

The Genie is out of the Bottle

Uri Avnery

February 19, 2011

THIS IS a story right out of “1001 Nights”. The genie escaped from the bottle, and no power on earth can put it back.

When it happened in Tunisia, it could have been said: OK, an Arab country, but a minor one. It was always a bit more progressive than the others. Just an isolated incident.

And then it happened in Egypt. A pivotal country. The heart of the Arab world. The spiritual center of Sunni Islam. But it could have been said: Egypt is a special case. The land of the Pharaohs. Thousands of years of history before the Arabs even got there.

But now it has spread all over the Arab world. To Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen. Jordan, Libya, even Morocco. And to non-Arab, non-Sunni Iran, too.

The genie of revolution, of renewal, of rejuvenation, is now haunting all the regimes in the Region. The inhabitants of the “Villa in the Jungle” are liable to wake up one morning and discover that the jungle is gone, that we are surrounded by a new landscape.

WHEN OUR Zionist fathers decided to set up a safe haven in Palestine, they had the choice between two options:

They could appear in West Asia as European conquerors, who see themselves as a bridgehead of the “white” man and as masters of the “natives”, like the Spanish conquistadores and the Anglo-Saxon colonialists in America. That is what the crusaders did in their time.

The second way was to see themselves as an Asian people returning to their homeland, the heirs to the political and cultural traditions of the Semitic world, ready to take part, with the other peoples of the region, in the war of liberation from European exploitation.

I wrote these words 64 years ago, in a brochure that appeared just two months before the outbreak of the 1948 war.

I stand by these words today.

These days I have a growing feeling that we are once again standing at a historic crossroads. The direction we choose in the coming days will determine the destiny of the State of Israel for years to come, perhaps irreversibly. If we choose the wrong road, we will have “weeping for generations”, as the Hebrew saying goes.

And perhaps the greatest danger is that we make no choice at all, that we are not even aware of the need to make a decision, that we just continue on the road that has brought us to where we are today. That we are occupied with trivialities – the battle between the Minister of Defense and the departing Chief of Staff, the struggle between Netanyahu and Lieberman about the appointment of an ambassador, the non-events of “Big Brother” and similar TV inanities – that we do not even notice that history is passing us by, leaving us behind.

WHEN OUR politicians and pundits found enough time – amid all the daily distractions – to deal with the events around

us, it was in the old and (sadly) familiar way.

Even in the few halfway intelligent talk shows, there was much hilarity about the idea that “Arabs” could establish democracies. Learned professors and media commentators “proved” that such a thing just could not happen – Islam was “by nature” anti-democratic and backward, Arab societies lacked the Protestant Christian ethic necessary for democracy, or the capitalist foundations for a sound middle class, etc. At best, one kind of despotism would be replaced by another.

The most common conclusion was that democratic elections would inevitably lead to the victory of “Islamist” fanatics, who would set up brutal Taliban-style theocracies, or worse.

Part of this, of course, is deliberate propaganda, designed to convince the naïve Americans and Europeans that they must shore up the Mubaraks of the region or alternative military strongmen. But most of it was quite sincere: most Israelis really believe that the Arabs, left to their own devices, will set up murderous “Islamist” regimes, whose main aim would be to wipe Israel off the map.

Ordinary Israelis know next to nothing about Islam and the Arab world. As a (left-wing) Israeli general answered 65 years ago, when asked how he viewed the Arab world: “though the sights of my rifle.” Everything is reduced to “security”, and insecurity prevents, of course, any serious reflection.

THIS ATTITUDE goes back to the beginnings of the Zionist movement.

Its founder – Theodor Herzl – famously wrote in his historic treatise that the future Jewish State would constitute “a part of the wall of civilization” against Asiatic (meaning Arab) barbarism. Herzl admired Cecil Rhodes, the standard-bearer of British imperialism. He and his followers shared the cultural attitude then common in Europe, which Eduard Said latter labeled “Orientalism”.

Viewed in retrospect, that was perhaps natural, considering that the Zionist movement was born in Europe towards the end of the imperialist era, and that it was planning to create a Jewish homeland in a country in which another people – an Arab people – was living.

The tragedy is that this attitude has not changed in 120 years, and that it is stronger today than ever. Those of us who propose a different course – and there have always been some – remain voices in the wilderness.

This is evident these days in the Israeli attitude to the events shaking the Arab world and beyond. Among ordinary Israelis, there was quite a lot of spontaneous sympathy for the Egyptians confronting their tormentors in Tahrir Square - but everything was viewed from the outside, from afar, as if it were happening on the moon.

The only practical question raised was: will the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty hold? Or do we need to raise new army

divisions for a possible war with Egypt? When almost all “security experts” assured us that the treaty was safe, people lost interest in the whole matter.

BUT THE treaty – actually an armistice between regimes and armies – should only be of secondary concern for us. The most important question is: how will the new Arab world look? Will the transition to democracy be relatively smooth and peaceful, or not? Will it happen at all, and will it mean that a more radical Islamic region emerges - which is a distinct possibility? Can we have any influence on the course of events?

Of course, none of today’s Arab movements is eager for an Israeli embrace. It would be a bear hug. Israel is viewed today by practically all Arabs as a colonialist, anti-Arab state that oppresses the Palestinians and is out to dispossess as many Arabs as possible – though there is, I believe, also a lot of silent admiration for Israel’s technological and other achievements.

But when entire peoples rise up and revolution upsets all entrenched attitudes, there is the possibility of changing old ideas. If Israeli political and intellectual leaders were to stand up today and openly declare their solidarity with the Arab masses in their struggle for freedom, justice and dignity, they could plant a seed that would bear fruit in coming years.

Of course, such statements must really come from the heart. As a superficial political ploy, they would be rightly despised. They must be accompanied by a profound change in our attitude towards the Palestinian people. That’s why peace with the Palestinians now, at once, is a vital necessity for Israel.

Our future is not with Europe or America. Our future is in this region, to which our state belongs, for better or for worse. It’s not just our policies that must change, but our basic outlook, our geographical orientation. We must understand that we are not a bridgehead from somewhere distant, but a part of a region that is now – at long last – joining the human march towards freedom.

The Arab Awakening is not a matter of months or a few years. It may well be a prolonged struggle, with many failures and defeats, but the genie will not return to the bottle. The images of the 18 days in Tahrir Square will be kept alive in the hearts of an entire new generation from Marakksh to Mosul, and any new dictatorship that emerges here or there will not be able to erase them.

In my fondest dreams I could not imagine a wiser and more attractive course for us Israelis, than to join this march in body and spirit.