opposition. They were downcast and mournful. Dozens of them were wandering forlornly around the corridors, like phantoms, lost souls. When they went up to the rostrum, they sounded like government spokesmen.

The Likud suffers from the opposite syndrome. Their predecessors were in opposition throughout the days of the Yishuv and during the first 29 years of the state. Opposition is in the blood of Likudniks. Even now, after many years (with interruptions) in government, they behave like an opposition. They are the eternal discriminated-against, miserable and bitter, people from the outside looking in, full of hate and envy.

Ehud Barak personifies the syndrome of his party. Everything is owed to him. Power is owed to him, the Ministry of Defense is owed to him. I would not have been surprised if he had insisted on a clause in the coalition agreement appointing him Minister of Defense for life (and his yeoman, Shalom Simchon, Minister of Agriculture for life). Governments come and governments go, but Ehud Barak must be the Minister of Defense – be the government rightist or leftist, fascist

or communist, atheist or theocratic. It does not matter how he functions in his job – his appraisal can be nothing less than perfect.

SO WHAT will this government do? What can it do?

As far as the most important matter is concerned, there is complete unanimity. Liberman, Netanyahu, Barak, Ellie Yishai of Shas and Danny Hershkovitz of the "Jewish Home" party are in total agreement about the Palestinians. All of them agree on the need to prevent the establishment of a real Palestinian state. All of them agree not to talk with Hamas. All of them support the settlement enterprise. During Barak's stint as Prime Minister, the settlements grew even faster than during Netanyahu's tenure. Liberman is himself a settler, Hershkovitz's party represents the settlers. All of them believe that there is no need for peace, that peace is bad for us. (After all, it was Barak, not Netanyahu or Liberman, who coined the phrase "We Have No Partner for Peace".)

So what will be the real platform of this government?

In four words: Deception for the fatherland.

ON THIS government's chosen path there lies a huge rock: the United States of America.

While Israel made a big leap to the right, the US has made a big leap to the left. One can hardly imagine a greater contrast than that between Binyamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama. Or between the two Bara(c)ks – Barack Obama and Ehud Barak

Netanyahu is conscious of this problem, perhaps more than any other Israeli leader. He grew up in the US, after his father, a history professor in Jerusalem, felt himself deprived of his rightful place in academia because of his extreme right-wing views and went to America. There Binyamin attended high-school and university. He speaks the fluent American English of a traveling salesman.

If there is one thing that unites practically all Israelis, from right to left, it is the conviction that the relationship between Israel and the US is critical for the security of the state. Netanyahu's main concern is, therefore, to prevent a serious break between the two countries.

Barak was admitted to the government precisely in order to avoid such a clash. Netanyahu wants to visit the White House with Barak, not Liberman, at his side.

The clash seems inevitable. Obama wants to create a new order in the Middle East. He knows that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict poisons the atmosphere against America in the Arab, and indeed in the entire Muslim world. He wants a solution to the conflict – exactly what Netanyahu and his partners want to prevent at any price, except the price of a breach with the US.

How to do this?

The solution is written in the Bible (Proverbs 24:6): "For

by ruses thou shalt make thy war."

(In the King James version, the Hebrew word Takhbulot is translated as "wise counsel". In Modern Hebrew it means ruses, tricks, ploys – and that is the way it is understood by all Hebrew-speakers today.)

FROM THE beginnings of Zionism, its leaders have known that their vision necessitates a large measure of make-belief. It is impossible to take over a country inhabited by another people without disguising the aim, diverting attention, hiding the acts on the ground behind a screen of flowery words.

All states lie, of course. 400 years ago, a British diplomat, Sir Henry Wotton, observed: "An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country." Because of the special circumstances of their enterprise, the Zionists have had to use deceit perhaps a bit more than usual.

Now the task is to present to the world, and especially the US and Europe, a false picture, pretending that our new government is yearning for peace, acting for peace, indeed turning every stone in search of peace - while doing the exact opposite. The world will be submerged by a deluge of declarations and promises, accompanied by lots of meaningless gestures, conferences and meetings.

People with good ears are already hearing Netanyahu, Liberman and Barak starting to play around with the "Arab Peace Initiative". They will talk about it, interpret it, accept it ostensibly while attaching conditions that empty it of all content.

The great advantage of this initiative is that it does not come from the Palestinians, and therefore does not require negotiations with the Palestinians. Like the deceased "Jordanian Option" and others of its kind, it serves as a substitute for a dialogue with the Palestinians. The Arab League includes 22 governments, some of which cooperate on the sly with the Israeli leadership. They can be relied on not to agree among themselves on anything practical.

BUT DECEIVING, like dancing the tango, takes two: one who deceives and one who wants to be deceived.

Netanyahu believes that Obama will want to be deceived. Why would he want to quarrel with Israel, confront the mighty pro-Israel lobby and the US Congress, when he can settle for soothing words from Netanyahu? Not to mention Europe, divided and ridden by Holocaust guilt, and the pathetic Tony Blair moving around like a restless ghost.

Is Obama ready to play, like most of his predecessors, the role of the deceived lover?

The Liberman/Bibarak/Bibiyahu government believes that the answer is a resounding yes. I hope that it will be a resounding No.