

Killjoy Was Here

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BINYAMIN NETANYAHU AROUSED my pity. From my 10 years of membership in the Knesset I know how unpleasant it is to speak before an empty hall.

His die-hard followers—a pathetic residue of Casino magnates and burnt-out Zionist right-wingers—sat in the gallery and an over-blown Israeli delegation sat in the hall, but they only underlined the general emptiness. Depressing.

How different from President Hassan Rouhani's reception! Then the hall was overcrowded, the General Secretary and the other dignitaries leapt from their seats to congratulate him at the end, the international media could not get enough of him.

Much of Netanyahu's misfortune was just bad luck. It was the end of the session, everybody was eager to get home or go shopping, no one was in the mood to listen to yet another lecture on Jewish history. Enough is enough.

Worse, the speech was totally eclipsed by a world-shaking event—the shutdown of the federal government. The breakdown of the celebrated US system of governance—something like an administrative 9/11—was a riveting sight. Netanyahu—Netanya who?—just could not compete.

PERHAPS THERE there was also a tiny bit of schadenfreude in the delegates' reaction to our Prime Minister.

In his General Assembly speech last year he assumed the role of the world's primary school teacher, using primitive teaching aids on the rostrum, drawing a line in red ink on a third-grade presentation of the Bomb.

For weeks now Israeli propaganda has been telling the world's leaders that they are childishly naive or just plain stupid. Perhaps they didn't appreciate being told that. Perhaps they were reinforced in their belief that the Israelis (or worse, the Jews) are overbearing, condescending and patronizing. Perhaps it was just one arrogant speech too many

All this is very sad. Sad for Netanyahu. He invested so much effort in this speech. For him, a speech before the General Assembly (or the US Congress) is like a major battle for a renowned general, a historic event. He lives from speech to speech, weighing in advance every sentence, practicing over and over again the body language,

the inflections, like the accomplished actor he is.

And here he was, the great Shakespearean, declaiming "To be or not to be" before an empty hall, rudely disturbed by the snoring of the sole gentleman in the second row.

COULD OUR propaganda line have been less boring? Of course it could.

Before setting foot on American soil, Netanyahu knew that the world was sighing with relief at the signs of the new Iranian attitude. Though he may be convinced that the ayatollahs were cheating (as usual, he would say) was it wise to appear as a serial killjoy?

He could have said: *"We welcome the new tones coming out of Tehran. We listened with much sympathy to Mr. Rouhani's speech. Together with the entire world, represented by this august assembly, we very much hope that the Iranian leadership is sincere, and that in serious negotiations a fair and effective solution can be found.*

"However, we cannot ignore the possibility that this charm offensive is but a smokescreen behind which Mr. Rouhani's internal enemies continue to build the nuclear bomb, which threatens all of us. Therefore we expect all of us will exercise utmost caution in conducting the negotiations. . . "

It's the tone that makes the music.

INSTEAD, OUR Prime Minister threatened again—and more sharply than ever—with an Israeli attack on Iran.

He brandished a revolver which, everybody knows, is empty.

This possibility—as I have repeatedly pointed out—never really existed. Geography, world economic and political circumstances make an attack on Iran impossible.

But even if it had been real at some time—it is quite out of the question now. The world is against it. The US public is most definitely against it.

An attack by Israel acting alone, in face of resolute American opposition, is as probable as an Israeli settlement on the moon. Slightly unlikely.

I don't know about the military feasibility. Could it be done? Could our Air Force do it without US assistance and support? Even if the answer were positive, the political circumstances forbid it. Indeed, our military chiefs seem singularly uninterested in such an adventure.

THE CLIMAX of the speech was Netanyahu's

grandiose declaration: “*if we have to stand alone, we shall stand alone!*”

What did it remind me of? In late 1940 there appeared in Palestine—and, I suppose, throughout the British Empire—a superb propaganda poster. France had fallen, Hitler had not yet invaded the Soviet Union, the US was still far from intervening. The poster showed Winston Churchill, undaunted, and a slogan: “Alright then, alone!”

Netanyahu could not remember this, though his memory does seem to be pre-natal. I call it “Alzheimer in reverse”—vividly remembering things that never happened.¹

The phrase Netanyahu was looking for dates from 1896—the year Theodor Herzl published his epochal work “Der Judenstaat”. A British statesman coined the catchword “Splendid Isolation” to characterize British policy under Benjamin Disraeli and his successor.

Actually, the slogan originated in Canada, when a politician spoke about Britain’s isolation during the Napoleonic wars: “Never did the ‘Empress Island’ appear so magnificently grand—she stood by herself, and there was a peculiar splendor in the loneliness of her glory!”

Does Netanyahu see himself as the reincarnation of Winston Churchill, standing proud and undaunted against a continent engulfed by the Nazis?

And where does that leave Barack Obama?

WE KNOW where. Netanyahu and his followers constantly remind us.

Obama is the modern Neville Chamberlain.

Chamberlain the Appeaser. The man who flourished a piece of paper in the fall of 1938 and proclaimed “Peace in Our Time”. The statesman who almost brought about the destruction of his country.

In this version of history, we are now witnessing the Second Munich. A repeat of the infamous agreement be-

tween Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Edouard Daladier and Neville Chamberlain, in which the Sudetenland, a province belonging to Czechoslovakia though inhabited by Germans, was turned over to Nazi Germany, leaving democratic little Czechoslovakia defenseless. Half a year later, Hitler invaded and occupied Czechoslovakia. Another few months and World War II broke out when he marched into Poland.

Historical analogies are always dangerous, especially in the hands of politicians and commentators with only superficial historical knowledge.

Let’s see about Munich. In the analogy, Hitler’s place is taken by Ali Khamenei, or perhaps Hassan Rouhani. Indeed? Do they have the world’s strongest military machine, as Hitler already had at that time?

And does Netanyahu himself look like Eduard Benes, the Czech president who trembled before Hitler?

And President Obama, does he resemble Chamberlain, the leader of an enfeebled and practically defenseless Britain, in desperate need of time to rearm? Does Obama surrender to a fanatical dictator?

Or is it Iran that is giving up—or pretending to give up—its nuclear ambitions, brought to its knees by the stringent set of American-dictated international sanctions?²

COMING BACK to reality: there is nothing splendid about the isolation of Israel these days.

Our Isolation means weakness, a loss of power, a diminishing of security.

It is the job of a statesman to find allies, to build partnerships, to strengthen the international position of his country.

Netanyahu has lately taken to quoting our ancient sages: “*If I am not for me, who is for me?*”

He forgets the next part of that same sentence: “*And if I am for myself, what am I?*”

¹He once recounted at length how he, as a boy, had a discussion with a British soldier in the streets of Jerusalem—though the last British soldier left the country more than a year before he was born.

²By the way, the Munich analogy was even more cock-eyed when it was recently applied in Israel to the American-Russian agreement about Syria. There, Bashar al-Assad assumed the role of the victorious Hitler, and Obama was the naïve Englishman with the umbrella. Yet it was Assad who gave up his precious chemical weapons, while Obama gave nothing, except a postponement of military action. What kind of a “Munich” was that?