

The Emperor's Old Clothes

EVERYBODY IS talking about the first 100 days of Barack Obama. And there's a lot to talk about.

Like a young bull he stormed into the arena. A deluge of new ideas in every direction, a tsunami of practical initiatives, some of which have already begun to be implemented. Clearly he had been thinking about them for a long time and intended to put them into practice from his first moment in office. He put his team together long ago, and his people started to act even before his triumphal entrance to the White House. During the first days he appointed the ministers, most of whom he had designated long before - this seems to be an effective cabinet, whose members are up to their tasks.

Everything according to a rule that was laid down long ago: what a new president does not initiate in his first 100 days, he will not accomplish later on. In the beginning everything is easier, because the public is ready for change.

An Israeli cannot, of course, resist comparing Obama to Binyamin Netanyahu, our old-new Prime Minister, who did not exactly storm into the arena. He crawled into it.

ONE COULD have expected that Netanyahu would trump even Obama in this respect.

After all, he has already been there. Ten years ago he was sitting in the Prime Minister's chair, gathering experience. And from experience – especially bad experience – one can and should learn.

Moreover, Netanyahu's victory was no great surprise. The only unexpected part of the election results was that his opponent, Tzipi Livni, won slightly more votes than he, but not enough to prevent him from attaining - together with his partners - a majority.

He had, therefore, a lot of time to prepare for his ascent to power, consult experts, perfect plans in every field, choose his team, think about the appointment of ministers from his own and allied parties.

Yet, incredibly, it appears that nothing, really nothing, of all this happened. No plans, no assistants, no team, no nothing.

To this very minute, Netanyahu has not succeeded in putting together his personal team – a fundamental precondition for any effective action. He does not have a chief of staff, a most important position. In his office, chaos reigns supreme.

The choice of ministers threw up one scandal after another. Not only did he put together a hideously bloated cabinet (39 ministers and deputy ministers, most of them flaunting fictitious titles) but almost all the important ministries are stuck with totally unsuited persons.

At a time of world-wide economic crisis he appointed to the Treasury a Minister who has no idea about economics, apparently thinking that he himself would manage the treasury – quite impossible for a

man who is responsible for the state as a whole. The Ministry of Health got an orthodox rabbi as Deputy Minister. In the middle of a world-wide epidemic, we have no Minister of Health, and according to law the Prime Minister has to exercise this function, too. In almost all the other ministries – from Transportation to Tourism – there are incumbents who know nothing about their fields of responsibility and don't even pretend to be interested in them – they are just waiting for an opportunity to move on to higher and better things.

No need to waste many words on the appointment of Avigdor Lieberman to the Foreign Ministry. This professional scandalmonger provokes a daily scandal in this most sensitive area of government. The bull in the china shop has already succeeded into turning all the diplomats into small bullocks, each of which is running about and smashing the dishes in his vicinity. At the moment, they are busy messing up Israel's relations with the EU.

All these appointments look like the desperate efforts of a cynical politician who does not care about anything other than returning to power, and then quickly putting together a cabinet, whatever its composition, paying any price to any party prepared to join him, sacrificing even the most vital interests of the state.

AS FAR as plans are concerned, Netanyahu does not resemble Obama either. He has come to power without any plans in any field. One gets the impression that he has spent his years in opposition with his head in hibernation

A week ago he presented a grandiose "economic plan" for saving our economy from the ravages of the world economic crisis. Economists raised their eyebrows. The "plan" consists of little more than a collection of tired old slogans and a tax on cigarettes. His embarrassed assistants stuttered that it was only a "general outline", not yet a plan, and that now they would start working on a real plan.

The public did not really worry about the lack of an economic plan. They have faith in improvisation, the wondrous Israeli talent that makes up for the inability to plan anything.

But in the political field, the situation is even worse. Because there the unpreparedness of Netanyahu meets the overpreparedness of Obama.

Obama has a plan for the restructuring of the Middle East, and one of its elements is an Israeli-Palestinian peace based on "Two States for Two Peoples". Netanyahu argues that he is not in a position to respond, because he has no plan of his own yet. After all, he is quite new in office. Now he is working on such a plan. Very soon, in a week, or a month, or a year, he will have a plan, a real plan, and he will present it to Obama.

Or course, Netanyahu has a plan. It consists of one word, which he learned from his mentor, Yitzhak Shamir: “NO”. Or, more precisely, NO NO NO - the three no’s of the Israeli Khartoum: No peace, No withdrawal, No negotiations. (It will be remembered that the 1967 Arab summit conference in Khartoum, right after the Six-day War, adopted a similar resolution.)

The “plan” which he is working on does not really concern the essence of this policy, but only the packaging. How to present to Obama something that will not sound like “no”, but rather like “yes, but”. Something that all the serfs of the Israeli lobby in Congress and the media can swallow painlessly.

AS A taster for the “plan”, Netanyahu has already presented one of its ingredients: the demand that the Palestinians and other Arabs must recognize Israel as “the State of the Jewish People”.

Most of the media in Israel and abroad have distorted this demand and reported that Netanyahu requires the recognition of Israel as a “Jewish State”. Either from ignorance or laziness, they obliterated the important difference between the two formulas.

This difference is immense. A “Jewish State” is one thing, a “State of the Jewish People” is something radically different.

A “Jewish State” can mean a state with a majority of citizens who define themselves as Jews and/or a state whose main language is Hebrew, whose main culture is Jewish, whose weekly rest day is Saturday, which serves only Kosher food in the Knesset cafeteria etc.

A “State of the Jewish People” is a completely different story. It means that the state belongs not only to its citizens, but to something that is called “the Jewish People” – something that exists both inside and outside of the country. That can have wide-ranging implications. For instance: the abrogation of the citizenship of non-Jews, as proposed by Lieberman. Or the conferring of Israeli citizenship on all the Jews in the world, whether they want it or not.

The first question that arises is: what does “the Jewish People” mean? The term “people” - “am” in Hebrew, Volk in German – has no accepted precise definition. Generally it is taken to mean a group of human beings who live in a specific territory and speak a specific language. The “Jewish People” is not like that.

Two hundred years ago it was clear that the Jews were a religious community dispersed throughout the world and united by religious beliefs and myths (including the belief in a common ancestry). The Zionists were determined to change this self-perception. “We are a people, one people”, Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, wrote in German, using the word Volk.

The idea of “the State of the Jewish People” is decidedly anti-Zionist. Herzl did not dream of a situation in which a Jewish State and a Jewish

Diaspora would coexist. According to his plan, all the Jews who wish to remain Jews would immigrate to their state. The Jews who prefer to live outside the state would stop being Jews and be absorbed into their host nations, finally becoming real Germans, Britons and Frenchmen. The vision of the “Visionary of the State” (as he is officially designated in Israel) was supposed, when put into practice, to bring about the disappearance of the Jewish Diaspora – the Jewish people outside the “Judenstaat”.

David Ben-Gurion was a partner to this vision. He stated that a Jew who does not immigrate to Israel is not a Zionist and should not enjoy any rights in Israel, except the right to immigrate there. He demanded the dismantling of the Zionist organization, seeing in it only the “scaffolding” for building the state. Once the state has been set up, he thought quite rightly, the scaffolding should be discarded.

NETANYAHU’S DEMAND that the Palestinians recognize Israel as “the State of the Jewish People” is ridiculous, even as a tactic for preventing peace.

A state recognizes a state, not its ideology or political regime. Nobody recognizes Saudi Arabia, the homeland of the Hajj, as “the State of the Muslim Umma” (the community of believers.)

Moreover, the demand puts the Jews all over the world in an impossible position. If the Palestinians have to recognize Israel as “the State of the Jewish People”, then all the governments in the world must do the same. The United States, for example. That means that the Jewish US citizens Rahm Emmanuel and David Axelrod, Obama’s closest advisors, are officially represented by the government of Israel. The same goes for the Jews in Russia, the UK and France.

Even if Mahmoud Abbas were persuaded to accept this demand – and thereby indirectly put in doubt the citizenship of a million and a half Arabs in Israel – I would oppose this strenuously. More than that, I would consider it an unfriendly act.

The character of the State of Israel must be decided by the citizens of Israel (who hold a wide range of opinions about this matter). Pending before the Israeli courts is an application by dozens of Israeli patriots, including myself, who demand that the state recognize the “Israeli nation”. We request the court to instruct the government to register us in the official Population Registration, under the heading “nation”, as Israelis. The government refuses adamantly and insists that our nation is Jewish.

I ask Mahmoud Abbas, Obama and everyone else who is not an Israeli citizen not to interfere in this domestic debate.

Netanyahu knows, of course, that nobody will take his demand seriously. It is quite obviously just another device to avoid serious peace negotiations. If he is compelled to drop it, it will not be long before he comes up with another.

To paraphrase Groucho Marx: “This is my pretext. If you don’t like it, well, I have a lot of others.”