

Remember Ophira?

THIS WEEK I had a nostalgic experience. I met a parliamentary delegation from one of the European countries. What turned this meeting into a special occasion for me was its location.

The "Pasha Room" of the "American Colony" Hotel in East Jerusalem is a beautiful square hall, decorated in traditional Arab style. I was in this hall at the moment Yitzhak Rabin held out his hand to Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn at the Oslo agreement signing ceremony.

We gathered there spontaneously, Israeli peace activists and Fatah leaders, to celebrate the event together. We watched the proceedings on TV and cracked bottles of champagne. I still have one of the corks.

Just an hour before, I had witnessed a no less exciting meeting. A group of young Palestinians, delirious with joy, marched through the streets, olive branches in their hands and a large Palestinian flag fluttering over their heads. At the street corner, a unit of the Border Police – the most aggressive anti-Arab force in Israel – was waiting. At the time, even the simple possession of a Palestinian flag was a crime.

For a moment, we held our breath. What is going to happen? The Palestinians ran towards the policemen and thrust olive branches into their hands. The policemen did not know what to do. They were obviously in a state of total disorientation and did not react at all. The enthusiastic youngsters continued on their way through the streets of East Jerusalem, singing and rejoicing.

Today, 15 and a half years later, one can only look back with longing at the passion for peace that possessed all of us then. Nothing has remained of that fervor, that hope, that zeal for reconciliation.

All these have now been replaced by a poisonous mix of hopelessness and dejection.

IF YOU stop any ten random passers-by in a Tel Aviv street and ask them what they think about the chances of peace, nine of them will shrug their shoulders and answer: It won't happen. No chance. The conflict will just go on forever.

They will not say: We don't want peace, the price of peace is too high. On the contrary, many will declare that for peace they are ready to give back the occupied territories, even East Jerusalem, and let the Palestinians have a state of their own. Sure. Why not? But, they will add: No chance. There will be no peace.

Some will say: The Arabs don't want it. Others will say: Our leaders can't do it. But the conclusion is the same: It just won't happen.

A similar poll of Palestinians would probably yield the same results: We want peace. Peace would be wonderful. But there's no chance. It won't happen.

This mood has produced the same political situation on

both sides. In the Palestinian elections, Hamas won, not because of its ideology but because it expresses the despair of peace with Israel. In the Israeli elections, there was a general move to the Right: Leftists voted for Kadima, Kadima people voted for Likud, Likud people voted for the fascist factions.

Without hope there is no Left. The Left is by nature optimistic, it believes in a better future, in the chance of changing everything for the better. The Right is by nature pessimistic. It does not believe in the possibility of changing human nature and society for the better, it is convinced that war is a law of nature.

But among the despairing there are still those who hope that an intervention by foreigners – Americans, Europeans, even Arabs – will impose peace on us.

This week, that hope was severely shaken.

ON TV we were shown a uniquely impressive conference, a huge assembly of world leaders, who all came to Sharm-el-Sheikh. (Remember that during our occupation of Sinai it was called Ophira? Remember Moshe Dayan saying that he preferred Sharm-el-Sheikh without peace to peace without Sharm-el-Sheikh?)

Who was not there? Chinese and Japanese rubbed shoulders with Saudis and Qataris. Nicholas Sarkozy was everywhere (Indeed, it was well-nigh impossible to take a photo without the hyper-active French president appearing in it somewhere.) Hillary Clinton was the star. Hosni Mubarak celebrated his achievement in getting them all together on Egyptian soil.

And for what? For little, poor Gaza. It has to be rebuilt.

It was a celebration of sanctimonious hypocrisy, in the very best tradition of international diplomacy.

First of all, nobody from Gaza was there. As in the heyday of European imperialism, 150 years ago, the fate of the Natives was decided without the Natives themselves being present. Who needs them? After all, they are Primitives. Better without them.

Not only Hamas was absent. A delegation of Gaza businessmen and civil society activists could not come either. Mubarak just did not allow them to pass the Rafah crossing. The gate of the prison called Gaza was barred by the Egyptian jailers.

The absence of delegates from Gaza, and especially from Hamas, turned the conference into a farce. Hamas rules Gaza. It won the elections there, as in all the Palestinian territories, and continues to govern it even after one of the mightiest armies in the world spent 22 days trying to dislodge it. Nothing will happen in the Gaza Strip without the consent of Hamas. The world-wide decision to rebuild Gaza without the participation of Hamas is sheer foolishness.

The war ended with a fragile cease-fire that is collapsing before our very eyes. In his opening speech to the

conference, Mubarak hinted that it is Ehud Olmert who is now preventing an armistice (called Tadyah or calm in Arabic). Nobody at the conference reacted. But when there is no cease-fire, another even more destructive war is looming. It's just a matter of time – months, weeks, perhaps days. What has not yet been destroyed, will be destroyed then. So what is the good in investing billions to rebuild schools, hospitals, government buildings and ordinary homes, all of which will be demolished again anyhow?

Mubarak spoke about the exchange of prisoners. Sarkozy spoke with much pathos about the soldier "Jilad Shalit", a French citizen who all French people want to be freed. Interesting. There are 11 thousand Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. How many of them also hold French citizenship? Sarkozy did not say. It doesn't interest him. Even in this bunch of hypocrites, he strives for championship.

The participants of the conference promised Mahmoud Abbas fabulous sums of money. Nearly five billion dollars. How much will actually be paid? How much of this will actually pass through the sieve of the high-flying set in Ramallah and reach Gaza? According to a Gaza woman who appeared on television, a homeless mother who lives in a small tent in the middle of a huge mud puddle: Not a cent.

Was the political part of the performance more serious? Hillary spoke about "Two States for Two Peoples". Others talked about "the Political Process" and "Peace Negotiations". And all, all of them knew that these are nothing but hollow words.

IN HIS poem "If", Rudyard Kipling asked whether "you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken / Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools." This is now a test for all those who stood at the cradle of the "Two State" idea some 60 years ago.

This vision was – and remains – the only viable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The sole realistic alternative is the continuation of the present situation – occupation, oppression, Apartheid, war. But the enemies of this vision have smartened up and pretend to support it on every occasion.

Avigdor Liberman is in favor of "Two States". Absolutely. He spells it out: several Palestinian enclaves, each of them surrounded by the Israeli military and by settlers like himself. These Bantustans will be called "a Palestinian state". An ideal solution, indeed: the State of Israel will be cleansed of Arabs, but will continue to rule over all of the

West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Binyamin Netanyahu has a similar vision, but differently worded: the Arabs will "govern themselves". They will govern their towns and villages, but not the territory, neither the West Bank nor the Gaza Strip. They will have no army, of course, and no control of the airspace over their heads, neither will they have any physical contact with neighboring countries. Menachem Begin used to call this "autonomy".

But there will be "economic peace". The Palestinian economy will "flourish". Even Hillary Clinton ridiculed this idea publicly before meeting with Netanyahu.

Tzipi Livni wants "Two Nation-States". Yes' Ma'm. When? Well... First of all there have to be negotiations, unlimited in time. They did not come to fruition during the years she has been conducting them, nor have they got anywhere at all. Ehud Olmert speaks about the "Political Process" – why did he not bring it to a successful conclusion during the years of his stewardship? How long must the "Process" go on? Five years? Fifty? Five hundred?

So Hillary speaks about "Two States". Speaks with great vigor. Is ready to speak about it with any Israeli government that will be set up, even if inspired by the ideas of Meir Kahane. The main thing is that they talk with Mahmoud Abbas, and that Abbas in the meantime receives money, a lot of money.

An EXTREME right-wing government is about to be set up. Kadima has laudably decided not to join. On the other hand, Ehud Barak, the father of "We Have No Partner For Peace", is looking desperately for a way in.

And why not? He won't be the first political prostitute from his party.

In 1977, Moshe Dayan deserted the Labor Party in order to serve as Foreign Minister and fig-leaf for Menachem Begin, who forcibly prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state. In 2001, Shimon Peres got the Labor Party to join the government of Ariel Sharon, in order to serve as Foreign Minister and fig-leaf to the man whose very name made all the world shudder after the Sabra and Shatila massacre. So why should Ehud Barak not become a fig-leaf for a government that includes outright fascists?

Who knows, perhaps he will even represent us at the next conference in Ophira - sorry, Sharm-el-Sheikh – the one that will be convened after the next war, in which Gaza will be razed to the ground. After all, a lot of money will be needed to build it up again.