

# Ship of Fools 2

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THE EXPRESSION “Ship of Fools” was used by a Swiss theologian 515 years ago as the title of a book harshly criticizing the Catholic church of his day. Its licentiousness, he foresaw, would lead to disaster. And indeed, shortly afterwards a monk named Martin Luther split the church and set in motion the great Reformation.

I used this phrase in the 70s to define the era between the two wars – the Six-Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973, six years spent by Israel in a state of foolish euphoria. “We never had it so good”.

The present era deserves the title “Ship of Fools 2”.

THE DEFINING slogan of “Ship of Fools 1” was coined by Moshe Dayan, who served as first officer on its bridge, at the right hand of the captain, Golda Meir.

Dayan, then the idol of Israel and an international sex-symbol, declared: “If I have to choose between Sharm al-Sheikh without peace or peace without Sharm al-Sheikh, I choose Sharm al-Sheikh.”

In retrospect, that sounds like sheer madness. Who, today, remembers Ophira, as we called Sharm at the time? Only the Israelis who go there to idle on hammocks in the sun, pampered by the staff of Egyptian hotels. And, of course, the families of the soldiers who died on Yom Kippur.

“Ship of Fools 1” set sail for its fateful voyage on the morrow of the Six-day War, when the new Hebrew Empire extended from the summit of Mount Hermon to the shining sea of Ras Muhammad, south of Sharm. The astounding six-day victory of the Israeli army over three Arab armies, after weeks of nerve-wracking anxiety, looked like a miracle. A deluge of victory songs, victory albums and victory speeches flooded the country. The intoxication swept all sectors of the public, from the top leaders to the last (Jewish) citizen. It addled the brains, perverted logic and precluded any reasonable discussion.

The intoxication did not spare academic luminaries or army generals. Ariel Sharon declared that his troops could reach Tripoli, the Libyan capital, within a week. This seemed almost self-evident.

For those who were not here, or were too young to remember: In the country there was an atmosphere of supreme self-confidence, which led to complete carelessness. “Everything will be OK”. The economy was flourishing. The first settlements were taking root. There was no pressure on Israel to return the territories it had just conquered (“Liberated Territory Will Not Be Returned”). The Arab League met in Khartoum and did Israel an immense favor by declaring the Three No’s – No peace with Israel, No recognition of Israel, No negotiations with Israel. Plucky little Israel attracted the sympathy of the

world. It was good to be an Israeli then and to flash your Israeli passport at any border crossing.

This week, Aluf Ben of Haaretz drew our attention to a recording just released by the President Nixon Library. The president used to have all his conversations secretly taped, and much of this material has now been released. This includes a recording of his meeting with Golda Meir in the first half of 1973 – a few months before the Yom Kippur War.

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger revealed to Golda that the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, was ready to make peace with Israel in return for Sinai. Golda treated the proposal with disdain and told Nixon that the Egyptians had no chance against Israel — and therefore would not dare to attack.

(I found that particularly striking, because at the same time I told the Knesset that the Egyptians would start a war even if they had no chance of winning. I had reached this conclusion after meeting a number of important Egyptians, who thoroughly convinced me that Egypt just could not tolerate the status quo in which the Israeli occupation of a part of their land was frozen. They told me that Egypt was ready to pay a heavy price just to unfreeze the situation and to get things moving.)

Golda did not understand that. She was a tough but primitive woman, insensitive to the feelings of others, and did not dream of returning territory for peace. About the Palestinians she did not waste much thought (“There is no such thing as a Palestinian people!”) Moshe Dayan laid the foundations for an eternal occupation. In the middle of 1973 the two looked around them and could detect no cloud – not even the tiniest one – on the horizon.

Aluf Ben sees similarities between the Golda-Nixon meeting and the Netanyahu-Obama talks. I agree.

TODAY WE are in a very similar situation. Here we are sailing again on a Ship of Fools, jolly and light-hearted.

We never had it so good. Our economic situation is splendid. So is our security situation. So is our political situation.

The world-wide economic crisis has not touched us. In several areas, our exports are booming. Just now we were told that our commerce with India is about to expand hugely, and with China, too, we are doing nicely. The polls show that most Israelis are satisfied with their personal economic situation and expect an even rosier future. That’s far from what US and European citizens are feeling. A person whose economic situation is good does not crave change and does not make a revolution.

As far as security is concerned, our situation has never been better. The suicide attacks have ceased altogether. The Palestinian security services are cooperating to prevent attacks on us. The Northern border is almost quiet. The occasional incidents on the Gaza border are not worrisome. We are working hard to arouse the world against the dangers of an Iranian nuclear bomb, but Israelis are not really worried. They know that even if the Iranians got a bomb, they would not dare use it, because Israel can wipe all Iranian cities and their beautiful historical monuments from the face of the earth.

On the political level, the sky is the limit for our achievements. In several rounds we have thrown Barack Obama on the boards. The frantic scurrying around of Hillary Clinton and George Mitchel is simply pathetic. The settlement construction, which has not really stopped for a moment, is gathering even more momentum, with the help of thousands of Palestinian workers who have no other means of subsistence.

The Israeli government rules Washington DC more firmly than ever. The new Congress is even more loyal to Israel than the old one, if that is possible. Just now, the outgoing House unanimously passed a resolution objecting to the declaration of Palestinian statehood. After his resounding defeat in the mid-term elections, Obama must start to think about the presidential election in two years time. It's difficult to imagine that in these two years he would dare to provoke the mighty Israel lobby, which can now rely not only on the Jewish organizations and the millions of evangelical Christians, but also on the people of the Tea Party (many of whom are anti-Semites like Nixon, as revealed in the tapes: he despised the Jews and admired the Israelis.)

Obama can say what he wants: in a real test he will have to veto any Security Council resolution which is distasteful to the Israeli government. He will have no choice. And he will also supply Israel with all the airplanes it desires — and more.

THOSE WHO had illusions about Netanyahu — Israelis and others — seem to have sobered up by now. He does not want peace, nor a “peace process”, nor any movement at all towards peace.

For Netanyahu, peace is a four-letter word (as it indeed is in Hebrew). And not only because he has an extreme right-wing coalition, full of racists and ultra-nationalists, who are happy to play host to fascists from all over the world. And not only from fear of the settlers, whose political clout is growing by the day. But also because Netanyahu himself does not want to enter the history books as the man who gave up parts of the Jewish homeland and turned them over to the Arabs.

With all the differences, there are a lot of similarities between Netanyahu and Golda Meir. True, there is no second Moshe Dayan — Ehud Barak looks like a piece of wood compared to his one-eyed predecessor with his overflowing charisma. Avigdor Lieberman would be only too happy to fill the vacuum — if he could.

Everything is alright, nothing to worry about. This time, the euphoria is not producing a harvest of victory albums and songs of glory, but a deluge of racist laws that apartheid South Africa would have been jealous of, and declarations of rabbis who boast of conserving our “racial purity” (and we need not mention the place where that notion came from).

This euphoria leads to acts whose sole aim — so it seems — is to provoke and humiliate. An outstanding example: this week it became known that Israel is about to enlarge the “Seven Arches” hotel on the top of the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem — a hotel that belongs to the Jordanian royal family and was expropriated by the Custodian of Enemy Property. That is like the act of a child smashing a precious vase on the ground and shouting: “Ha-ha-ha, what can you do to me?”

“SHIP OF FOOLS 1” went down on Yom Kippur. 2600 young Israelis, the flower of a generation, drowned with it. The “incapable” Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal, and the glorious Bar-Lev Line, the pride of the Israeli army, collapsed. One can pinpoint the exact minute when the euphoria died: on live TV we saw dozens of red-eyed Israeli soldiers crouching on the ground, frightened and humiliated, with moustachioed Syrian soldiers glowering over them. End of the Israeli superman mystique.

“Ship of Fools 2” will also founder. We cannot foresee how. Will it be a war that will lay waste to our towns and villages? Will it be an Islamic revolution in the Arab countries? Will world politics change dramatically?

There is one important difference between Ship 1 and Ship 2: then the whole world loved us, now many around the world detest us. The manifesto of the 26 leading European elder statesmen, who demand that their successors change the European policy towards Israel, is a very bad omen. When the inevitable crisis arrives, world public opinion will no longer be on our side. It will be on the side of the Palestinians.

Somebody wrote this week that America's support of Israel is a case of “assisted suicide”. In Israel, assisting suicide is a crime. Suicide itself, however, is allowed by our laws.

Those whom the Gods want to destroy, they first make mad. Let's hope we recover our senses before it is too late.