

Pickled Cucumbers

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HALLELUJAH! AT LONG last I have found a point on which I agree with Binyamin Netanyahu. Really!

This Monday the Knesset reassembled for its winter session after a long (and blessed) vacation. On such occasions, the president of the state and the prime minister are invited to speak. The speeches are supposed to be festive, full of pious platitudes. In one ear and out the other.

Not this time.

Seated next to the Speaker, the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, made a speech that was unprecedented in every respect. He attacked the Likud-dominated government coalition and accused it of undermining the rule of law, the Attorney General and the police.

The President is no leftist, by any means. He belongs to the nationalist right. His ideology is that of “the whole of Eretz-Israel”. He is a member of the Likud party.

To understand him, one has to go back to Vladimir Jabotinsky, who in the 1920s founded the Revisionist Party, the foremother of the Zionist Right. Jabotinsky was born and brought up in Czarist Odessa, but studied in Italy, when the Risorgimento was still fresh in everybody's mind. This movement was an unusual mixture of extreme nationalism and extreme liberalism, and Jabotinsky took this with him.

Jabotinsky's portrait hangs in every Likud office, but his teachings have long ago been forgotten by the Likud membership, except for old-timers like Rivlin, who is 78. He was born at the outbreak of World War II. He belongs to a special group of people: descendants of East European Jews who came to Palestine long before the Zionist movement was born. His father was an expert on Arab culture.

Rivlin is one of the nicest people I know. Everybody likes him. Everybody, that is, except Netanyahu, who, with rare foresight, objected to his nomination.

NETANYAHU LISTENED to Rivlin's speech with a frozen face. Then he rose to make his own speech—a speech which was prepared long before the session, but which sounded as if Rivlin had listened to it before preparing his own text.

The Prime Minister attacked the Supreme Court, the

Attorney General, the Chief of Police, the media and the left, as if all these were meeting in secret to prepare his downfall. This was quite extraordinary, since the attorney general and the police chief were his own personal choices. According to him, all these were conspiring to bring him down in an anti-democratic plot, a putsch by police investigators and criminal prosecutors. The frequent leaks from these investigations, which have been widely published in the media, were—according to Netanyahu—all part of the plot.

And indeed, the public has been well informed about the investigations, one of which concerns expensive presents given by multi-millionaires to Netanyahu, who is himself quite rich. The presents include very expensive cigars, and therefore this bribery investigation is called the “cigar case”.

The same and other millionaires also gave expensive presents to Sarah, Netanyahu's very unpopular wife. These include pink champagne, so this investigation is called the “pink champagne case”.

But these are bagatelles compared to a black cloud approaching Netanyahu and called the “submarines case”. It concerns the acquisition of submarines and surface vessels from a German shipyard. Since German armament producers are known for paying huge bribes to the chiefs of backward countries, nobody was really surprised by rumors of many tens of millions of Euros being paid to Israeli politicians, admirals and middlemen. But where did the euros stop? Before they reached the top?

NETANYAHU'S REACTIONS speak louder than the rumors. They have replaced his obsessions about the Iranian nuclear bomb, the terrible danger of Hezbollah and even the treacherous Israeli left. They seem to be his main preoccupation.

In order to neutralize the cabal, Netanyahu and his minions have come up with a simple solution: to adopt the “French Law”. This is now the main effort of the Israeli government and the Likud party, to the detriment of everything else. It says simply that no criminal investigation or prosecution shall be conducted against a “sitting prime minister”.

On the face of it, there is some sense in this. Our prime minister must conduct the affairs of the state, plan

the next war (there is always a next war) and promote economic growth—all functions which suffer when he is fully occupied with dozens of criminal cases. But on second thoughts, it means that a criminal can serve in the highest office and that the prime minister—he and nobody else in the country—is exempt from investigation.

True, according to this law the investigations are only postponed until the prime minister becomes a normal citizen again. But Netanyahu is in his fourth 4-year term, and all the signs are that he fully intends to have a 5th, 6th and 7th, if God—may He be blessed—prolongs his life accordingly.

No other leader in the democratic world enjoys such a privilege, except one. It is called the French Law—but there are huge differences. The French law does protect the president from prosecution while in office—but not the prime minister. Also, and that is a very big also, the terms of office of the French president are limited to two—so that the postponement is not too long.

AT THIS moment, the entire government machinery is being mobilized to turn this legal abomination into law.

Some of the Likud's coalition partners are balking. This coalition consists of many parties—six, if my count is right—and if one of them abstains, there may be trouble. At present, two have announced that they are giving their members “a free hand”.

Incensed, Netanyahu's chief whip is threatening to break up the government and declare new elections—a dire threat to all coalition partners, who may face perdition.

In the Likud party itself there is not a single voice of dissent, not a single brave rebel like the two Republican senators who defied President Trump this week.

But President Rivlin condemned the proposed law in the strongest terms, and the Attorney General called it “absurd”.

SO WHERE do I agree with Netanyahu? On one point: he attacked the left for possessing a “factory of depression”, which create a sour mood.

In Hebrew we have a term for sour foods, such as pick-

led cucumbers. It may be loosely translated as “souries”. Netanyahu said that the left is creating a public “mood of souries”, in order to topple him.

Some readers may remember that I have accused the left of the same malaise, but from a different angle. There is a mood of depression within wide stretches of the Israeli peace camp, a mood of desperation, indeed a sour mood.

This mood leads to the impression that we can do nothing to save our state, which is being led to disaster by Netanyahu and his minions. A rather convenient mood, since it means that we can do nothing and need not risk anything, because the battle is lost anyhow.

Some draw the conclusion that the battle must be fought somewhere else, far away from us, such as the fight of the BDS for the boycott of everything Israeli. These days the battle has reached absurd heights, when a US town that was grievously hit by the hurricane announced that its citizens will receive compensation only if they undertake not to boycott Israel. Indeed, a country of unlimited absurdities.¹

A SOUR mood does not create fighters. A happy mood creates fighters. When the situation is bad, when it looks hopeless, a bunch of happy warriors can turn the outcome of the battle.

There is no reason to despair. History is not made by God. It is made by us.

Speaking of the French president—let's remember that Emmanuel Macron appeared from nowhere, founded a new party and on the first attempt won an absolute majority. If the French can, we can too.

Desperation, depression, they are all luxuries we cannot afford. We must return to the battle with hope and self-assurance.

As the man said: Yes, we can.

Let's be in good spirits. Let's rejoin the battle joyfully.

The above-mentioned Jabotinsky wrote a historical novel about the Biblical hero Samson. Just before bringing the Philistine temple down on himself, he bequeathed his people a testament of three commands: Chose a king, Collect iron, and—Laugh!

¹By the way, Haaretz disclosed this week that our government has hired an international US law firm to fight against BDS.