

Kerry and Chutzpah

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IF YOU HAPPEN to bump into John Kerry at Ben Gurion Airport, you may wonder whether he is coming or going. He may well be wondering himself.

For many weeks now he has been devoting most of his precious time to meetings with Binyamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas, trying to get these two people together.

It is about half an hour's car ride between the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem and the Palestinian President's Mukata'ah in Ramallah. But the two are more distant from each other than the Earth and Mars.

Kerry has taken it upon himself to bring the two together—perhaps somewhere in outer space. On the moon, for example.

TOGETHER FOR what?

Ah, there's the rub. The idea seems to be a meeting for meeting's sake.

We have watched this procedure for many years. Successive American presidents have undertaken to bring the two sides together. It is an American belief, rooted in Anglo-Saxon tradition, that if two reasonable, decent people get together to thrash out their differences, everything will fall into place. It's almost automatic: meet—talk—agree.

Unfortunately, it does not quite work this way with conflicts between nations, conflicts that may have deep historical roots. In meetings between leaders of such nations, they often just want to hurl old accusations at each other, with the aim of convincing the world that the other side is utterly depraved and despicable.

Either side, or both, may be interested in prolonging the meetings forever. The world sees the leaders meeting, the mediator and the photographers working hard, everybody talking endlessly of peace, peace, peace.

I remember a Scandinavian gentleman named Gunnar Jarring. Remember him? No? Don't blame yourself. He is eminently forgettable. A well-meaning Swedish diplomat (and Turkologist), he was asked by the UN in the early 1970s to bring the Egyptians and Israelis together and to achieve a peaceful settlement between them.

Jarring took his historic mission very seriously. He

shuttled tirelessly between Cairo and Jerusalem. His name became a joke in Israel, and probably in Egypt, too.

The protagonists in those days were Anwar Sadat and Golda Meir. As we disclosed at the time, Sadat gave Jarring a momentous message: in return for getting back all of the Sinai peninsula, conquered by Israel in 1967, he was ready to make peace. Golda rejected this proposal out of hand. There was, of course, no meeting.¹

Everybody knows how this chapter ended. After Golda had rejected everything, Sadat attacked, won an initial surprise victory, the whole political world started to move, Golda was kicked out, and after four years of Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin came to power and agreed the same peace with Sadat that had been proposed before the war. The 3,000 Israeli soldiers and around 10,000 Egyptians who died in the war did not see it.

Jarring, by the way, died in 2002, unsung and forgotten.

KERRY IS no Jarring. First of all, because he does not represent a powerless international organization, but the World's Only Superpower. The full might of the United States of America is at his disposal.

Or is it?

That is really the most relevant—indeed the only relevant—question at this moment.

He will need a lot to achieve his heart's desire: the meeting—not just the meeting, but The Meeting—between Netanyahu and Abbas.

That looks like an easy task. Netanyahu declares, with his usual sincerity, that he wants to meet. Nay, that he is eager to meet. With the polished charm of a seasoned TV presenter familiar with the power of visual images, he even offered to put up a tent halfway between Jerusalem and Ramallah (at the infamous Qalandia checkpoint?) and sit down with Abbas and Kerry until a full agreement on all aspects of the conflict is achieved.

Who could resist such a generous offer? Why the hell does Abbas not jump at it and grasp it with both hands?

For a very simple reason.

The very start of new negotiations would be a political

¹A popular joke doing the rounds had Golda and Sadat facing each other from opposite banks of the Suez Canal. Golda shouted: "Make Love not War!" Sadat looked at her through his binoculars and replied: "Better war!"

triumph for Netanyahu. Actually, it's all he really wants—the ceremony, the bombast, the leaders shaking hands, the smiles, the speeches full of goodwill and talk of peace.

And then? Then nothing. Negotiations that go on endlessly, months, years, decades. We have seen it all before. Yitzhak Shamir, one of Netanyahu's predecessors, famously boasted that he would have dragged out the negotiations forever.

The profit for Netanyahu would be clear and immediate. He would be seen as the Man of Peace. The present government, the most rightist and nationalist Israel has ever known, would be rehabilitated. The people around the world who preach a boycott of Israel in all spheres would be shamed and disarmed. The growing alarm in Jerusalem about the "de-legitimization" and "isolation" of Israel would be relieved.

What would the Palestinian side get out of it? Nothing. No stop to the settlements. Not even the release of old prisoners who have been incarcerated for more than 20 years (like those who were released to Hamas in return for Gilad Shalit). Sorry, no "preconditions"!

Abbas demands that the aim of the negotiations be spelled out in advance: the establishment of the State of Palestine with borders "based on" the pre-1967 lines. The omission of this statement from the Oslo accords of 1993 led to their eventual evaporation. Why make the same mistake twice?

Also, Abbas wants to set a time limit for the negotiations. A year or so.

Netanyahu, of course, refuses all of this. At the moment, poor Kerry is trying to put something together that would satisfy the wolf while keeping the lamb alive. Give Abbas American assurances without Israeli assurances, for example.

IN ALL this bickering, one basic fact is ignored.

It's that elephant again. The elephant in the room, whose existence Netanyahu denies and which Kerry is trying to ignore.

The occupation.

The assumption is generally made that the negotiations are between equals. In cartoons, Netanyahu and Abbas appear to be of equal size. The American picture of two reasonable people talking it out between themselves presupposes two more or less equal partners.

But this whole picture is basically false. The proposed "negotiations" are between an almighty occupying power and an almost totally powerless occupied people. Between the wolf and the lamb.²

The Israeli army operates freely throughout the West Bank, including Ramallah. If Netanyahu so decides, Abbas may find himself tomorrow morning in an Israeli prison, together with the old people Netanyahu refuses to release.

Less drastically, the Israeli government can at any moment, at will, stop transferring the large sums of tax and customs money it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, as it has done several times already. This would immediately bring the PA to the brink of bankruptcy.

There are hundreds of ways, one more refined than the other, in which the occupation authorities and the occupation army can make life intolerable for individual Palestinians and their community as a whole.

What can the Palestinians do to put pressure on the Israeli government? Very little. There is the threat of a Third Intifada. It worries the army, but does not frighten it. The army's answer is more repression and bloodshed. Or another resolution of the UN General Assembly, elevating Palestine to the rank of a full member of the world organization. Netanyahu would be furious, but the actual damage would be limited.

ANY PRESSURE to start meaningful negotiations that would lead to a peace agreement in—say—a year must come from the President of the United States of America.

That is so obvious that it hardly needs mentioning.

This is the crux of the matter.

Kerry can bring cash, a lot of cash, to bribe the Palestinians, or whisper into their ears dire threats to frighten them into meeting Netanyahu in his imaginary tent—it will mean next to nothing.

The only chance to start real negotiations is for Barack Obama to put his full weight behind the effort, to confront Congress and the hugely powerful pro-Israel lobby and dictate to both sides the American peace plan. We all know what it must look like—a combination of the (Bill) Clinton outline and the pan-Arab peace initiative.

If John Kerry is unable to deliver this pressure, he should not even try. It really is an imposition to come here and shake things up when you have no means to impose a solution. Sheer impertinence.

Or, as you say in Hebrew, Chutzpah.

²It's the old Israeli joke again: Can you keep a wolf and a lamb together? Of course you can, if you put in a new lamb every day.