

Interim Forever!

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"I HAVE three answers," the Jew told the rabbi when his neighbor sued him for not returning a borrowed jar.

"First, I never borrowed a jar from him. Second, the jar was broken. Third, I returned it to him long ago."

Avigdor Lieberman's Peace Plan shows a similar kind of logic.

PEACE PLAN? Lieberman? Oh yes. Contrary to everything you thought, Lieberman wants peace, indeed is yearning for peace. So much so that he has spent days and nights working out an entire Peace Plan of his own.

This week he summoned Israel's 170 senior diplomats, the elite of our foreign service, and revealed his thoughts to them. The opinions of the Foreign Minister are of course binding for the diplomats, and from now on they constitute the guiding line for all Israeli diplomatic missions around the world.

But first of all, Lieberman settled accounts with the Turks. They demand an apology from Israel for the killing of nine Turkish activists on the ship that tried to break the Gaza blockade. The Turks also demand that Israel pay indemnities to the bereaved families. They insist that the Israeli soldiers unlawfully attacked the Turkish ship on the high seas and shot the unarmed activists.

"There is no limit to their Chutzpah," Lieberman thundered. Everybody knows that the Turks themselves attacked our soldiers who abseiled innocently from their helicopters and were compelled to shoot in self-defense.

Lieberman knew, of course, that Netanyahu was negotiating with the Turks in order to put an end to the conflict. The Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak, and the army chiefs were putting pressure on him to reestablish good relations with Ankara, and especially with the Turkish military – relations, they believe, that are of major strategic value for Israel. The Turks on their part, know that Israel controls the US Congress and therefore also believe that a compromise would be good for them. Netanyahu's emissary was looking for a formula that would be short of an apology and yet satisfy Ankara.

Lieberman has put an end to this appeasement. Netanyahu cannot afford to look like a wimp next to his macho Foreign Minister. So he declared that he would never ever apologize.

For Lieberman, that was a major victory. Netanyahu capitulated. Barak was humiliated. The Turks remain enemies. What more can a Foreign Minister hope for?

BUT LIEBERMAN does not rest on his laurels for a moment. At the same meeting with the select 170 he laid out his great plan, Plan B.

Just a moment. If this is Plan B, what is Plan A?

Netanyahu, of course, has no peace plan. His declared position is that the Palestinians must return to direct negotiations without prior conditions, but only after they officially recognize Israel as "the state of the Jewish people" (or, in another

version, as a "Jewish and democratic state".) It is clear that the Palestinians cannot be expected to agree to any such prior condition.

So what "Plan A" does Lieberman allude to? Not to Netanyahu's, but to Barack Obama's. The American president speaks about two states with the border between them based on the 1967 lines and a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem.

On no account, says Lieberman. And, like the Jew who was sued for the jar, he also has his three reasons:

First, we have no partner for peace.

Second, the Israeli government cannot make peace.

Third, peace is no good for us.

WE HAVE no partner for peace, because the Palestinians don't want peace. Lieberman, the immigrant from Moldavia, knows the Palestinians much better than they know themselves. Therefore he states categorically: "Even if we offer the Palestinians Tel Aviv and a withdrawal to the 1947 borders, they will find a reason not to sign a peace treaty." (The 1947 borders, fixed by the United Nations, gave Israel 55% of the country, while the 1949-1967 borders left Israel with 78%.)

True, this matter could be settled easily: Israel could enter negotiations and offer a peace plan within the parameters set by President Bill Clinton and adopted by Barack Obama. If the Palestinians refuse, we would not lose anything and they would be shamed before the whole world.

Lieberman, so it seems, did not overlook such a possibility, and so he has prepared an alternative argument: we cannot negotiate with the Palestinians because they have no legitimate leadership.

Why not legitimate? Here Lieberman is revealed as the principled democrat he is. Mahmoud Abbas' term of office has expired. The Palestinian Authority has held no new elections. Can one demand of Israel, the beacon of democracy in the Middle East, to make peace with a leadership that has not been lawfully elected?

Clearly, that is unthinkable. Israel will not betray its sacred principles. A committed democrat like Lieberman can not and will not agree to that.

True, the great majority of the Palestinian people agree that Abbas should conduct the negotiations. Even Hamas recently declared (not for the first time) that if Abbas reaches a peace agreement, and if this is confirmed by the Palestinian people in a referendum, Hamas would accept it, even though this would be contrary to its principles.

But this does not interest Lieberman. He will not compromise himself by negotiating with an administration whose democratic credentials are in doubt.

THIS IS NOT so important, because, according to Lieberman, Israel itself cannot make peace.

Quite simply, “there are sharp differences of opinion within the coalition”. As he puts it: “I don’t think that it is possible to achieve a common denominator between Eli Yishai and Ehud Barak, or between me and Dan Meridor, or even in Likud between Benny Begin and Michael Eitan (Meridor, Begin and Eitan are all ministers without portfolio). . . In the present political circumstances, it is impossible for us to present a plan for a permanent settlement, because the coalition would simply not survive.”

For Lieberman, as for Netanyahu, the continued existence of the present coalition is clearly more important than reaching a “permanent settlement”. True, one could easily set up an alternative coalition, based on Likud, Kadima and Labor, but for Lieberman – and, so it seems, for Netanyahu, too – this possibility is not worth considering.

THE CONCLUSION, according to Lieberman: peace is not possible, not now, not for the coming decades.

But, fortunately, he has an alternative that is much better than a final peace agreement.

It is called “Long-Term Interim Agreement”.

This week, Lieberman leaked its basics: “A significant increase in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in the areas of security and the economy. . . The aim of the Plan is to stabilize even more the situation in the West Bank and increase the security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in order to give the Palestinians more security responsibilities for what’s happening on the ground.”

So, it is possible after all to cooperate with the illegitimate regime of Mahmoud Abbas, if he continues to collaborate with the Israel military and Shin Bet to prevent attacks in Israel and the settlements. For this service, he will be paid well: “The Plan will act to strengthen the Palestinian economy significantly by increasing the freedom of movement between the Palestinian towns in the West Bank and providing various economic inducements.”

Meaning: in payment for the services of the Palestinian

Authority for Israel’s security, Israel will graciously permit the inhabitants of Nablus to go to Ramallah, and the inhabitants of Bethlehem to reach Hebron. Palestinian workers will continue to build the settlements, whose numbers will increase mightily, and the economic situation will improve.

The Plan also fixes targets: the Palestinian GNP pro capita must reach about 20 thousand dollars (more than ten times its present level). “When the economic situation within the Palestinian Authority is similar to that in Israel, it will be easier to renew the political negotiations and achieve a permanent settlement.”

In other words: the occupation will continue until one of the following happens: either the Palestinian standard of living will reach that of Israel or the Messiah will come – whichever happens first. In any case, there is no clear indication that either will happen within the next few decades..

IS THIS the plan of Lieberman only, or of Netanyahu, too?

When asked about the speech of his Foreign Minister, Netanyahu gave an evasive answer. Any minister has the right to say whatever he wants, he said, but only the government’s official policy counts.

Well, first of all, the Foreign Minister is not just “any minister”. The political musings of the deputy Minister of Transportation (if any) may be unimportant, but the Foreign Minister is the international spokesman of the state, the representative of the government abroad.

But Netanyahu continued that if negotiations are resumed and these come up against a brick wall, it is very possible that there will be no choice but to conclude an interim agreement.

In practice, it is Netanyahu himself who is holding up the negotiations, because he refuses to freeze the settlements and he demands that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a “Jewish state”. And even if negotiations were resumed, they would soon come up against a wall, because of our government’s attitude towards East Jerusalem and the borders.

So what remains? Interim forever!