

# Mutiny on the Titanic

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**H**ERE IS A story that has never been told before: When the Titanic was well out into the Atlantic, its crew mutinied. They demanded higher wages, less cramped quarters, better food. They assembled on the lower decks and refused to budge from there.

A few old hands from the engine room tried to extend the scope of the protest. They claimed that the captain was grossly incompetent, that the officers were nincompoops and that the voyage was bound to end in disaster.

But the leaders of the protest resisted. "Let's not go beyond our practical demands," they said. "The course of the ship is none of our business. Whatever some of us may think about the captain and the officers on the bridge, we must not mix matters. That would only split the protest."

The passengers did not interfere. Many of them sympathized with the protest, but did not want to get involved.

It is said that one drunken English lady was standing on deck, a glass of whisky in her hand, when she saw the huge iceberg looming. "I asked for some ice," she murmured, "but this is ridiculous!"

FOR A WEEK, or so, all the Israeli media were riveted to the goings on at the UN.

Ehud Barak had warned of a "tsunami". Avigdor Lieberman foresaw a "bloodbath". The army was prepared for huge demonstrations that were certain to end in unprecedented violence. No one could think of anything else.

And then, overnight, the bloody tsunami faded like a mirage, and the social protest reappeared. State of war Out, welfare state In.

Why? The commission appointed by Binyamin Netanyahu to examine the roots of the protest and propose reforms had finished its work in record time and laid a thick volume of proposals on the table. All very good ones. Free education from the age of 3, higher taxes for the very rich, more money for housing, and so on.

All very nice, but far short of what the protesters had demanded. The almost half a million demonstrators some weeks ago did not go out into the streets for that. Economics professors attacked, other economics professors defended. A lively debate ensued.

This can go on for a few days. But then something is bound to happen – perhaps a border incident, or a settlers' pogrom against a Palestinian village, or a pro-Palestinian resolution at the UN – and the whole media pack will veer around, forget about the reforms and return to the good old scares.

In the meantime, the military budget will serve as a bone of contention. The government commission has proposed reducing this budget by 3 billion shekels – less than a billion dollars – in order to finance its modest reforms. Netanyahu has voiced

agreement.

No one took this very seriously. The slightest incident will enable the army to demand a special budget, and instead of the suggested tiny reduction, there will be another big increase.

But the army has already raised hell – quite literally – describing the disasters that will surely befall us if the diabolical reduction is not choked in its cradle. We face defeat in the next war, many soldiers will be killed, the future investigation committee will blame the present ministers. They are already shaking in their shoes.

ALL THIS goes to show how quickly national attention can swing from "protest mode" to "security mode". One day we are shaking our fists in the street, the next we are manning the national ramparts, resolved to sell our lives dearly.

This could lead to the idea that the two problems are really one, and can only be solved together. But this conclusion meets with resolute resistance.

The young leaders of the protest insist that the demand for reform unites all Israelis – male and female, young and old, leftist and rightist, religious and secular, Jew and Arab, Ashkenazi and Oriental. Therein lies its power. The moment the question of national policy comes up, the movement will break apart. End of protest.

Difficult to argue with that.

True, even so the rightists accuse the protesters of being leftists in disguise. Very few national-religious people appear at the demonstrations, and no orthodox at all. Oriental Jews, traditional voters for the Likud, are underrepresented, though not altogether absent. People speak of a movement of the "White Tribe" – Jews of European descent.

Still, the movement has succeeded in avoiding an open split. The hundreds of thousands of demonstrators have not been called upon to identify themselves with any particular political party or creed. The leaders can rightly claim that their tactic – if it is a tactic – has worked up to now.

THIS CONVICTION has been reinforced by recent events in the Labor Party.

This moribund congregation, down in the polls to a mere 7% of the votes, has suddenly sprung to new life. A lively primary election for the party leadership has restored some color to its cheeks. In a surprise victory, Shelly Yacimovich has been elected party chairwoman.

Shelly (I dislike these long foreign surnames) was in the past an assertive, abrasive radio journalist with very pronounced feminist and social-democratic views. Six years ago she joined Labor and was elected to the Knesset under the wing of Amir Peretz, the then leader, who she has now soundly beaten.

In the Knesset, Shelly has distinguished herself as a diligent and relentless militant on social issues. She is a girlish-looking 51, a lone she-wolf, disliked by her colleagues, devoid

of charisma, not at all the hail-fellow-well-met type. Yet the party rank and file, perhaps out of sheer desperation, preferred her to the members of the bankrupt old guard. The atmosphere in the country produced by the social protest movement certainly contributed to her success.

In all her years in the Knesset, she has not mentioned any of the national problems – war and peace, occupation, settlements. She has concentrated exclusively on social issues. On the eve of the primary, she shocked many members of her party by publicly embracing the settlers. “The settlements are no sins or crimes,” she asserted, they were put there by Labor Party governments and are a part of the national consensus.

Shelly may really believe this or she may consider it good tactics – the fact is that she has adopted the same line as the protest movement: that social affairs should be separated from “national” affairs. Seems you can be rightist on the occupation and leftist on taxing the rich.

#### BUT CAN YOU?

On the morrow of the Labor primaries, something amazing happened. In a respected opinion poll, Labor rose from 8 to 22 Knesset seats, overtaking Tzipi Livni’s Kadima, which sank from 28 to 18.

A revolution? Not quite. All the new Labor votes came from Kadima. But a move from Kadima to Labor, while interesting in itself, is not important. The Knesset is divided into two blocs – the nationalist-religious and the center-left-Arab. As long as the

rightist bloc has a 5% edge, there will be no change. To effect change, enough voters must jump from one side of the scales to the other.

Shelly believes that by shunning national issues and concentrating on social matters, voters can be moved to make the jump. Some say: that’s all that counts. What’s the use of putting forward a program of peace, if you can’t change the government? Let’s first come to power, by whatever means, and then see to peace.

Against this logical argument, there is the contrary contention: that if you start to embrace the settlers and ignore the occupation, you will end up as a minor partner in a right-wing government, as has happened before. Ask Shimon Peres. Ask Ehud Barak.

And then there is the moral question: can you really chant “the People Demand Social Justice” and ignore the daily oppression of four million Palestinians in the occupied territories? When you abandon your principles on the way to power, what are you likely to do with that power?

THE JEWISH High Holidays, which started the day before yesterday, provide a pause for reflection. Politics are at a standstill. The protest leaders promise another huge demonstration, restricted to the social demands, in a month’s time.

In the meantime, the Titanic, this beautiful masterpiece of naval architecture, is riding the waves.