

Woe to the Victor

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“VAE VICTIS!” WAS THE ROMAN CRY. Woe to the vanquished.

I would alter it slightly: “Vae Victori”, Woe to the victor!

The outstanding example is the astounding victory Israel won in June, 1967. After weeks of approaching doom, the Israeli army beat three Arab armies in six days and conquered huge stretches of Egyptian, Syrian and Palestinian territory.

As it turned out, this was the greatest disaster in our history. Intoxicated by the very size of the victory, Israel started down a road of political megalomania, which led to the dire consequences from which we are unable to free ourselves to this very day. History is full of such examples.

Now we have witnessed the totally unexpected election success of Ya'ir Lapid. It may turn out to be the same story in miniature.

LAPID WON 19 seats. His is the second largest faction in the 120-seat Knesset, after Likud-Beitenu, which has 31 seats. The composition of the House is such that it is almost impossible for Binyamin Netanyahu to form a coalition without him.

The former TV star is in the position of a child in a candy store, who can take whatever he desires. He can pick and choose any government post he fancies for himself and his minions. He can impose on the Prime Minister almost any policy.

That's where his troubles start.

Put yourself in his place, and see what that must mean. FIRST OF ALL, what job should you choose?

As the major partner in the coalition, you have the right to choose one of the three major ministries: defense, foreign affairs or treasury.

Seems easy? Well, think again.

You can take defense. But you have no defense experience whatsoever. You have not even served in a combat unit, since your father got you a job on the army's weekly paper (a lousy paper, by the way).

As defense minister, you would in practice be the superior of the Chief of Staff, almost a Commander in Chief.¹

So defense is not for you.

YOU CAN take foreign affairs. It's really the ideal job for you.

Since you want to become Prime Minister next time, you need public exposure, and the Foreign Minister gets plenty of that. You will appear in photos alongside President Obama, Angela Merkel, Vladimir Putin and a host of other world celebrities. The public will get used to seeing you in this distinguished international circle. Your telegenic good looks will enhance this advantage. Israelis will take pride in you.

Moreover, this is the only job in which you cannot fail. Since foreign policy is largely determined and conducted by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister is not blamed for anything, unless he is a perfect fool—and you certainly are not that.

After four years, everybody will be convinced that you are prime ministerial material.

Even better: you can dictate the immediate opening of peace talks with the Palestinians. Netanyahu is in no position to refuse, particularly as Barak Obama will demand the same. The opening ceremony of the negotiations will be a triumph for you. Actual progress will be neither demanded nor expected.

SO WHY not take it?

Because you see a big warning sign.

The 543,289 citizens who voted for you did not vote for a foreign minister. They voted for making the Orthodox serve in the army, providing affordable housing, getting food prices down, lowering taxes on the Middle Class. They don't give a damn about foreign relations, the occupation, peace and such trivia.

If you evade these domestic problems and go to the foreign office, a deafening cry will be taken up: Traitor! Deserter! Cheat!

Half of your followers will leave you at once. For them, your name will be mud.

Moreover, in order to follow a peace agenda, even pro forma, you must discard the idea of having Naftali Bennett's ultra-rightist party in the coalition, and take in the Orthodox parties instead. If so, how to compel the Orthodox to serve in the army, akin to feeding them pork?

¹Under Israeli law, the entire government is the Commander in Chief, but the Minister of Defense represents the government vis-à-vis the armed services.

THE LOGICAL conclusion: you must choose the treasury.

God forbid!!!

I would not wish this fate on the worst of my enemies, and I feel no enmity towards the son of Tommy Lapid.

The next Finance Minister will be compelled to do exactly the opposite of Ya'ir's election promises.

His first task concerns the state budget for 2013, already overdue. According to official figures, there is a hole of 39 billion Shekels, something like 10 billion dollars. Where will they come from?

The real alternatives are few, and all are painful. There must be heavy new taxes, especially on the glorified Middle Class and the poor. Lapid, a neo-liberal like Netanyahu, will not tax the rich.

Then there will be sweeping cuts in government services, such as education, health and the welfare state. At the moment, hospitals are working at 140% capacity, endangering the lives of patients. Many schools are falling apart. Lower pensions will spell misery for the old, the disabled and the unemployed. Everybody will curse the Finance Minister. Is this how you want to launch your political career?

There is, of course, the huge military budget, but dare you touch it? When the Iranian nuclear bomb is dangling above our heads (at least in our imagination)? When Netanyahu is promoting his latest scare—the Syrian chemical weapons, which may fall into the hands of radical Islamists?

You can, of course, reduce the pensions of army officers who retire—as is the custom in Israel—at the age of 45. Dare you?

You could drastically slash the immense sums invested in the settlements. Are you that kind of a hero?

As if this were not enough, the high echelon of economic officials is in disarray. The much respected Governor of the Bank of Israel, Stanley Fischer, an import from the US, has just resigned in mid-term. The highest officials in the budget department are at each other's throats.

You would be very brave or very foolish (or both) to accept the post.

YOU COULD, of course, be satisfied with something less elevated.

Education, for example. True, the education ministry is considered a second-grade ministerial job, though it has many thousand employees and the second largest budget, after defense. But there is one big drawback: any success would take years to show.

The outgoing minister, Gideon Sa'ar, a Likud member (and a former employee of mine) has a knack for attracting public attention. At least once a week he had a new project, which attracted lavish publicity on TV. But serious achievements were rare.

From my late wife's experience as a teacher I know that the frequent "reforms" ordered by the ministry hardly ever reach the classrooms. Anyhow, to achieve anything real you would need enormous new sums of money, and where would you get them from?

And will a second-grade ministry satisfy your ego after such a glorious election triumph? You could, of course, enlarge the ministry and demand the return of Culture and Sport, which were split off in order to create a job for another minister. Since one of your basic election promises was to reduce the number of ministers from 30 to 18, that may be possible.

But will your voters be satisfied with your concentrating on education, instead of working for the economic reforms you promised?

ALL THESE unenviable dilemmas boil down to a basic one: who do you prefer as your main coalition partner?

The first choice is between Bennett's 12 seats and the 11 of Shas (which, if they were combined with the Torah Jewry faction, would become 18).

Lapid prefers Bennett, his far right mirror image, with whom he hopes to enforce his "service equality" program—canceling the exemption of thousands of Torah students from military service. But Sarah Netanyahu, who rules the Prime Minister's office, has put a veto on Bennett. Nobody knows why, but she clearly hates his guts.

With Bennett as a coalition member, any real move towards peace would, of course, be unthinkable.

With the religious, on the other hand, movement towards peace would be possible, but no real progress towards getting the Orthodox to serve in the army. The rabbis are afraid that if they mix with ordinary Israelis, especially females ones, their souls will be lost forever.²

THESE ARE some of the questions facing poor Lapid because of the scale of his electoral success. His voters expect the impossible.

He has to make his decisions right now, and his whole future depends on making the right ones—if there are any right ones.

As George Bernard Shaw put it: *"There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it."*

²As for me, I am ready to join a movement Against Service Equality. The last thing we need is a kippah-wearing army. We have quite enough kippahs in the army as it is.