

Words, Words, Words

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IMAGINE A WAR breaking out between Israel and Jordan. Within two or three days the Israeli army occupies the entire territory of the Hashemite Kingdom. What will be the first act of the occupation authority?

Establish a settlement in Petra? Expropriate land near Aqaba?

No. The very first thing will be to decree that the territory will henceforth be known as “Gilead and Moab”.

All the media will be ordered to use the biblical name. All government and court documents will adopt it. Except for the radical Left, nobody will mention Jordan anymore. All applications by the inhabitants will be addressed to the Military Government of Gilead and Moab.

WHY? BECAUSE annexation starts with words.

Words convey ideas. Words implant concepts in the minds of their hearers and speakers. Once they are firmly established, everything else follows.

The writers of the Bible already knew this. They taught “DEATH AND LIFE ARE IN THE POWER OF THE TONGUE, AND THEY THAT LOVE IT SHALL EAT THE FRUIT THEREOF.” (Proverbs 18:21). For how many years now have we been eating the fruit of “Judea and Samaria”?

When Vladimir Putin last week restored the old name of “New Russia” to the territory of East Ukraine, it was not just a semantic change. It was a claim for annexation, more powerful than a salvo of cannon shots.

RECENTLY I listened to a speech by a left-wing politician, and was disturbed when she spoke at length about her struggle for a “political settlement” with the Palestinians.

When I remonstrated with her, she apologized. It was a slip of the tongue. She had not meant it that way.

In Israeli politics, the word “peace” has become poison. “Political settlement” is the vogue term. It is meant to say the same. But of course, it doesn’t.

“Peace” means much more than the formal end of warfare. It contains elements of reconciliation, of something spiritual. In Hebrew and Arabic, Shalom/Salaam include wellbeing, safety and serve as greetings. “Political settlement” means nothing but a document formulated by lawyers and signed by politicians.

The “Peace of Westphalia” put an end to 30 years of war and changed the life of Europe. One may wonder whether a “Political settlement of Westphalia” would have

had the same effect.

The Bible enjoins us: “SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT!” (Psalms, 34:14) It does not say “Seek a political settlement and pursue it.”

When the Israeli Left gives up the term Peace, this is not a tactical retreat. It is a rout. Peace is a vision, a political ideal, a religious commandment, an inspiring idea. Political Settlement is a subject for discussion.

PEACE IS not the only victim of semantic terrorism. Another is, of course, the West Bank.

All TV channels have long ago been ordered by the government not to use this term. Most journalists in the written media also march in step. They call it “Judea and Samaria”.

“Judea and Samaria” means that the territory belongs to Israel, even if official annexation may be delayed for political reasons. “West Bank” means that this is occupied territory.

By itself, there is nothing sacred about the term “West Bank”, which was adopted by the Jordanian ruler when he illegally incorporated the area in his newly extended kingdom. This was done in secret collusion with David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, who wanted to erase the name “Palestine” from the map. The legal basis was a phony conference of Palestinian “notables” in Jericho.

King Abdallah of Jordan divided his fief into the East Bank (of the Jordan river) and the West Bank.

So why do we insist on using this term? Because it means that this is not a part of Israel, but Arab land that will belong—like the Gaza Strip—to the State of Palestine when peace (sorry, a Political Settlement) is achieved.

Until now, the semantic battle remains undecided. Most Israelis talk about the “West Bank”. “Judea and Samaria” has remained, in common parlance, the realm of the settlers.

THE SETTLERS, of course, are the subject of a similar semantic battle.

In Hebrew, there are two terms: *Mitnahalim* and *Mityashvim*. They essentially mean the same. But in common usage, people use *Mitnahalim* when they mean the settlers in the occupied territories, and *Mityashvim* when they speak about settlers in Israel proper.

The battle between these two words goes on daily. It is a fight for or against the legitimacy of the settlement beyond the Green Line. Up to now, our side seems to have the upper hand. The distinction remains intact. If someone uses the term Mityashvim, they are automatically identified with the political Right.

The Green Line itself is, of course, the leftist concept. It makes a clear distinction between Israel proper and the occupied territories. The color comes from the fact that this border—actually the 1949 armistice line—was always marked on the maps in green. Until.

Until the (left-wing) Minister of Labor, Yigal Alon, decreed that henceforth the Green Line would no longer be marked on any map. Under an old law dating back to the British Mandate, the government owns the copyright for all maps printed in the country, and the Minister of Labor was in charge.

This remained so until Gush Shalom sued the government in the Supreme Court. Our argument was that since on the two sides of this line different laws apply, the citizens must have a map that shows them what law they have to obey at a given place. The ministry gave in and promised the court that it would print maps with the Green Line marked.

For lack of an alternative, all Israelis use the term “Green Line”. Since Rightists do not recognize this line at all, they have not invented an alternative word. For some time they tried the term “Seam-Line”, but this did not catch on.

A LINE between what? At the beginning of the occupation, the question arose what to call the areas just conquered.

We of the peace camp called them, of course, “occupied territories”. The Right called them “liberated territories” and floated the slogan “Liberated territories will not be returned”, a catchy rhyme in Hebrew. The government called them “administered territories” and later “disputed territories”.

The general public just settled for “the territories”—and that is the term used nowadays by everybody who has no interest in stressing his or her political conviction every time these areas are mentioned.

THIS RAISES the question about the Wall.

When the government decided to create a physical obstacle between Israel and the Occupied Territories—partly

for expansion, partly for genuine security reasons—a name was needed. It is built mainly on occupied land, annexing in practice large areas. It is a fence in open areas, a wall in built-up ones. So we simply called it “the Wall” or “the Fence”, and started weekly demonstrations.

The “Wall/Fence” became odious around the world. So the army looked around for a term that sounded non-ideological and chose “separation obstacle”. However, this term now appears only in official documents.

WITH WHOM are we negotiating about the Political Settlement? Ah, there is the rub.

For generations, the Zionist movement and the State of Israel denied the very existence of a Palestinian people. In the 1993 Oslo Agreement, this idiotic pretense was dropped and we recognized the PLO as the “representative of the Palestinian people”. But the Palestinian state was not mentioned, and until this very day our government abhors the terms “Palestinian state” or “State of Palestine”.

Even today the term “Palestinians” evokes conscious or unconscious rejection. Most commentators speak about a political settlement with “our neighbors”—by which they do not mean the Egyptians, Jordanians, Syrians or Lebanese, but You Know Who.

In Oslo, the PLO negotiators strenuously insisted that their new state-in-the-making should be called the “Palestinian National Authority”. The Israeli side vehemently objected to the word “National”. So the agreement (actually a “Statement of Principles”) calls it the “Palestinian Authority” and the Palestinians themselves call it the “Palestinian National Authority”. Palestinians who need urgent medical treatment in Israeli hospitals are turned back if they bring financial documents signed by the “Palestinian National Authority”.

SO THE fight goes on along the semantic front. For me, the really crucial part is the fight for the word Peace. We must reinstate it as the central word in our vocabulary. Clearly, loudly, proudly.

As the hymn of the peace movement (written by Yankele Rotblit as an appeal by the fallen soldiers to the living) says:

Therefore, sing a song to peace

Don't whisper a prayer

Sing a song to peace

In a loud shout!