

## When He Says Yes – What Does He Mean?

"YOU MUST be celebrating," the interviewer from a popular radio station told me after Netanyahu's speech. "After all, he is accepting the plan which you proposed 42 years ago!" (Actually it was 60 years ago, but who is counting?)

The front page of Haaretz carried an article by Gideon Levy, in which he wrote that "the courageous call of Uri Avnery and his friends four decades ago is now being echoed, though feebly, from end to end (of the Israeli political spectrum)."

I would be lying if I denied feeling a brief glow of satisfaction, but it faded quickly. This was no "historic" speech, not even a "great" speech. It was a clever speech.

It contained some sanctimonious verbiage to appease Barack Obama, followed right away by the opposite, to pacify the Israeli extreme right. Not much more.

NETANYAHU DECLARED that "our hand is extended for peace."

In my ears, that rang a bell: in the 1956 Sinai war, a member of my editorial staff was attached to the brigade that conquered Sharm-al-Sheikh. Since he had grown up in Egypt, he interviewed the senior captured Egyptian officer, a colonel. "Every time David Ben-Gurion announced that his hand was stretched out for peace," the Egyptian told him, "we were put on high alert."

And indeed, that was Ben-Gurion's method. Before every provocation he would declare that "our hands are extended for peace", adding conditions that he knew were totally unacceptable to the other side. Thus an ideal situation (for him) was created: The world saw Israel as a peace-loving country, while the Arabs looked like serial peace-killers. Our secret weapon is the Arab refusal, it used to be joked in Jerusalem at the time.

This week, Netanyahu wheeled out the same old trick.

I DO NOT underrate, of course, the significance of the chief of the Likud uttering the two words: "Palestinian state".

Words carry political weight. Once released into the world, they have a life of their own. Unlike dogs, they cannot be called back.

In a popular Israeli love song, the boy asks the girl: "When you say no, what do you mean?" One could well ask: When Netanyahu says yes, what does he mean?

But even if the words "Palestinian state" passed his lips only under duress, and when Netanyahu has no intention at all of turning them into reality, it is still important that the head of the government and the chief of the Likud was compelled to utter them. The idea of the Palestinian state has now become a part of the national consensus, and only a handful of ultra-rightists reject it directly. But this is only the beginning. The main struggle will be about turning the idea into reality.

THE ENTIRE speech was addressed to one single person: Barack Obama. It was not designed to appeal to the Palestinians. It was quite clear that the Palestinians are only the passive object of a discussion between the President of the USA and the Prime Minister of Israel. Except in some tired old clichés, Netanyahu spoke about them, not to them.

He is ready, so he says, to conduct negotiations with the "Palestinian community", and that, of course, "without preconditions". Meaning: without Palestinian preconditions. On Netanyahu's part, there are plenty of preconditions, every one of which is designed to make certain that no Palestinian, no Arab and indeed no Muslim will agree to enter negotiations.

Condition 1: The Arabs have to recognize Israel as "the nation-state of the Jewish people" (and not just "a Jewish state", as many in the media erroneously reported.) As Hosny Mubarak has already answered: No Arab will accept this, because it would mean that 1.5 million Arab citizens of Israel are cut off from the state, and because it would deny in advance the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees - the main bargaining chip of the Arab side.

It should be remembered that when the United Nations resolved in 1947 to partition Palestine between a "Jewish state" and an "Arab state", they did not mean to define the character of the states. They were just stating facts: there are two mutually hostile populations in the country, and therefore the country has to be divided between them. (Anyhow, 40% of the population of the "Jewish" state was to consist of Arabs.)

Condition 2: The Palestinian Authority must first of all establish its rule over the Gaza Strip. How? After all, the Israeli government prevents travel between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and no Palestinian force can pass from one to the other. And the solution of the problem by establishing a Palestinian unity government is also ruled out: Netanyahu flatly

declared that there would be no negotiations with a Palestinian leadership that includes "terrorists who want to annihilate us" – his way of referring to Hamas.

Condition 3: The Palestinian state will be demilitarized. This is not a new idea. All peace plans that have been put forward up to now speak about security arrangements that would protect Israel from Palestinian attacks and Palestine from Israeli attacks. But that is not what Netanyahu has in mind: he did not speak about mutuality, but about domination. Israel would control the air space and the border crossings of the Palestinian state, turning it into a kind of giant Gaza Strip. Also, Netanyahu's style was deliberately overbearing and humiliating: he obviously hopes that the word 'demilitarized' would be enough to get the Palestinians to say "no".

Condition 4: Undivided Jerusalem will remain under Israeli rule. This was not proposed as an opening gambit for negotiations but presented as a final decision. That by itself ensures that no Palestinian, nor any Arab or even any Muslim, could accept the proposal.

In the Oslo Agreement, Israel undertook to negotiate about the future of Jerusalem. It is an accepted legal rule that if one undertakes to negotiate, one accepts to do so bona fide, on the basis of give and take. Therefore, all peace plans provide that East Jerusalem - wholly or partly - will be returned to Arab rule.

Condition 5: Between Israel and the Palestinian state there will be "defensible borders". These are code-words for extensive annexations by Israel. Their meaning: no return to the 1967 borders, not even with a swap of territory that would allow for some of the large settlements to be joined to Israel. In order to create "defensible borders", a major part of the occupied Palestinian territories (which altogether make up just 22% of pre-1948 Palestine) will be absorbed into Israel.

Condition 6: The refugee problem will be solved "outside the territory of Israel". Meaning: not a single refugee will be allowed to return. True, all realistic people agree that there can be no return of millions of refugees. According to the Arab peace initiative, the solution must be "mutually agreed" – which means that Israel has to agree to any solution. The assumption is that the two parties will agree on the return of a symbolic number. This is a highly charged and sensitive matter, which must be treated with prudence and the utmost sensitivity. Netanyahu does the opposite: his provocative statement, devoid of all empathy, is clearly designed to bring about an automatic refusal.

Condition 7: No settlement freeze. The "normal life" of the settlers will continue. Meaning: the building

activity for the "natural increase" will go on. This illustrates the saying of Michael Tarazy, a legal advisor to the PLO: "We are negotiating about sharing a pizza, and in the meantime Israel is eating it."

All this was in the speech. No less interesting is what was not in it. For example, the words: Road Map. Annapolis. Palestine. The Arab peace plan. Occupation. Palestinian Sovereignty. Opening of the Gaza Strip border crossings. Golan Heights. And, even more important: there was not a hint of respect for the enemy who must be turned into a friend, in the words of the ancient Jewish saying.

SO WHAT is more important? The verbal recognition of "a Palestinian state" or the conditions which empty these words of all content?

The public response is interesting. In an opinion poll taken immediately after the speech, 71% supported it, but 55% believed that Netanyahu just "gave in to American pressure", and 70% did not believe that a Palestinian state would really come about during the next few years.

What exactly do the 71% support? The "Palestinian state" solution or the conditions which obstruct its implementation – or both?

There is, of course, an extreme right-wing minority which prefers a head-on collision with the United States to giving up any territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Along the road to Jerusalem one can see large posters showing a manipulated photo of Obama wearing an Arab headdress. (It sends a shiver down the spine, because it reminds us of seeing exactly the same poster with Yitzhak Rabin under the keffiyeh.) But the great majority of the people understand that a break with the US must be avoided at all costs.

Netanyahu and the right-wing hoped that the Palestinians would reject his words outright, thus painting themselves as serial peace refusers, while the Israeli government would be seen as taking the first small but significant step towards peace. They are sure that this could be achieved for nothing: the Palestinian state will not be set up, the Israeli government will not give up anything, the occupation will remain, settlement activity will go on and Obama will accept all this.

SO THE main question is: how will Obama react?

The first reaction was minor. A politely positive response.

Obama is not seeking a frontal collision with the Israeli government. It seems that he wants to exert "soft" pressure, vigorously but quietly. To my mind, that is a wise approach.

A few hours before the speech, I met with ex-President Jimmy Carter. The meeting took place at the American Colony hotel in East Jerusalem. It was organized by Gush Shalom, with several other Israeli peace organizations taking part. In my opening remarks, I pointed out that we were in exactly the same room where 16 years ago, while the Oslo agreement was being signed in Washington, Israeli peace activists and the leaders of the Palestinian population in Jerusalem met and opened bottles of champagne. The euphoria of those moments has disappeared without leaving a trace.

Israelis and Palestinians have lost hope. On both sides, the overwhelming majority wants an end to the conflict but do not believe that peace is possible – and each side blames the other. Our task is to rekindle the belief that it is indeed possible.

For this there is a need for a dramatic event, a kind of invigorating electric shock – like the historic visit of Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem in 1977. I suggested that Obama should come to Jerusalem and speak directly to the Israeli public, perhaps even from the Knesset rostrum, like Sadat.

After listening intently to the participants, the former President encouraged us in our activities and put forward some proposals of his own.

THE DECISIVE point at this moment is, of course, the

matter of the settlements. Will Obama insist on a total freeze of all building activity or not?

Netanyahu hopes to wriggle out of it. He has now found a new gimmick: projects that have already started must be allowed to be finished. One cannot stop them in the middle. The plans have already been approved. The tenants are waiting for their apartments, and they must not be made to suffer. The Supreme Court will not allow a freeze. (A particularly ridiculous argument, like the court allowing a thief to spend some more of the money he has stolen before passing sentence.)

If Obama falls for this, he should not be surprised to find out belatedly that these projects include 100,000 new housing units.

This brings us to the most important fact of this week: the settlers did not raise hell after Netanyahu's speech. On the contrary. Here and there some feeble criticism could be heard, but the large and armed settler population kept remarkably quiet.

Which brings us back to the unforgettable Sherlock Holmes, who explained how he solved one of his mysteries by drawing attention to "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"But the dog did nothing in the night-time!" someone objected.

"That was the curious incident," remarked Holmes.