

The Rape of Washington

RETURNING HOME from a very short visit to London, I found the country in the grip of uncontrollable emotions.

No, it was not about the looming danger of the radical right gaining control. It is now almost certain that the next government will consist of an assorted bunch of settlers, explicit racists and perhaps even outright fascists. But that does not evoke any excitement.

Nor was there much excitement about yet another interrogation of the (still) incumbent Prime Minister in his various corruption affairs. That is hardly news anymore.

All the excitement was about a "press conference" given by the former President of Israel, Moshe Katsav, after the Attorney General announced that he might be indicted for rape.

Katsav, it may be remembered by those who remember such things, was accused by several of his female staff of persistent sexual harassment and at least one case of rape. He had to resign.

An Iranian-born immigrant and a protégé of Menachem Begin, Katsav had made a career based on a kind of affirmative action. Begin believed that, for the sake of integration, promising young immigrants from Oriental countries should be promoted to positions of responsibility. Katsav, a rather nondescript right-wing politician with all the customary right-wing opinions, became Minister of Tourism and then was elected by the Knesset to the ceremonial post of President, mainly to spite the rival candidate, Shimon Peres. Wags said that the Knesset was reluctant to spoil Peres' (then) unbroken record of lost elections.

Since his abdication two years ago, the Katsav affair has dragged on and on, almost to the point of farce. Revelations were leaked by the police, several women disclosed lurid details, the ex-President made a plea agreement admitting to lesser offences, he then revoked the deal, the Attorney General procrastinated and now he seems to have made up his mind about the indictment.

So Katsav called a press-conference in his remote hometown, Kiryat Malakhi (the former Arab village of Qastina, now within reach of the Qassams). It was an unprecedented performance. The ex-President spoke solo for nearly three hours, airing his grievances against the police, the Attorney-General, the media, the politicians and almost everybody else. All this was, incredibly, broadcast live on all three of Israel's TV channels, as if it had been a State of the Union address. Katsav rambled on and on, repeating himself again and again. No questions were allowed. Respected journalists, hungry for scoops, were evicted if they dared to interrupt.

So when I came back yesterday morning, I found this feat dominating the front pages of all our newspapers. Everything else was banished to the back pages.

BECAUSE OF this, Charles Freeman got hardly a mention. Yet his affair was a thousand-fold more important than all

the sexual activities of our ex-President.

Freeman was called by Barack Obama's newly-appointed Chief of National Intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair, to the post of Chairman of the National Intelligence Council. In this position, he would have been in charge of the National Intelligence Estimates (NIE), summarizing the reports of all the 16 US intelligence agencies, which employ some 100,000 people at an annual cost of 50 billion dollars, and composing the estimates that are put before the President.

In Israel, this is the job of the Directorate of Military Intelligence, and the officer in charge has a huge influence on government policy. In October 1973, the then intelligence chief disregarded all reports to the contrary and informed the government that there was only a "low probability" of an Egyptian attack. A few days later the Egyptian army crossed the canal.

Throughout the 1990's, the man in charge of intelligence estimates, Amos Gilad, deliberately misled the government into believing that Yasser Arafat was deceiving them and was actually plotting the destruction of Israel. Gilad was later openly accused by his subordinates of suppressing their expert reports and submitting estimates of his own, which were not based on any intelligence whatsoever. Later, as the guru of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Gilad coined the phrase "We have no Palestinian partner for peace".

In the US, the intelligence chiefs famously supplied President George W. Bush with the (false) intelligence he needed to justify his invasion of Iraq.

All this shows how vitally important it is to have an estimates chief of intellectual integrity and wide experience and knowledge. Admiral Blair could not have chosen a better person than Charles Freeman, a man of sterling character and uncontested expertise, especially about China and the Arab world.

And that was his undoing.

AS A former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Freeman is an expert on the Arab world and the Israeli-Arab conflict. He has strong opinions about American policy in the Middle East, and makes no secret of them. In a 2005 speech, he criticized Israel's "high-handed and self-defeating policies" originating in the "occupation and settlement of Arab lands," which he described as "inherently violent." In a 2007 speech he said that the US had "embraced Israel's enemies as our own" and that Arabs had "responded by equating Americans with Israelis as their enemies." Charging the US with backing Israel's "efforts to pacify its captive and increasingly ghettoized Arab populations" and to "seize ever more Arab land for its colonists," he added that "Israel no longer even pretends to seek peace with the Palestinians." Another conclusion is his belief that the terrorism the United States confronts is due largely to "the brutal oppression of the Palestinians by an Israeli occupation that has lasted over 40 years and shows no signs of ending." Naturally, the appointment of such a

person was viewed with great alarm by the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. They decided on an all-out attack. No subtle behind-the-scenes intervention, no discreet protestations, but a full-scale demonstration of their might right at the beginning of the Obama era. Public denunciations were composed, senators and congressmen pressed into action, media people mobilized. Freeman's integrity was called into question, shady connections with Arab and Chinese financial interests "disclosed" by the docile press. Admiral Blair came to his appointee's defense, but in vain. Freeman had no choice but to withdraw.

THE FULL meaning of this episode should not escape anyone. It was the first test of strength of the lobby in the new Obama era. And in this test, the lobby came out with flying (blue-and-white) colors. The administration was publicly humiliated. The White House did not even try to hide its abject surrender. It declared that the appointment had not been cleared with the President, that Obama had no hand in it and did not even know about it. Meaning: of course he would have objected to the appointment of any official who was not fully acceptable to the lobby. The portrayal of the power of the lobby by Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, has been fully vindicated.

THIS HAS a significance which goes far beyond the already far-reaching implications of the affair itself. Many people in Israel, who view the establishment of the new rightist government with apprehension, cite as their main fear the danger of a clash with the new Obama administration. Such a clash, they believe, could be fatal for Israel's security. But the rightists deride such arguments. They assert that no American president would ever dare to confront the Israeli lobby. The captive congressmen and senators, as well as the supporters of the Israeli government in the media and even in the White House itself, would sink on sight any American policy opposed by even the most extreme right-wing government in Israel. Now the first skirmish has taken place, and the

President of the United States has blinked first. Perhaps one should not rush to conclusions, perhaps Obama needs more time to find his bearings, but the signs are ominous for any Israeli interested in peace. It may be too early to call this episode the Rape of Washington, but it is certainly vastly more important than Katsav's sexual escapades.

BY THE WAY, or not by the way, a word about my trip to London. I went there to lend support to a group of Jewish personalities, well-known in academic and other circles, who have set up an organization called "Independent Jewish Voices". Recently they published a book called "A Time To Speak Out", in which several of them contributed to the debate about Israel, human rights and Jewish ethics. The views expressed are very close to those current in the Israeli peace camp. But when they offered their book for presentation in the Jewish Book Week, they were rudely rejected. In protest, they convened an event of their own, and that's where I spoke. I believe that it is of utmost importance that such Jewish voices be heard. In several countries, including the US, groups of brave Jews are trying to stand up to the Jewish establishment that unconditionally supports the Israeli Right. In the US, several such groups have sprung up, some quite recently. One of them, called "J Street", is trying to compete with the formidable and notorious AIPAC. It is important for governments and peoples to know that the unconditional support for the Israeli Right does not represent the majority of Jews in the US, the UK and other countries. The Jewish public is far from monolithic. The majority is liberal and believes in peace and human rights. Until now this was a silent majority, out of fear of a repressive establishment. It is indeed "a time to speak out". I believe that it is in the interest of Israel to support these groups – and that their activities are somewhat more important than Mr. Katsav's exploits.