

The Nobleman and the Horse

“HALF AND HALF,” the late Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, is said to have answered, when asked whether he wanted tea or coffee.

This joke was intended to parody his hesitation on the eve of the Six-day War. (Though secret documents published this week show Eshkol in a very different light.)

The American public now resembles the man in the joke. They sent to Washington a large group of Tea Party types, but the coffee drinkers in the White house are still in control.

The Israeli leadership did not know how to treat the results of this election. Are they good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?

THE BIG winner of the American election is none other than Binyamin Netanyahu.

His policy is similar to that of his political mentor, Yitzhak Shamir. It is based on the Jew who had to teach the Polish nobleman's horse to read and to write within a year – otherwise the whole shtetel would be massacred. “A year is a long time,” he tried to soothe his weeping wife, “Within a year the horse or the nobleman will be dead.”

Shamir's game was to postpone everything, miss every opportunity to bring peace closer, gain time.

When the pressure on Israel gets stronger, one has to evade, obstruct, cheat. Sooner or later the nobleman or the horse will die – and with some luck, both of them. The situation will change, the pressure will lessen, those who exert the pressure will disappear. A crisis somewhere else in the world will take people's minds off us. We shall win another year or two, and then we shall see.

This is Netanyahu's strategy, too. To prevent any advance towards peace, since peace means the evacuation of settlements and the setting up of a Palestinian state.

For two years now he has succeeded in thwarting every effort by Barack Obama to compel him to start a real peace process. He has defeated him at every turn, time after time. Now Obama has suffered a stinging setback at home, and a new chapter has begun.

But the nobleman has not died, and neither has the horse. How will Obama treat Netanyahu now?

In Jerusalem, there are two contradictory answers to this question.

The first assessment is that there is nothing to fear anymore from Obama. True, the horse has not died, but it is limping badly.

A big question mark is now hanging over Obama's future. He is in danger of becoming a one-term president. From now on, he will be compelled to devote all his time and energy to his effort to get reelected. In such a situation, he cannot afford to

provoke AIPAC and run the risk of losing the votes – and the money – of the Jews.

According to this assessment, when the House of Representatives is in the hands of his opponents, Obama must be very careful. In domestic matters, which decide elections, he will not be able to achieve anything without a compromise with the reinvigorated Republicans. These are led by politicians who are abject lackeys of Israel.

In short: there is nothing to fear anymore. Obama can make gestures towards the Palestinians and even flex his muscles, but in any real test with Netanyahu and AIPAC he will be the first to blink.

That assures Netanyahu two years of quiet. Everything will remain frozen, except the settlements. They will grow. And in two years, with a new President in the White House, we shall see what we shall see. A new nobleman, a new horse.

THE CONTRARY assessment is much less rosy for Netanyahu.

No doubt, Obama is full of fury against Netanyahu, and this fury may by now have turned into real loathing. In the last days before this election, Netanyahu refused Obama the little victory that could have improved his image at the last moment. Obama asked – nay, begged – for nothing more than a freeze of the settlements for another two months, just to make it possible to stage a grand spectacle of the resumption of the ceremony of the Peace Process. Netanyahu turned down the request disdainfully, even though it was accompanied by the offer of a huge political bribe.

Obama is a man who does not show negative emotions. He will continue to smile at Netanyahu, perhaps even to slap him on the back. But an enemy in the White house is a dangerous enemy, and a wounded enemy is even more dangerous. Wounded or not, an American president is still the most powerful person in the world.

True, the coming presidential election is already casting a long shadow over Washington. But the beginning of the serious election campaign is still a year off, and this year may be an opportunity for a determined American peace initiative. The President may want to show his voters an impressive achievement in the international arena, and a historic peace agreement between Israel and Palestine would certainly constitute such an achievement.

And even if this does not come about, a more serious danger for Netanyahu may be lurking after November 2012. Obama may be reelected. Some of his predecessors – Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton – suffered stinging setbacks in their first mid-term elections and still had no problem getting reelected.

If Obama is elected for a second term, he may

become a very dangerous adversary indeed. Since he will not be allowed to stand again, he will be immune to the pressure of the Israel lobby. He will be thinking about his place in history. And undoubtedly, making peace between Israel and Palestine would be a historic achievement.

Moreover, the Tea Party may disappear as quickly as it appeared. This happens in the US every few decades: a wave of madness sweeps over the country like a tsunami and disappears as if it had never been. Remember Joe McCarthy. If the wave continues until 2012, and Obama then faces somebody like Sarah Palin, he could ask for nothing better.

As to the Congress: as far as Israel is concerned, there is no change. The senators and congressmen dance to the tune of the Israel lobby, and in this respect there is no difference between Democrats and Republicans. It "crosses party lines", as one of the leaders of the lobby recently boasted.

In short, according to this assessment the clash between Obama and Netanyahu is inevitable. It will come to a head within two or three years, maximum. The nobleman will not die, nor will the horse. The question is whether the Jew will survive.

THIS PERSONAL clash hides a far deeper, far more fundamental one.

There is a lot of blabber about the partnership of the two countries. About the joint myths of pioneers, fight against the natives, conquest of a new homeland, a nation of immigrants. About "joint values".

It all reminds me of Shimon Peres' blabbering in the 1950s about the "joint values" that bound France to Israel. The joint values evaporated the moment France made peace with the Algerian rebels. The French stance changed overnight. As Charles de Gaulle said: "France has no friends, France has only interests."

The United States of America, too, has interests, and their friendships, too, are temporary. Both in the State Department and in the Pentagon, the experts know that the present Israeli policy is contrary to the American national interest. This knowledge finds expression in a growing number of books by former

senior officials and academics, as well as in the speeches of high-ranking military officers. Lately, it also underlay an extremely unusual editorial in the New York Times, after the editors visited this country. And this in a paper anti-Semites call the Jew York Times!

The US is involved in two expensive wars in Muslim countries - Iraq and Afghanistan - and in a severe crisis with a third Muslim country - Iran. All over the "extended Middle East", its allies are declining, while its opponents are in the ascendancy.

The opponents are a mixed lot: Iran is a religious Shiite country, Turkey is a Sunni secular republic (with a moderately religious party in power), Syria is a Sunni country ruled by the small Alawite sect, whose Islamic credentials are doubted by both Sunnis and Shiites. Hezbollah is fanatically Shiite, Hamas is fanatically Sunni. There is not much all these have in common, except their opposition to the status quo in the region.

Almost all the experts believe that the unlimited American support for Israel is the main cause for the Islamic anti-American wave. Most of them do not speak about this openly, because fear of the Israeli lobby pervades the entire American political establishment. But even the most terrifying lobby cannot withstand, in the long run, the inexorable logic of national interests.

THERE IS something crazy in this situation: our government is rushing light-heartedly towards a clash with the only remaining ally we have in the world. No realistic alternative can be detected on the horizon.

This is, by itself, an ominous fact, because the American Empire is in a slow but continuing decline in all areas - economic, political, military and cultural. This is a protracted process that will take many years, but Israel should be positioning itself to accommodate the rise of new centers of power. The Netanyahu government is doing the exact opposite: it is challenging the entire world and acting consistently to isolate Israel.

Unlike the story about the Jew, the nobleman and the horse - this is not a joke.