

The Fearmongers

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ON THE ANNIVERSARY of David Ben-Gurion's death, the usual memorial meeting was held at his graveside in Sdeh Boker, the Negev desert village where he lived in his retirement. There is no cemetery, just his grave and that of his wife Paula.

The newspapers published a picture of Binyamin Netanyahu making a speech under a big photo of the late leader gazing thoughtfully into the distance.

One little detail in the picture caught my eye: Netanyahu was wearing a kippah.

Why? Ben-Gurion was a convinced atheist. He refused to wear a kippah even at funerals.¹

The place was not a synagogue, nor even a cemetery. So why for God's sake (sorry) did the man put this black kippah on his head?

For me that is a sign of what I call the re-Judaization of Israel.

ZIONISM WAS, among other things, a revolt against the Orthodox Jewish religion, that was associated with the Diaspora which Zionists contemptuously call Galut ("exile"). All the founding fathers of Zionism – Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Chaim Weizmann, Ze'ev Jabotinsky and the rest – were convinced atheists.

So why did Ben-Gurion give the religious parties two autonomous education systems, financed by the state?

Why did he release pupils of religious seminars ("yeshivot") from military service?

People of my age can remember the situation. Ben-Gurion, like all of us, believed that the Jewish religion was about to die out. Some old people, who spoke Yiddish, were still praying in the synagogues, but with time they would disappear. We, the young new Israelis, were secular, modern, free from these old superstitions.

Not in his darkest nightmares (or daymares) could Ben-Gurion have imagined a time when religious pupils, some of whom are not taught in their schools even the most basic modern skills, would amount to nearly half the Israeli Jewish school population. Or that the number of religious shirkers now deprives the army of several divisions.

Step by step, the religious community is taking over the state. The religious settlers, the religious anti-Arab pogromists, their allies and ultra-right collaborators are gaining new footholds by the day. Just now the army has announced that 40% of candidates for junior officers' courses are wearing kippahs. In 1948, when our army came into being, I did not see a single kippah-wearing soldier, not to mention an officer.

¹Though a complete atheist myself, I do sometimes wear a kippah at funerals, out of consideration for the feelings of others.

²Indeed, I would not be alive today if my father had not perceived the danger of the Nazi regime from the first day and organized our escape, while almost everybody around was scoffing at him.

³I confess that I coined this phrase many years ago as a joke. Alas, a joke no more.

But the danger of re-Judaization goes far beyond the political sphere.

LET ME take a metaphor from nature.

The premier necessity in nature is survival. There are many different strategies for survival, and nature embraces all of them – as long as they are successful.

The gazelle survives by running away. When in danger, it escapes. It is very successful in this. Fact: the gazelles have survived.

The lion survives by fighting. When in danger, it attacks. It relies on its teeth and claws. It is very successful in this. Fact: the lions have survived.

Jews have survived by fleeing. They were immensely successful in this. After thousands of years of the most atrocious persecutions, pogroms and holocausts, they are still there. Their dispersal over the world furthers this technique. At the slightest danger, they can escape from one country to another.

Jews have not built Taj Mahals or majestic cathedrals. Their treasures are holy texts, literature and music – things you can store in your head and take with you when you are on the run.

Like some animals in nature, Jews sense the slightest danger from far away. It's like a red light in their head – it goes on when nobody else yet perceives the menace.²

Zionism wanted to turn the gazelle into a lion. It said: no more running away. When in danger, we stand and we fight.

No more the cowardly Jew of the anti-Semitic caricature. From now on, the heroic Israeli, upright and proud.

And, as seems to be human nature, we overcompensate for the past. We have become aggressive, militaristic, even brutal. The oppressed have become oppressors. Jews used to say: "*If force does not work, try using your brain.*" Israelis say: "*If force does not work, try using more force.*"³

HOWEVER, LATELY it seems to me that the old Jew has not disappeared. He has only been hiding. Hiding inside the Israeli. He and his little red light are right there.

How did I find out? Just by listening to Binyamin Netanyahu, with or without his kippah.

Netanyahu has invented (or adopted) a peculiar style of ruling: governing by playing on people's fears.

Since coming back to power, he has been treating us to an endless series of fears. Fearmongering is the order of the day – every day.

At the beginning there was Barack Hussein Obama, who threatened to punish us for not giving up our sacred right to build settlements all over the country God himself promised us. Unfortunately, Obama capitulated right away, so another

menace was needed.

No problem. Mahmoud Abbas, yesterday's "plucked chicken", turned into a roaring tiger and applied to the United Nations to accept the State of Palestine as a member. As everybody knows, that was a mortal threat to Israel. It was only averted by Obama's (yes, the same Hussein Obama) promise to use his veto on behalf of Israel. But the Palestinians have nevertheless been accepted by UNESCO, so the terrible danger has not been banished.

Then came the Arab Spring. As Netanyahu realized from the first moment, even before our great and glorious friend Mubarak was sent to the glass cage, that presented a mortal threat. Now it has been eerily confirmed: Islam, deadly Islam, is taking over Egypt.

Islam, as Netanyahu tells us at every opportunity, is a murderous anti-Jewish creed. There are no moderate Islamists – they are all out to throw us into the sea. Even in our former ally Turkey.

And they are winning not only in Egypt. These terrible Islamists have already won in Morocco and Tunisia, and are going to win in Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Syria. Our "villa" will be surrounded not just by a jungle, but by a jungle full of deadly Islamist predators. How absolutely terrifying.

Then another frightful danger was exposed just in time: human rights associations are threatening the very existence of Israel. They are part of a world-wide anti-Semitic conspiracy. Fact: They are financed by foreign governments. A new law had to be enacted against them in a hurry. Fortunately, such laws were recently enacted in some former Soviet countries. So our Moldavian foreign Minister (or, rather, our foreign minister from Moldavia), Avigdor Lieberman, obtained the text from his great friend, Alexander Lukashenko, that model democrat from Belarus, and the other renowned democrat, Vladimir Putin.

All these mortal dangers were enough to wipe out the sudden surge of social protest, but they were nothing compared to that awful, overwhelming danger: The Iranian Bomb.

The Iranian Nuclear Bomb means a Second Holocaust, no less. Only the strong leadership of Binyamin Netanyahu can save us in the nick of time.

Faced with such petrifying danger, nobody asks the relevant question: why would any Iranian leader attack a country that has plenty of nuclear bombs of its own and the ability to devastate all of Iran in a "second strike"? The German government is providing us with the sixth of the submarines we have just for this purpose.

Yes, the Iranian leaders may be religious fanatics. But we have plenty of those, too, and some are members of our government coalition. At the moment the country is in an uproar because the rabbis demand that religious soldiers may leave any military ceremony where female soldiers are allowed to sing. "A woman's voice is her sexual part," a holy text asserts. And a prominent rabbi has just announced that a religious soldier should rather face a firing squad than listen to a woman singing.⁴

But Iran is dominating our public discourse. All the red lights are blinking like mad. The Jew inside us is mortally afraid. The gazelle says: Run. The lion says: Attack.

THE BIBLE tells us: "Happy is the man that feareth alway!" (Proverbs 28:14). But constant fear is a bad adviser when conducting your affairs, the more so when directing the policies of a state. But it may be good politics when you want to keep your own people in check while chipping away at democracy, equality and human rights.

So let's release the ghetto Jew inside us and send him on his way. Let's overcome our fear of fear itself. And, while we are at it, let's kick the fearmongers out.

⁴I am not making this up.