

“YOU are Fed Up?”

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“**Y**ou can lie to all of the people some of the time, and to some of the people all of the time, but you cannot lie to all of the people all of the time.”

This slightly altered quotation from Abraham Lincoln has yet to be absorbed by Binyamin Netanyahu. He thinks it doesn't apply to him. Actually, that is the core of his entire political career.

This week, he was given a very instructive lesson. After being treated to dozens of cordial encounters between Netanyahu and Nicholas Sarkozy, Israeli TV viewers got a glimpse of reality. It came in the form of an exchange of views between the presidents of the US and of France.

Sarkozy: *“I cannot stand him (Netanyahu). He is a liar!”*

Obama: *“YOU are fed up with him? I have to deal with him every day!”*

That came after it was leaked that Angela Merkel, the German prime minister, told her cabinet that “every word that leaves Netanyahu's mouth is a lie.”

Which makes it more or less unanimous.

BEFORE PROCEEDING, I must say something about the media angle of this affair.

The dialogue was broadcast live to a group of senior French media people, because somebody forgot to turn the microphone off. A piece of luck of the kind that journalists dream about.

Yet not one of the journalists in the hall published a word about it. They kept it to themselves and only told it to their colleagues, who told it to their friends, one of whom told it to a blogger, who published it.

Why? Because the senior journalists who were present are friends and confidants of the people in power. That's how they get their scoops. The price is suppressing any news that might hurt or embarrass their sponsors. This means in practice that they become lackeys of the people in power – betraying their elementary democratic duty as servants of the public.

I know this from experience. As an editor of a news magazine, I saw it as my duty (and pleasure) to break these conspiracies of silence. Actually, many of our best scoops were given to us by colleagues from other publications who could not use them themselves for the same reason.

Luckily, with the internet now everywhere, it has become almost impossible to suppress news. Blessed be the online Gods.

A FEW weeks after Yitzhak Rabin was elected Prime Minister (for the second time) in 1992, I met Yasser Arafat in Tunis.

He was, of course, curious about the personality of the newly elected Israeli leader. Knowing that I was meeting him from time to time, he asked what I thought of him.

“He is an honest man,” I replied, and then added: *“as much as a politician can be.”*

Arafat burst out laughing, and so did everybody in the room, including Mahmoud Abbas and Yasser Abed Rabbo.

Ever since Sir Henry Wotton said, some four centuries ago, that “an ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country,” it is generally assumed that diplomats and politicians may be lying, and not only abroad. Some do so only when necessary, some do it often, some, like Netanyahu, do it as a rule.

In spite of the general assumption of mendacity, it is not good for a leader to be branded as a habitual liar. When leaders meet personally, in private and face to face, they are supposed to tell each other the truth, even if not necessarily the whole truth. Some personal trust is of great advantage. If a leader loses it, he loses a precious asset.

Winston Churchill said of one of his predecessors, Stanley Baldwin, that (quoting from memory) “the Right Honorable Gentleman sometimes stumbles upon the truth, but he always hurries on as if nothing has happened.” One of our ministers said about Ariel Sharon that he sometimes tells the truth by mistake. People asked how you could tell when Richard Nixon was lying: “Easy: his lips are moving”.

Rabin was basically an honest man. He hated lying and avoided it as much as he could. Basically he remained a military man and never became a real politician.

LAST WEDNESDAY was the 16th anniversary of his assassination, according to the Hebrew calendar.

The event was marked in Israeli schools by speeches and special lessons. What these citizens of tomorrow learned was that it is very bad to murder a prime minister. And that, more or less, was that.

Not a word about why he was killed. Certainly nothing about the community the assassin belonged to, or what campaign of hatred and incitement led to the murder.

The Ministry of Education is now firmly in the hands of a Likud minister, and one of the most extreme. But the trend is not confined to the education system.

In Israel it is practically impossible to obtain a picture of Rabin shaking the hand of Arafat. Rabin and King Hussein? As many post cards as you might wish. But Rabin's peace with Jordan was an unimportant matter, like the US peace with Canada. The Oslo agreement, however, was a historic watershed.

Only people branded as “extreme leftists” – one of the worst insults these days – dare to raise the obvious questions about the assassination: Who? Why?

There is tacit agreement that the only person responsible was the actual assassin: Yigal Amir, the son of Yemenite Jews, a former settler and a student of a religious university.

Would he have acted without the blessing of one or more rabbis? Most certainly not.

Amir was led to do what he did by months of intense incitement. An unprecedented campaign of hatred dominated the public sphere. Posters showed Rabin in the uniform of an SS officer. Religious groups publicly condemned him to death in medieval ceremonies. Demonstrators in front of his private home shouted: "With blood and fire / we shall remove Rabin!"

In the most (in)famous demonstration, in the center of Jerusalem, a coffin marked "Rabin" was paraded around, while Netanyahu looked on from a balcony, in the company of other rightist leaders.

And most tellingly: not a single important right-wing or religious voice was raised against this murderous campaign.

By general tacit agreement, nothing of all this was mentioned this week. Why? Because it would not be nice. It would "split the nation". Honorable citizens do not do this kind of thing.

Rabin himself cannot be acquitted of all blame. After the incredibly courageous act of recognizing the PLO (and thereby the Palestinian people) and shaking hands with Arafat, he did not rush forward to create an irreversible historic fact of peace, but hesitated, dithered, held back and allowed the forces of war and racism to regroup and counter-attack.

When the Kiryat Arba settler Baruch Goldstein carried out his massacre in the "Cave of Machpela", Rabin had a golden opportunity to clear out the nest of fascist settlers in Hebron. He shrank back from taking on the settlers. The settlers did not shrink back from killing him.

WHAT HAPPENED next? This week a very revealing document was leaked.

It appears that on the day of the assassination, Netanyahu spoke with the American ambassador (and Zionist Jew) Mar-

tin Indyk. Netanyahu, remembering his part in the incitement, was obviously in panic. He confided to the ambassador that if elections were to take place immediately, the entire Israeli right-wing would be wiped out.

But Shimon Peres, the new Prime Minister, did not call immediate elections, though several people (including myself) publicly urged him to do so. Netanyahu's assessment was quite correct – the country was outraged, the right-wing was generally blamed for the assassination, and if elections had taken place, the Right would have been marginalized for many many years. The entire history of Israel would have taken a different turn.

Why did Peres refuse to do so? Because he hated Rabin. He did not want to be elected as the "executor of Rabin's testament", but on his own merits. Unfortunately, the public did not have the same high opinion of these "merits".

During the next few months, Peres committed every conceivable (and inconceivable) mistake: he approved the killing of a major Hamas militant which led to a flood of deadly suicide bombings all over the country. He attacked Lebanon, which led to the Kafr Kana massacre, and had to withdraw ignominiously. And then he called premature elections after all. In his election campaign, Rabin was not even mentioned. Thus Peres managed to be (narrowly) defeated by Netanyahu.

I once wrote that Peres suffered his most grievous insult just a few minutes before the assassination. Amir was waiting at the foot of the stairs from the tribune, his pistol ready. Peres came down the steps, and the assassin let him pass, like a fisherman contemptuously throwing a small specimen back into the sea. He was waiting for Rabin.

The rest is history.