

# The President Elect

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**T**HE FIRST SHOCK has passed. President-Elect Donald Trump. I am gradually getting used to the sound of these words.

We are entering an era of complete uncertainty. We Israelis and the entire world. From shoe-shine boy to head of state.

Nobody knows.

**BUT FIRST** we must say goodbye to Barack Obama.

Frankly, I like the guy. There is something noble about him. Upright. Honest. Idealistic.

When the cameras showed him this week sitting together with Donald Trump, the contrast could not have been greater. Obama is the anti-Trump. Trump is the anti-Obama.

And yet....

Yet in all the eight long years of his presidency, President Obama has done nothing, nothing at all, for peace in our region.

In these eight years, the Israeli ultra-right has flourished. Settlements in the occupied territories have multiplied and grown larger. After every new settlement expansion, the State Department has dutifully condemned it. And then given Binyamin Netanyahu another few billions. And the latest gift was the biggest ever.

When he came into office, Obama made some very beautiful speeches in Cairo and Jerusalem. Many exquisite words. And they were just that: mere words.

Some people believe that now, when Obama is free of all obligations, he will use his last two months in power to atone for his sins and do something meaningful for Israeli-Palestinian peace. I doubt it.<sup>1</sup>

Have we heard the last of the Obama family? I am not sure. Somehow I have the idea that after four or eight years we will see another Obama running for president: Michelle Obama, the wildly and rightly popular first lady, who has all the qualities needed: She is black. She is a woman. She is highly intelligent. She has a sterling character. (Unless in the New America, these are all negative qualities.)

**THERE WAS** some comfort in the election results. Hillary Clinton got more votes than Donald Trump. She lost in the electoral college.

To a foreigner, this institution looks as obsolete as a dinosaur. It may have had its uses when the United States of America (in the plural) were really a federation of diverse and different local entities.

These days are long past. We now used the term “United States” in the singular. The US does. The US thinks. The US votes.

What is the profound difference between a voter in Arizona and a voter in Montana? Why should the vote of a citizen in Oregon weight more than the vote of a citizen in New York or California?

The electoral college is undemocratic. It should have been done away with a long time ago. But political institutions die slowly, if at all. Somebody always profits from them. This time it is Trump.

A **SIMILAR** antiquated system is the appointing of Supreme Court judges.

The Supreme Court has immense power, cutting deep into the private life of every US citizen. Enough to mention abortions and same-sex marriages. It also influences international relations and much more.

Yet the power to appoint new judges rests solely in the hands of the president. A new president changes the composition of the court, and lo and behold, the entire legal and political situation changes.

In Israel, the very opposite prevails. Years ago, new judges were practically appointed by the old judges, “a friend brings a friend”, as popular humor had it.

Later this system was changed a bit—Supreme Court judges are now chosen by a committee of nine, three of which are sitting judges, two others are politicians from the Knesset (one each from the government coalition and from the opposition), two are government ministers and two represent the bar association.

Five of the members of the committee must be women. One of the judges on the committee is an Arab, appointed by seniority.

But the decisive point of the law is that any appointment must be made by a majority of seven members—seven of nine. This means in practice that the three sitting judges on the committee have a veto power on any ap-

<sup>1</sup>Years ago, at some European congress, I accused the Spanish Diplomat Miguel Moratinos of doing nothing for Israeli-Palestinian peace. In his aggressive reply, he accused me of sheer impertinence. Why should anyone do anything for the Israeli peace forces, if these forces themselves do nothing to achieve peace?

pointment. So have the politicians. A judge can only be appointed by compromise.

Until now, this system has worked very well. No complaints have been registered. But the new Minister of Justice, a rabid ultra-nationalist woman, wants to change the system: no more majority of seven, but a simple majority of five. This would give decisive power to the right-wing politicians and abolish the power of the three judges to block political appointments.

This proposal has aroused very strong opposition, and the debate is still going on.

HOW TO describe the incoming president, less than two weeks after his election?

The first word that springs to mind is: erratic.

We saw this during the election campaign. He would say two contradictory things in the same breath. Say something and deny it. Flatter one section of the voters and then their enemies.

OK, OK some people would say. So what. A candidate will say anything to get elected.

True, but this particular candidate overdid it. He presented a very nasty personality, devoid of civility, propagating hatred of blacks, Hispanics, and gays, denigrating women, not rejecting outright anti-Semites and neo-Nazis.

But it worked, right? It got him where he wanted to be, didn't it? It does not compel him to go on in the same vein, now that he has reached his goal. So, forget it.

Some people are now dreaming of a completely new Trump, a person who abandons all his old slogans and declaration and turns out to be a sensible politician, using his proven talent for deal-making in order to achieve the things necessary to make America great again.

As a candidate he did the things necessary to get elected. Once in office he will do the things necessary to govern.

Other people pour cold water on these hopes. Trump is Trump, they say. He will be as nasty a president as he was a nasty candidate. A far-right hate-monger. His every step will be dictated by his ugly world of ideas. Look, his first major appointment was of a rabid anti-Semite as his closest advisor.

WELL, I don't know. Nobody does. I tend to believe that he himself does not either.

I think that we are in for four years of uncertainty. Faced with a problem he knows nothing about, he will act according to his mood of the moment. He will take advice from nobody, and nobody will know in advance what will be his decision. I feel fairly certain about this.

Some of his decisions may be very good. Some may be very bad. Some intelligent. Some idiotic.

As I said: erratic.

The world will have to live with this. It will be highly risky. It may turn out right. It may also lead to catastrophe.

PEOPLE HAVE compared Trump to Adolf Hitler. But the comparison is quite erroneous.

Apart from their German-Austrian descent, they have nothing in common. Hitler was no billionaire. He was a real man from the people—an unemployed nobody, who lived for some time in a public shelter.

Hitler did have a Weltanschauung, a fixed world-view. He was a fanatic. When he came to power, people deceived themselves into believing that he would soon give up his demagogic, rabble-rousing ideas. He did not. Until the day of his suicide, Hitler did not change his ideology one iota. Tens of millions of victims, including the millions of Jews, testify to that.

Trump is no Hitler. He is no Mussolini. Nor even a Franco. He is a Trump.

And that may be bad enough. May be.

So do up your safety belt and hold on tight for the roller-coaster ride.