

Wrong Side

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OF ALL the memorable phrases uttered by Barack Obama in the last two years, the one that stuck in my mind more than any other appeared in his historic speech in Cairo in the early days of his term. He warned the nations not to place themselves “on the wrong side of history.”

It seems that the Arab nations took heed of this advice more than he might have anticipated. In the last few weeks they jumped from the wrong to the right side of history. And what a jump it was!

Our government, however, is moving in the opposite direction. It is determined, so it seems, to get as far away from the right side as possible.

We are in a cul-de-sac. And it lies in the nature of culs-de-sac that the deeper in you get, the further you have to go back when the time comes.

THIS WEEK, a fascinating telephone conversation took place. On the one end was Binyamin Netanyahu, on the other the German Chancellor.

In time gone by, the world’s leaders did not generally talk to each other directly. Bismarck did not pick up the phone to talk with Napoleon III. He sent seasoned diplomats, who knew how to smooth the edges and deliver an ultimatum in a soft voice.

Netanyahu called to rebuke Angela Merkel for Germany’s vote in favor of the Security Council resolution condemning the settlements – the resolution blocked by the scandalous US veto. I don’t know if our Prime Minister mentioned the Holocaust, but he certainly expressed his annoyance about Germany daring to vote against the “Jewish State”.

He was shocked by the answer. Instead of a contrite Frau Merkel apologizing abjectly, his ear was filled by a schoolmistress scolding him in no uncertain terms. She told him that he had broken all his promises, that no one of the world’s leaders believes a single word of his any more. She demanded that he make peace with the Palestinians.

If a person like Netanyahu could be rendered “speechless”, it would have happened at that moment. Fortunately for Netanyahu, it just cannot happen to him.

THIS CONVERSATION is a symptom of an ongoing process – the slow but steady deterioration in Israel’s international standing.

In Israel, this is called “delegitimatсия”. It is conceived as a sinister world-wide conspiracy, rather on the lines of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Clearly, it has no connection with anything we do – since all our deeds are pure as gold. The obvious conclusion: the enemies of Israel all over the world – including their fifth column in Israel itself – are plotting the destruction of Israel by all kinds of boycotts.

Our leaders know how to obstruct this plot – by enacting laws. Anyone who supplies the enemies of Israel with lists of enterprises located in the settlements will be punished. Anyone

who calls for a boycott of Israel or of the settlements – in the eyes of the lawmakers, they are one and the same – will have to pay astronomical fines and indemnities, millions of dollars. And if all this doesn’t help, the enemies of the regime will be sent to prison, as has happened already to the serial peace demonstrator Jonathan Pollak.

But it appears that our leaders do not rely on these measures alone. Therefore, our deputy Foreign Minister, Danny Ayalon (remember? the genius who sought to humiliate the Turkish ambassador by sitting him on a low stool?) decided to reach for even more radical remedies: all Israeli ambassadors will now be sent to the Machpela Cave in Hebron for a historic meeting with our forefather Abraham, who, according to Jewish belief, is buried there (archeologists think that it is a Muslim Sheikh who lies there in troubled rest.)

Seriously, our leaders now look like the boy in the legend who thrust his finger in the dyke to stop the water, though in our case the whole of the dyke is crumbling.

YES, ISRAEL’S standing in the world is indeed sinking continuously, but not because of a world-wide plot uniting “anti-Semites” and “Self-hating Jews”.

We are sinking, because we are on the wrong side of history.

Israel has maintained for decades a regime of occupation. It continues to control and humiliate another people. Ideologically and practically, it lives in the mental world of the 19th century, while the rest of the world is starting to live in the 21st. Israeli policy is simply anachronistic.

The 21st century will see the sight of nations coming together. It will see the beginning of a world order, and I have no doubt that this idea will be realized.

This is not a vision of starry-eyed idealists. It is an essential necessity for the human race and all its peoples and nations. The world is faced with problems that no single state or group of states can solve by itself. Global warming, which is threatening the very existence of the human species, is by its very nature a world problem. The recent economic crisis has shown that the collapse of one country’s economy can spread like wildfire to the entire world. The Internet has established a world-wide community, in which ideas spread easily from country to country, as we can see now in the Arab world.

International institutions, which once aroused only derision, are slowly acquiring real jurisdiction. The International Court has grown teeth. International law, which in the past was mainly an abstract idea, is slowly evolving into a real world law. Important and strong countries like Germany and France are voluntarily giving up large chunks of their sovereignty in favor of the European Union. Regional and world-wide cooperation between nations is becoming a political necessity.

Concepts like democracy, liberty, justice and human rights are not only moral values – in today’s world they have become

essential needs, a basis for a new world order.

All these processes are advancing at a maddeningly slow, almost geological pace. But the direction is unmistakable and cannot be reversed. Whatever Barack Obama's deeds – or lack of them – his intuition about the direction can be trusted.

That is the “right side of history”. But our country is closing its eyes to this. True, it excels in the most international of industries, high tech, and is working successfully to extend its economic ties to the far corners of the world. But it scorns international public opinion, the United Nations and international law. It sticks to a form of nationalism that was “modern” at the time of the French revolution, when the “nation-state” was the highest ideal. Of course, nationalism has not died, and it occupies even now an important place in the consciousness of the peoples. But this is a completely new form of nationalism, the nationalism of the 21st century, which does not stand in contradiction to internationalism but, on the contrary, constitutes a brick in the edifice of the international structure.

THE ARAB nations have suddenly awoken from a centuries-long slumber, and are now fighting to catch up with the other nations. The anachronistic tyrannies that kept them down, wasted their capabilities and imposed on them patterns of bygone ages, are no more.

It is difficult to know where these uprisings, which are engulfing the region from Morocco to Oman and from Syria to Yemen, will go. It is hard to prophesy, especially the future.

2011 may be for the Arab world what 1848 was for Europe. Then, when the French people stood up, the waves of revolution spread over much of the face of the continent. It seems that I am not the only one who is now reminded of this example. Much can be learned from it, and not all of it positive. In France, the uprising swept away a corrupt regime, but paved the way for the rise of Napoleon III, the first of Europe's modern dictators. In Germany, then fragmented into dozens of kingdoms and principalities, the rulers were frightened and so promised democratic reforms. But while the debates of the lawyers and politicians in Frankfurt about the future constitution went on and on, the kings gathered their armies, crushed the democrats and started another era of oppression. (The failure of the Frankfurt assembly found its expression in the immortal German verse: “Dreimal hundert Professoren / Vaterland, du bist verloren!” – three times a hundred professors / Motherland you are lost.)

The revolutions of 1848 left behind a legacy of disappointment and despair. But they were not in vain. The noble ideas born in those heady months did not die, future generations strove to realize them in all the countries of the continent. The current flag of Germany was born in those days.

The Arab revolutions, too, may end in failure and disappointment. They may give birth to new dictatorships. Here and there anachronistic religious regimes may spring up. Each Arab country is different from the others, and in each the developments will be subject to local conditions. But what happened yesterday in Tunisia and Egypt, what is happening today in Libya and Yemen, what happens tomorrow in Saudi Arabia and Syria will shape the face of the Arab nations for a long time to come. They

will play an entirely new role on the world stage.

ISRAEL IS dominated by the settlers, who resemble in spirit the Crusaders of the 12th century. Fundamentalist religious parties, not much different from their Iranian counterparts, play a major role in our state. The political and economic elite is steeped in corruption. Our democracy, in which we took so much pride, is in mortal danger.

Some people argue that all this is happening because “Netanyahu has no policy”. Nonsense. He has a clear policy: to maintain Israel as a garrison state, to enlarge the settlements, to prevent the foundation of a real Palestinian state, and to go on without peace, in a state of eternal conflict.

Just now it was leaked that Netanyahu is going to give a historic speech - another one – very soon. Not in the Knesset, whose importance is approaching nil, but in the really important forum: AIPAC, the Jewish lobby in Washington.

There he will unfold his Peace Plan, whose details have also been leaked. A wonderful plan, with only one minor defect: it has nothing to do with peace.

It proposes setting up a Palestinian state with “provisional borders”. (With us, nothing is more permanent than the “provisional”). It will consist of about half the West Bank. (The other half, including East Jerusalem, will presumably be covered with settlements.) There will be a timetable for the discussion of the core issues – borders, Jerusalem, refugees etc. (In Oslo, a timetable of five years was fixed. It expired in 1999, by which time negotiation had not even started.) Negotiations will not start at all until the Palestinians recognize Israel as the State of the Jewish People and accept its “security requirements”. (Meaning: never.)

If the Palestinians accept such a plan, they need (in the words of the US Secretary of Defense in another context) “to have their heads examined”. But of course Netanyahu is not addressing the Palestinians at all. His plan is a primitive attempt at marketing. (After all, in the past he was a marketing agent for furniture). The aim is to stop the international campaign of “delegitimatsia”.

Ehud Barak, too, had something to say this week. In a long TV interview, almost entirely consisting of political gibberish, he made one important remark: the Arab uprisings provide Israel with new opportunities. What opportunities? You guessed it: to get increased quantities of American arms. Arms and America über alles.

And indeed, the one factor that makes this policy still possible is the unequalled relationship between Israel and the US. But the Arab Awakening will, in the medium and long term, change the Israeli-Arab balance of power – psychologically, politically, economically, and in the end also militarily. At the same time, the world balance of power is also changing. New powers are rising, old powers are gradually losing their clout. This will not be a one-time, dramatic occurrence, but a slow and steady process.

That is how history is moving. Anyone who places himself on the wrong side of it will pay the price.