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On the road to Canossa

IN JANUARY 1077, King Henry IV walked to Canossa. He crossed the snow-covered Alps barefoot, wearing a penitent monk's hair shirt, and reached the North-Italian fortress in which the Vicar of God had found refuge.

Pope Gregory VII had excommunicated him after a conflict over the right to invest bishops throughout the German Reich. The excommunication endangered the position of the king, and he decided to do everything possible to get it lifted.

The king waited for three days outside the gates of Canossa, fasting and wearing the hair shirt, until the pope agreed to open the gate. After the king knelt before the pope, the ban was lifted and the conflict came to an end – at least for the time being.

THIS WEEK, the Netanyahu went to Canossa in the United States, in order to prevent Pope Obama I from putting a ban on him.

Contrary to the German king, Bibi I did not walk barefoot in the snow, did not exchange his expensive suit for a hair shirt and did not forgo his sumptuous meals. But he, too, was compelled to wait for several days at the gates of the White House, before the pope deigned to receive him.

The German king knew that he had to pay the full price for the pardon. He knelt. The Israeli king thought that he could get off cheap. As is his wont, he tried all kinds of subterfuges. He did not kneel, but barely bowed. The pope was not satisfied.

This time, the walk to Canossa did not succeed. On the contrary, it made the situation worse. The deadly sword of American excommunication continues to hang above Netanyahu's head.

IN ISRAEL, Binyamin Netanyahu is considered the expert No. 1 on the USA. He was brought there as a child, attended high school and university there and speaks fluent – even if rather shallow – American.

But this time he was mistaken, and in a big way.

Netanyahu's heart is with the American right. His closest friends there are neoconservatives, right-wing Republicans and evangelist preachers. It seems that these had assured him that Obama would lose the big battle for health care and would soon be a lame duck until inevitably losing the next presidential elections.

It was a gamble, and Netanyahu lost.

At the beginning of the crisis over construction in East Jerusalem, Netanyahu was still sure of himself. Obama's people rebuked him, but not too severely. I seemed that the conflict would end like all the previous ones: Jerusalem would pay lip service, Washington would pretend that the spit was rain.

A less arrogant person would have told himself: let's not rush things. Let's wait at home until it becomes clear

who will win the health insurance battle. Then we shall think again and make a decision.

But Netanyahu knew that he was assured an enthusiastic welcome at the AIPAC conference, and AIPAC, after all, rules Washington. Without thinking much he flew there, made a speech and harvested thunderous applause. Drunk with success he waited for the meeting in the White House, where Obama was supposed to embrace him before the cameras.

But in the meantime, something absolutely awful had happened: the health law was adopted by Congress. Obama won a victory that has been called "historic". Netanyahu was not facing a beaten and beleaguered pope, but a Prince of the Church in all his splendor.

ACCORDING TO an Israeli joke, the shortest unit in time is the moment between the light turning green and the driver behind you starting to honk. My late friend, General Matti Peled, insisted that there was a shorter moment: the time it takes for a newly promoted officer to get used to his new rank. But it appears that there is an even shorter period of time.

George Mitchell, the hopping mediator, handed Netanyahu Obama's invitation to the White House. The cameras showed everything: Smiling from ear to ear, Mitchell extended his hand for the handshake, he even stretched out his other hand to hold Netanyahu's arm. And then, the moment he thought that the cameras had stopped recording, the smile disappeared from his face at a dizzying speed, as if a mask had fallen, and a sour and angry expression appeared.

If Netanyahu had perceived that moment, he would have been cautious from there on. But caution is not one of his most outstanding qualities. Completely ignoring Obama, he told the thousands of cheering AIPAC-sters that he would go on building in East Jerusalem, that there is no difference between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and that all successive Israeli governments have built there.

That is quite true. The most energetic settler in East Jerusalem was Teddy Kollek, the Labor Party's mayor of West Jerusalem at the time of the annexation. But Teddy was a genius. He succeeded in fooling the whole world, appearing as a shining peace activist, gathering all possible peace prizes (except the Nobel Prize), and between prizes established a huge area of Israeli settlement all over East Jerusalem. (Once I talked in Jerusalem with Lord Caradon, the father of UN Security Council resolution 242, a sober British statesman who was very critical of Israel. After our conversation, he met with Teddy, who devoted the whole day to him and toured Jerusalem in his company. By the evening, the noble lord had become Teddy's devoted admirer.) Teddy's slogan was: Build and don't talk! Build and don't make noises!

But Netanyahu can't keep quiet. It is said of Sabras, the native-born Israelis, that they "finish quickly" because

they have to run and tell the boys. Netanyahu is a Sabra.

Perhaps Obama would have been ready to apply to Jerusalem the rule used by the US armed forces about gays: Don't ask, Don't tell. But for Netanyahu, the telling is the most important part of it, the more so since all the preceding governments had indeed built there.

NETANYAHU'S OTHER argument is also interesting. He said that there is a consensus about the new Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Bill Clinton's peace plan provided that "what is Jewish in Jerusalem will go to Israel, what is Arab will go to Palestine". Since everybody agrees that in the final agreement the Jewish neighborhoods would be joined to Israel anyhow, why not build there now?

This sheds light on a tried and tested Zionist method. When an unofficial consensus about the division of the land between Israel and Palestine is reached, the Israeli government says: OK, now that there is agreement about the land we are getting, let's talk about the rest of the land. Mine is mine, now let's negotiate about what is yours. The existing Jewish neighborhoods are ours already. There we are free to build without limitation. It remains only to decide upon the Arab neighborhoods, where we also intend to build.

Actually, Netanyahu should be thanked. For decades, everybody made a distinction between the "settlements" in the West Bank and Gaza and the "Jewish neighborhoods" in East Jerusalem. Now this distinction has been eradicated, and everybody speaks about the settlements in East Jerusalem.

SO NETANYAHU went to Canossa. He entered the gate of the White House. Obama listened to his proposals and told him that they were not sufficient. Netanyahu huddled with his advisors in a side room in the building and went back to Obama. Again Obama told him that his proposals were insufficient. That's how it ended: no agreement, no joint statement, no photos.

That is not just a "crisis" anymore. It is something really momentous: a basic change in the policy of the US. The American ship in the Middle East is making a large turn, and this is taking a long time. There have been many disappointments for peace-lovers on the way. But now it is happening at last.

The President of the United States wants to end the conflict, which is threatening the vital national interests of the US. He wants a peace agreement. Not at the end of time, not in the next generation, but now, within two years.

The change finds its expression in East Jerusalem, because there can be no peace without East Jerusalem becoming the capital of Palestine. The Israeli building activity there is designed to prevent just this. Therefore, it is the test.

Up to now, Netanyahu has played a double game. At one moment he leans towards the US, the next he leans towards the settlers. Aluf Ben, the senior political editor of Haaretz, this week asked him to choose "between Benny Begin and Uri Avnery" – meaning, between Greater Israel and the two-state solution.

I feel flattered by the formula, but the political choice is now between Lieberman-Yishai and Tzipi Livni.

Netanyahu has no chance of escaping Obama's excommunication as long as he is a hostage of the present government coalition. It is said that a clever person knows how to get out of a trap into which a wise person would not have fallen in the first place. If Netanyahu had been wise, he would not have set up this coalition. Now we shall see if he is clever.

Kadima is far from being a peace party. Its countenance is blurred. During the whole year in opposition it has not proven itself in any way and has not taken part in any principled struggle. But the public considers it a moderate party, unlike Netanyahu's overtly extremist partners. According to the latest polls, Kadima has recently extended its slight advantage over Likud.

In order to enter into serious negotiations with the Palestinians, as demanded by Obama, Netanyahu will have to dismantle the existing coalition and invite Livni in. Until that happens, he will be left standing at the gate of Canossa.

The struggle between the king and the pope did not end with the humiliating scene at Canossa. It went on for a long time. The battle between Netanyahu and Obama will be decided much more quickly.