

The March of Folly

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MY LATE FRIEND, Nathan Yellin-Mor, the political leader of the LEHI underground, once told me that a certain politician is “not a great thinker and not a small fool.”

I remember that sentence every time I think about Gilad Erdan, our Minister of Public Security. His part in the events of the last few weeks, in which the entire Middle East almost exploded, confirmed this judgment.

On the other hand, Binyamin Netanyahu reminds me of the saying: “A clever person is one who knows how to extricate himself from a trap which a wise person would not have gotten into in the first place.”

About Netanyahu I would have said: “A very clever but not a very wise person.”

THERE ARE two ways to look at historic disasters. The one sees them as plots of evil persons, the other as acts of folly.

It is easy to understand the first school. After all, it cannot be possible that our very lives depend on a bunch of fools, who have no idea about anything.

For example, it is easy to believe that Binyamin Netanyahu sent a secret order to a security guard at the Israeli embassy in Amman to kill two Jordanians, so as to enable him (Netanyahu) to negotiate with the King of Jordan to release the guy in return for the removal of the metal detectors from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Pure genius.

The other version is much more prosaic. It says that the people who determine the lot of nations and countries—emperors and kings, statesmen and generals, leftists and rightists—are almost all perfect fools. A frightening idea. But it was always so, and still is. All over the world, and particularly in Israel.

One of my friends said this week: “There is no need to put cameras on the Temple Mount, as is now suggested. We should put the cameras in the cabinet room, because that is the source of the greatest danger to the future of Israel.”

BARBARA TUCHMAN, the American-Jewish historian, originated the phrase “the March of Folly”. She researched several historic disasters and showed that they were caused by sheer stupidity.

One example: Word War I, with its millions of victims,

¹The Druze are a separate semi-Muslim sect.

which was the result of a sequence of incredibly imbecilic acts.

A Serbian fanatic killed an Austrian archduke, whom he accosted by accident, after the planned attempt on his life had failed. The Austrian emperor saw an opportunity to show his prowess and delivered an ultimatum to little Serbia. The Russian Czar mobilized his army to defend his Slavic brothers. The German general staff had a contingency plan that provided that once the Russians started to mobilized their cumbersome army, the German army would cross into France and smash it before the Russians were ready to fight. The British declared war in order to help the French.

Not one of these actors wanted a war, least of all a world war. Each of them contributed just a little piece of folly. Together they started a war which left millions of dead, wounded and disabled. In the end, they all agreed that the only person to blame was the German Kaiser, who was not a little fool either.

THE SAME historian would have been delighted to write about the latest incidents on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Three Palestinian fanatics, citizens of Israel, killed three Border Guard “fighters” there, who happened to be Druze.¹

Somebody, probably within the police, hit on the brilliant idea of installing metal-detectors to prevent such atrocities.

Three minutes' thought would have sufficed to understand that this was a foolish idea. On a good day, hundreds of thousands of Muslims enter the Temple Mount, in order to pray in and near the al-Aqsa mosque, one of the three most holy places of Islam (after Mecca and Medina). Getting them to pass the detectors would have been like passing an elephant through the eye of a needle.

It would have been easy to phone the Waqf (Muslim trust) officials, who are in charge of the Mount. These would have quashed the idea, because it would have asserted Israeli sovereignty over the holy place. They could also have phoned the king of Jordan, who is formally in charge of the Waqf, who would have put an end to the nonsense.

But the idea reached Erdan, who grasped immediately that such an act would turn him into a hero. Erdan is 46 years old and was educated in a religious seminary. In the army, he did not serve in a combat unit, but in an office. The typical career of a right-wing politician.

Erdan behaved like a child playing with fire near a gasoline container. The metal detectors were put in place without informing the waqf or the king. At the last moment he informed Netanyahu, who was about to go abroad.

Netanyahu has many expensive hobbies, but his most cherished pleasure is to go abroad and meet with the world's great, in order to prove that he is one of them. He was about to meet with the new president of France and after that four leaders of Eastern Europe, all of them half-democrats and quarter-fascists.

Netanyahu was not in the mood to deal with the nonsense of Erdan, one of his dwarfs, when he was about to meet with the world's giants. Without quite understanding what he was doing, he agreed to the detectors.

It is not clear when the General Security Service (Shabak) was asked. But this body, which is deeply connected with the Arab reality, warned against it. So did army intelligence. But who are they compared to Erdan and his police commissioner, a kippah-wearing commander, who is no genius either.

THE MOMENT the detectors were put in place, events exploded. In the eyes of the Muslims, it looked like an Israeli attempt to change the status quo and become masters of the Temple Mount. The gasoline container caught fire.

The folly of the decision became clear at once. Jehovah and Allah entered the scene. The Muslim worshippers would not pass through the detectors. The multitudes started to pray in the streets.

The severity of the matter soon became evident. The Muslims, both Israeli citizens and subjects in the occupied territories, who a moment before were just a faceless mass, were suddenly revealed as a determined people, ready for a fight. That was a real achievement of Erdan's. Bravo.

The detectors did not discover any weapons, but they revealed the dimensions of the government's foolishness. Mass demonstrations took place in Jerusalem, in the Arab townships in Israel, in the occupied territories and in the neighboring countries. On the first weekend, seven persons were killed, hundreds were wounded.

The new idol was called "sovereignty". The Israeli authorities could not remove the detectors without "giving up sovereignty" (and also "giving in to the terrorists"). The waqf could not give in without sacrificing "sovereignty" over the third holy place of Islam. By the way, not a single government in the world recognizes Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem.

The Muslims are afraid that if the Jews take over the Temple Mount, they will destroy the Dome of the Rock

(the beautiful blue and gold-capped structure) and the al-Aqsa mosque, and build the Third Temple in their place. That may sound crazy, but there already exist in Israel fringe groups that are training priests and producing implements for the temple.

According to Barbara Tuchman, leaders can be accused of folly only if at least one wise person had warned them. In our case, such a person was Moshe Dayan, who, immediately after the conquest of the Mount in 1967, ordered the Israeli flag to be removed and forbade the soldiers to enter.

NOBODY KNEW how to get out of the impasse.

Netanyahu did not interrupt his successful tour abroad in order to hurry home and take things into his own hands. Why would he? If he hurried home every time one of his minions committed a foolish act, how could he and Sara'le, his wife, enjoy the world?

And then a divine miracle happened. God Himself entered the fray.

A Jordanian handyman was working in the apartment of an Israeli security guard in the Israeli embassy in Amman. Suddenly he attacked the guard with a screwdriver and slightly wounded him. The guard drew his revolver and shot him dead. For good measure, he also shot and killed the owner of the apartment, a Jordanian physician.

It is not clear whether the incident happened because of a quarrel over money or whether the handyman suddenly decided to become a "shahid" (martyr). Neither is it clear why the guard shot him dead, instead of shooting him in the leg or using the unarmed combat techniques in which he was trained.

The former Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, not a small terrorist himself, once pronounced that no (Arab) terrorist should be allowed to leave the scene of a terror act alive. And indeed, since then hardly one has left alive, whether a girl with scissors or a man swinging a screwdriver. Even a seriously wounded attacker, lying on the ground and bleeding severely, was shot in the head. (The shooter was released from detention this week.)

Anyhow, for Netanyahu and Erdan the Amman incident was a gift from heaven. The Jordanian king agreed to release the security guard without investigation, in return for the removal of the metal detectors in Jerusalem. With a sigh of relief that could be heard throughout the country, Netanyahu agreed. No Israeli could refuse to remove the detectors in return for the saving of one of our gallant boys. It was not a giving up of "sovereignty", it was the saving of a Jew—an old Jewish commandment.

All the members of the embassy staff were returned to Israel—about an hour's drive—and Netanyahu feted their "salvation"—though nobody had threatened them.

IN THE meanwhile another thing happened.

Netanyahu does not fear God or the Arabs. He fears

Naftali Bennett.

Bennett is the leader of the "Jewish Home" party, the successor of the National-Religious party, once the most moderate party in the country. Now they are the most extreme right-wing party. It is a small faction, with only eight Knesset members (out of 120), but that is enough to break up the coalition and bring the government down. Netanyahu is mortally afraid of them.

When the fury over the detectors was at its peak, a young Arab entered Halamish settlement and killed three members of a settler family. He was wounded and captured, miraculously left alive and hospitalized.

Just a few hours later, Bennett and his female Minister of Justice demanded that the assailant be executed. There is no death penalty in Israel, but for some reason this penalty was not stricken from the codex of military courts. So Bennett and his beautiful Justice Minister demanded its use.

In all the history of the State of Israel, only two people have ever been executed by legal process. One was Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Holocaust. The other was an engineer convicted of espionage (wrongly, it later appeared) in the first weeks of the state.

The demand for the death penalty is incredibly stupid. Every Muslim "terrorist" dreams of becoming a "shahid"—one who sacrifices his life for Allah and reaches paradise. His execution would fulfill his dream. And nothing arouses national and international emotion more than an execution.

There is something sick about enthusiasts of the death penalty and the public that supports them. If their demand were accepted—no chance—this would constitute a great victory for the Muslim fanatics. Fortunately, all the Israeli security services object strenuously to the demand.

But in an establishment dominated by folly, even this folly attracts some attention and support.