

Uri Avnery
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Sir Winston Peres

First of all, I want to apologize to all the good women who are engaged in the world's oldest profession.

I recently described Shimon Peres as a political prostitute. One of my female readers has protested vigorously. Prostitutes, she pointed out, earn their money honestly. They deliver what they promise.

Our president, on the other hand, only tells the truth by accident. He is a political impostor and a political sham. To him, too, apply Winston Churchill's words about a former Prime Minister: "The Right Honorable gentleman sometimes stumbles upon the truth, but he always hurries on as if nothing has happened." Or the words of former minister Amnon Rubinstein about Ariel Sharon: "He blushes when he tells the truth."

Like a traveling salesman offering a counterfeit product, Peres is now peddling the merchandise called Binyamin Netanyahu. He presents to the world a Netanyahu we have never known: a peacemaker, the epitome of truthfulness, a man with no other ambition than to go down in history as the founder of the State of Palestine. A Righteous Jew to outshine all Righteous Gentiles.

HOWEVER, ALL these lies are nothing compared to trivializing the Holocaust.

In some countries, that is a criminal offense, punishable by prison. The trivializing has many guises. For example: the assertion that the gas chambers never existed. Or: that not six million Jews were killed, but only six hundred thousand. But the most dangerous form of minimizing is the comparison of the Holocaust to passing events, thus turning it into "a detail of history", as Jean-Marie Le-Pen infamously put it.

This week, Shimon Peres committed exactly this crime.

Like a lackey walking in front of the king, strewing flowers on the road, Peres flew to the US to prepare the ground for Netanyahu's coming visit. He imposed himself on a reluctant Barack Obama, who had no choice but to receive him.

Posing as a new Winston Churchill, the man who warned the world against the rise of Nazi Germany, he informed Obama with solemn bombast: "As Jews we cannot but compare Iran to Nazi Germany."

About this sentence at least three things must be said: (a) it is untrue, (b) it trivializes the Holocaust, and (c) it reflects a catastrophic policy.

DOES IRAN really resemble Nazi Germany?

I don't like the regime there. As a committed atheist who insists on total separation between state and religion, I oppose any regime based on religion – in Iran, in Israel or in any other country.

Also, I don't like politicians like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. I am allergic to leaders who stand on

balconies and declaim to the masses below. I detest demagogues who appeal to the base instincts of hatred and fear.

Alas, Ahmadinejad is not the only leader of this type. Indeed, the world is full of them, some are among the staunchest supporters of the Israeli government. In Israel, too, we do not lack this sort.

But Iran is not a fascist state. According to the evidence, there is quite a lot of freedom there, including freedom of expression. Ahmadinejad is not the only candidate for president in the present election campaign. There are a number of others, some more radical, some less.

Nor is Iran an anti-Semitic state. A Jewish community, whose members are refusing to emigrate, is living there comfortably enough. It enjoys religious freedom and has a representative in parliament. Even if we take such reports with a grain of salt, it is clear that the Jews in Iran are not being persecuted like the Jews in Nazi Germany.

And, most important: Iran is not an aggressive country. It has not attacked its neighbors for centuries. The long and bloody Iraq-Iran war was started by Saddam Hussein. It may be remembered that at the time Israel (contrary to the US) supported the Iranian side and supplied it with arms. (One such transaction was accidentally disclosed in the Irangate affair.) Before the Khomeini revolution, Iran was our most important ally in the region.

Ahmadinejad hates Israel. But it has been denied that he has threatened to annihilate Israel. It appears that the crucial sentence in his famous speech was mistranslated: he did not declare his determination to wipe Israel off the map, but expressed the opinion that Israel will disappear from the map.

Frankly, I don't think that there is such a great difference between the two versions. When the leader of a big country predicts that my state will disappear, that makes me worry. When that country appears to do everything possible to produce a nuclear bomb, that worries me even more. I draw conclusions, but about that later.

Moreover, Ahmadinejad – unlike Hitler – is not the supreme leader of his country. He is subject to the real leadership, composed of clerics. All the signs indicate that this is not a group of adventurers. On the contrary, they are very balanced, sophisticated and prudent. Now they are cautiously feeling their way towards dialogue with the US, trying to reach an accord without sacrificing their regional ambitions, which are quite normal.

In brief, the speeches of one demagogic leader do not turn a country into Nazi Germany. Iran is not a mad country. It has no real interests in Israel/Palestine. Its interests are focused on the Persian Gulf area, and it

wants to increase its influence throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Its relations with Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas mostly serve this purpose, and so does the anti-Israeli incitement of Ahmadinejad.

In brief, the comparison of Iran to Nazi Germany lacks a factual basis.

FROM THE Jewish point of view, the comparison is even more objectionable.

The Holocaust was a unique crime. True, the 20th century has seen other terrible acts of genocide, but they did not resemble the Shoa. In the Ottoman empire, a horrifying massacre of the Armenian citizens took place, which amounted to genocide. Hitler himself mentioned it, saying that the annihilation of the Jews would similarly be forgotten. Stalin killed millions of Soviet citizens in the name of a monstrous ideology, which had started as a humanist creed. So did Pot Pol, who killed millions in order to change society for the better. In Rwanda, members of one tribe slaughtered the members of another. And, alas, the list goes on.

But Nazi Germany was unique in employing the instruments of a modern industrial society in order to eliminate helpless minorities (let's not forget the Roma, those with disabilities and the homosexuals) in a prolonged, planned and highly organized process, with the participation of all the organs of the state. If the Nazi regime had not been overthrown by war, Hitler would have continued with the annihilation of many more millions of Poles, Ukrainians and Russians.

Nothing like that can reasonably be expected to happen in Iran. Neither the ideology, nor the composition of the regime nor any other indication leads in that direction. As far as its growing nuclear capabilities are concerned – the Israeli deterrent power will prevent any such thought from arising. (Let's not forget that the only country ever to use nuclear bombs in war was our friend, the USA.)

Nothing that is happening in the world today resembles the Shoa, in which six million Jews were wiped out. The Palestinians did not kill six million Israelis, and we did not kill six million Palestinians. Comparing the Arabs to the Nazis is no less odious than comparing the Israelis to the Nazis. Many terrible things have been and are being committed in our name – but they are as far from the deeds of the Nazis as the earth is from distant galaxies.

Any such comparison for the sake of some fleeting

propaganda advantage is trivializing the Holocaust and its perpetrators. If the Nazis were not worse than the Ayatollahs, then the Shoa was not so terrible, after all.

In all my contacts with Palestinian leaders, including Yasser Arafat, I have always advised them to avoid this upsetting comparison. This would also be good advice for our own leaders.

DOES THE comparison of Iran to Nazi Germany serve Israeli interests?

Iran is there. It was our ally in the past, and may be our ally again in the future. Leaders come and go, but geopolitical interests are more or less constant. Ahmadinejad may be replaced by a leader who will see Iranian interests in a different light.

The nuclear threat to Israel will not disappear – not after a (bad) speech by Peres nor after a (good) speech by Netanyahu. All over the region, nuclear installations will pop up. This process cannot be stopped. We all need nuclear energy to desalinate water and to produce electricity without destroying the environment. As an Israeli professor, a former employee in the nuclear center at Dimona, said this week: we must reconsider our nuclear policy. It may well be to our advantage to accept the demand of the American spokeswoman that Israel (as well as India and Pakistan) join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and a regime of strict supervision.

President Barack Obama is now saying to Israel: Put an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That is a precondition for the elimination of the threat to Israel. When the Palestinians, and the entire Arab world, make peace with Israel – Iran will not be able to exploit the conflict for the furthering of its interests. We were saying this, by the way, many years ago.

The refusal of Netanyahu-Lieberman-Barak to accept this demand shows the insincerity of their arguments about Iran. If they really believed that Iran posed an existential menace, they would hurry to dismantle the settlements, demolish the outposts and make peace. That would, after all, be a small price to pay for the elimination of an existential danger. Their refusal proves that the entire existential story is a bluff.

And concerning the comparison of Iran to Nazi Germany – it is as convincing as the comparison of Shimon Peres to Sir Winston.