

# Peace and Watermelons

Uri Avnery

February 23, 2013

ONE OF THE most interesting and prolonged private debates I have had in my life was with the brilliant Dr. Nahum Goldmann. The subject: American peace initiatives.

It was an unequal debate, of course. Goldmann was my elder by 28 years. While I was a mere editor of an Israeli news magazine, he was an international figure, President of the World Zionist Organization and the World Jewish Congress.

In the mid '50s, when I was looking for a personality who could possibly contest David Ben-Gurion's stranglehold on the prime minister's office, I thought of Goldmann. He had the necessary stature and was liked by moderate Zionists. No less important, he had a clear set of opinions. From the first day of the State of Israel, he had proposed that Israel become a "Middle Eastern Switzerland", neutral between the US and the Soviet Union. For him, peace with the Arabs was absolutely essential for the future of Israel.

I visited him in a luxury suite in Jerusalem's classy Kind David hotel. He was wearing a silken dressing gown, and when I made my offer, he responded: *"Look, Uri, I like the good life. Luxury hotels, good food and beautiful women. If I challenged Ben-Gurion, all these would disappear. His people would vilify me as they do you. Why would I risk all that?"*

We also started a discussion that ended only with his death, some 27 years later. He was convinced that the US wanted peace between us and the Arabs, and that a major American peace effort was just around the corner. This was not simply an abstract hope. He assured me that he had just met with the highest policy-makers and had it from the highest authority. Straight from the American horse's mouth, so to say.

Goldman was also an inveterate name-dropper. He regularly met with most major American, Soviet and other political personalities, and never failed to mention this in his conversation. So, being assured by the incumbent US presidents, ministers and ambassadors that the US was just about to impose peace on Israelis and Arabs, he told me just you wait. You'll see.

THIS BELIEF in an American Imposed Peace has haunted the Israeli peace movement for decades. In advance of the coming visit of President Obama to Israel next month, it is raising its weary head once more.

Now, finally, it is going to happen. At the beginning

of his second term, Barak Obama will shed the hesitations, fears and incompetence that marked his first. AIPAC will not be able to terrorize him anymore. A new, strong and resolute Obama will emerge and knock all the heads together. The leaders will be strongarmed into peace.

This is a very typical and very convenient conviction. It relieves us of the duty to do anything unpopular or daring ourselves. It is also very comforting. The Zionist Left is feeble and lifeless? Maybe, but we have an ally who will do the job. Like the little kid who threatens the bully with his powerful big brother.

This hope has been shattered again and again and again. US presidents came and went, each with his entourage of Jewish advisors, White House and State Department officials and ambassadors. And nothing happened.

Of course, there have been American peace initiatives galore. From Nixon's "Rogers plan", through Carter's Camp David agreement about Palestinian self-government to Clinton's Parameters and Bush's Road Map there were plenty of them, each one more convincing than the last. And then came the Obama, the new man, energetic and resolute, and imposed on Binyamin Netanyahu a stop of the settlement enterprise for several months, and... well, nothing.

No peace initiative and no watermelons, as we say in Hebrew (borrowed from the Arabs). Watermelons have a short season.

SLOWLY BUT surely, even Goldmann began to despair of the mirage of US intervention.

In our conversations we tried to crack the code of this enigma. Why, for God's sake, did the Americans not do what logic dictated? Why didn't they put pressure on our government? Why didn't they make an offer that our leaders couldn't refuse? In short, why no effective peace initiative?

It could not be in the American national interest to follow a policy that made it a hate-object of the masses throughout the entire Arab and most of the Muslim world. Didn't the Americans understand that they were undermining their clients in every Arab country—as these rulers never tired of telling them at every meeting?

The most obvious reason was the growing power of the pro-Israel lobby, from the early 50s on. AIPAC alone has now more than 200 employees in seven offices throughout the US. Almost everyone in Washington DC lives in

deadly fear of it. The Lobby can dethrone any senator or congressman who arouses its anger. Look at what is happening right now to Chuck Hagel, who dared to say the unthinkable: *"I am an American senator, not an Israeli senator!"*

The two professors, Mearsheimer and Walt, dared to say it: the pro-Israeli lobby controls American policy.

But this theory is not completely satisfying. What about the spying affair around Jonathan Pollard, who stays in prison for life in spite of immense Israeli pressure to release him?

Can a world power really be induced by a small foreign country and a powerful domestic lobby to act for decades against its basic national interest?

ANOTHER FACTOR often mentioned is the power of the arms industry.

When I was young, no one was more despised than the Merchants of Death. These days are long past. Countries—including Israel—pride themselves on selling arms to the most despicable regimes.

The US supplies us with huge quantities of the most sophisticated weapons. True, a lot of these come to us as a gift—but that doesn't change the picture. The arms producers are paid by the US government as a kind of New Deal public works project supported enthusiastically even (and especially) by the Republicans. After the arms are supplied to Israel, some Arab countries see themselves compelled to order huge quantities for themselves, for which they pay through the nose. See: Saudi Arabia.

This theory, which was once very popular, does not really satisfy either. No single industry is powerful enough to compel a nation to act against its own general interests for half a century.

THEN THERE is the "Common History" thing. The US and Israel are so much alike, aren't they? They have both displaced another people, and live on denial. Is there much difference between the Native-American naqba and the Palestinian one? Between the American and Zionist pioneers who struck roots in the wilderness and built a new nation? Do they not both base themselves on the same Old Testament and believe that God has given them their land (whether they believe in God or not)?

Do our settlers, who are creating a new Wild East in the occupied territories, not imitate the Wild West of American movies? A few days ago, Israel TV showed one Avri Ran, who declares himself "sovereign" of the West Bank, terrorizing both Palestinians and settlers, grabbing land irrespective of to whom it belongs, telling the army where to go and what to do, openly despising the Israeli and all other governments, and becoming a multi-millionaire in the process. Hollywood at its best.

But all this applies also to Australia (with whom we are quarreling at the moment), Canada, New Zealand and South American nations. Yet we don't have this kind of relationship with them.

Noam Chomsky, the brilliant linguist, has another answer: Israel is just a lackey of American imperialism,

-serving its interest in this region. A kind of unsinkable aircraft-carrier. I don't quite see it that way. Israeli was not involved in the US action in Iraq, for example. If the American dog is wagging the Israeli tail, just as surely, the tail is wagging the dog.

NEITHER GOLDMANN nor I found a satisfactory answer to this riddle.

Eight months before his death, I received from him, quite unexpectedly, a surprising letter. Written in German (which we never spoke) on his stationery, it was a kind of apology: I had been right all along, no American peace initiative was to be expected, the rationale remained inexplicable.

The letter bears the date of January 30, 1982, five months before Ariel Sharon's bloody invasion of Lebanon, which was approved in advance by Alexander Haig, the then Secretary of State, and presumably by President Reagan, too.

The letter was a response to an article I had written some days before in the magazine I edited, Haolam Hazeh, in which I asked: *"Do the Americans really want peace?"*

Goldmann wrote: *"I, too, have already sometimes asked myself this question. Though one should not underestimate the lack of statesmanlike wisdom of American foreign policy makers . . . I could write a whole book proving that America seriously wants peace, and another book showing that they do not want peace."*

He mentioned America's fear of Soviet penetration of the Middle East, and their belief that peace is impossible without Russian participation. He also disclosed that a Russian diplomat had told him that there had been an American-Russian agreement to convene a peace conference in Geneva, but that Moshe Dayan had called upon the American Jews to sabotage it. The Russians were very angry.

Sprinkling names along the way, he summed up: *"Without being quite sure, I would say at the moment that there is a combination of American diplomatic incompetence on one hand, a fear of Russian involvement in a peace on the other hand, added to the domestic fear of the pro-Israeli lobby, (which includes) not only the Jews but also (non-Jews) like Senator (Henry "Scoop") Jackson and others. (All these) seem to be the reasons for the complete lack of understanding and results of the American Middle East policy, for which Israel will pay heavily in the future."*

EXCEPT FOR the decline of Russian influence, every word is valid today, 31 years later, on the eve of the Obama visit.

Again many Israelis and Palestinians hope for an American peace initiative, which will put pressure on both sides. Again the President denies any such intent. Again the results of the visit will probably be disappointment and despair.

Just now, there are no watermelons on the market. Nor a real US peace initiative.