

Who's Laughing?

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“A DISASTER!” the courtiers of the King of Hanover cried, “Seven renowned professors at Göttingen University have published a declaration of protest against you!”

That was 173 years ago. The king had suspended the liberal constitution enacted by his predecessor.

“So what,” the king replied, “Tarts, dancers and professors I can always buy.”

This story was told me by Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who was himself a professor of half a dozen vastly different disciplines, from bio-chemistry to the philosophy of science. He held many of his colleagues in profound contempt.

He told me this story when we were talking about one professor in particular: Shlomo Avineri, who had just agreed to serve as Director General of the Foreign Office under Minister Yigal Alon. Alon was the author of the “Alon Plan”, which provided for the annexation of wide stretches of occupied territory.

THIS WEEK, Avineri published an article under the headline “Fascism? You make me laugh!”

What made him laugh? The ridiculous (for him) argument that there exist fascist tendencies in Israel. He reminded us that fascism means the Gestapo, concentration camps and genocide. How could we forget.

Avineri is a respected professor, an expert on Hegel and Zionism. He is also a valiant warrior against “post-Zionists” and other miscreants who criticize classical Zionism.

I guess that if in 1923 somebody had told his father in the Polish town of Bielsko that in the Bavarian town of Munich an oddball with a funny little moustache was telling people about his plan to become the dictator of Germany and invade Poland, he, too, would have exclaimed: “You make me laugh!”

In those days in Germany many little “völkisch” groups were springing up with similar demands: to annul the citizenship of Jews, to drive the Jews out of their neighborhoods and to introduce oaths of allegiance to the Reich as the nation-state of the German people (including the Austrians, of course.)

At the time, these groups were laughed at. How could anyone imagine that a civilized country, the nation of Goethe, Schiller and Kant – and, indeed, Hegel – would hoist these crazies into power?

Over the next few years, many of those who had laughed found themselves in concentration camps, where they had ample time to meditate and tell themselves: if we had acted to stop the fascists in time, instead of laughing, this would not have happened.

ON THE day Avineri was struggling not to laugh, another un-funny item was published.

It reported that a delegation of “Senior Peace Now Members”, led by Director-General Yariv Oppenheimer, had met with Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon.

The occurrence of this meeting gives rise to some questions. Even more so does its aim.

Danny Ayalon captured the attention of the world when he summoned the Turkish ambassador and sat him on a low sofa, while loudly explaining to the Israeli reporters present that his intention was to humiliate Turkey.

It is difficult to probe the depth of foolishness of this infantile deed and of the man who did it. The public humiliation of a proud nation, which holds a key position in our region, set off to a long chain of events: Turkish public opinion turned against Israel, a Turkish ship sailed for Gaza and its violent interception caused a world-wide storm, Turkey is realigning itself with Iran and Syria – and the story is not over yet. True, Ayalon did not cause all this by himself, but he definitely deserves his share of the glory.

So how did it enter the minds of these “Senior Peace Now Members” to meet this man of all people, and thus bestow legitimacy on him?

And not only on him. It could be argued that Ayalon is exposed as the village idiot, so that no amount of legitimacy would stick to him. But behind Ayalon there looms the man who appointed him: the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman.

Lieberman is an international symbol of racism, a settler and defender of settlers, the principal assistant in Binyamin Netanyahu’s efforts to obstruct peace and eternalize the occupation. At this very moment he is providing Netanyahu with the pretext to object to the freeze of the settlements and torpedo the peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

Dozens of foreign ministers refuse to meet with Lieberman. No Arab leader agrees to shake his hand. Egyptians loathe him, for Palestinians he is the symbol of evil. He cannot show his face in respectable international society.

So, for heaven’s sake, what caused the “Senior Peace Now Members” to legitimize this person?

THE TOPIC of the meeting is even more amazing. As reported, the Peace Now people proposed “cooperation” with the Foreign Office. It would be good for you, they told their host, to distribute Peace Now material around the world, in order to show that Israel is not only a state of occupation and settlements, but also of peaceniks. That

would improve the image of the state and help the Foreign Office to silence the critics.

In other words: the “Senior Peace Now Members” are prepared to serve as fig leaves for Netanyahu’s government and for Lieberman’s Foreign Office. They offer them an alibi.

The Peace Now movement enjoys a very positive reputation all over the world. People remember them for the giant protest demonstration after the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The impression is widespread that it is the sole peace movement in Israel. The world media treat it graciously, while practically ignoring all other Israeli peace forces.

This is what makes this meeting so dangerous. Many across the world will tell themselves: if Peace Now meets with Lieberman’s people and offers them cooperation, they can’t be so bad.

Thus, Peace Now is serving Lieberman as Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak are serving Netanyahu. And as Shlomo Avineri, in his time, served Yigal Alon. The King of Hanover knew what he was talking about.

HOW DID Peace Now reach this point?

I am not against the movement. On the contrary, I appreciate very much its struggle against the settlements. True, they did not join the boycott of the products of the settlements which we started 12 years ago, but they are monitoring the construction activities in the settlements and bringing them to the attention of the world. This is an important and very laudable action.

The trouble is that the movement, which could once call hundreds of thousands onto the streets, finds it hard nowadays to mobilize even a few hundred.

This can be attributed to the general collapse of the Israeli peace movement since 2000, when Ehud Barak declared that “We Have No Partner For Peace”. But the case of Peace Now merits special analysis.

The movement came into being in 1978, when it seemed that Menachem Begin was dragging his feet and was not responding positively enough to Anwar Sadat’s historic peace initiative. Begin, a lawyer by profession and character, haggled over every little detail, and there was a danger that the unique opportunity would be missed. The demonstrations of the young Peace Now helped to push Begin in the right direction.

The zenith of Peace Now’s success was the “demonstration of the 400 thousand” after the Sabra and Shatila massacre in the First Lebanon War. Even though the number is exaggerated, it was a huge demonstration, unique in its way, which expressed a real uprising of Israel public opinion.

But this success had a price. On the eve of the war, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, the leaders of the Labor Party, went to see Begin and urged him to start the war. And here, lo and behold, these two appeared as the main speakers at the Peace Now protest. It was a deal: Peace Now gave the two a kosher certificate, and the Labor Party brought the (then) masses of its adherents to the square.

It reminded me of the deal made by Faust with Mephistopheles: in return for worldly success, he sold his soul.

THE STRATEGY of Peace Now was not altogether without logic.

This was explained by Tzali Reshef, who was the real leader of the movement for several decades. In 1992, when Rabin deported 415 Islamic activists to the Lebanon border, a public debate on the proper response took place in Tel Aviv. I proposed setting up protest tents opposite the Prime Minister’s office and staying there until the deportees were allowed to return. Reshef rejected this, saying frankly: “Peace Now is addressing a large public and we must not do anything that would push them away from us. Avnery can afford to say all the right things, we don’t have this luxury.”

We indulged in this luxury, put up the tents and stayed there day and night in subzero temperatures. (It was in those very tents that Gush Shalom was born.) Throughout the years, Peace Now gradually adopted our positions, but always after a delay of months or years. Thus, they belatedly adopted the two-state solution, the need to talk with the PLO, the principle of two capitals in Jerusalem, etc.

This strategy would have been legitimate and even justified – had it proved effective. But in real life, the opposite happened: the masses left Peace Now, and the movement is now, like all of us, engaged in a desperate rearguard battle against the rising Rightist tide.

And unlike Professor Avineri – I feel no inclination to laugh.