

King Bibi

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BINYAMIN NETANYAHU IS our prime minister for life.

So it seems. So he evidently believes.

Not only believes. He acts accordingly. To make sure, he has done the two necessary things: (a) eliminate every possible competitor, and (b) surround himself with male and female nincompoops, no one of whom could be considered by anyone a plausible successor. Indeed, the idea that any of this lot could ever become prime minister sends shudders down our spines.

So we are stuck with him for life (at least). Time to face this prospect.

HE IS not the worst. No one ever is. For every bad leader, there is a worse one (except Adolf Hitler, perhaps).

So let us look first at the positive sides of his rule. There are some (yes, indeed).

No. 1: He is not crazy. Around the world there are several crazy leaders. We have quite a number of crazies in and out of government. Netanyahu is not one of them.

No. 2: He is not irresponsible. During the last Gaza war, when all kinds of politicians and other demagogues called for him to do all kinds of irresponsible things, such as re-conquering the Gaza Strip, he refused and followed the advice of the army.¹

One can ask, of course, how we got into this quagmire in the first place. In fact, Netanyahu fits the old definition: A clever person is somebody who knows how to get out of a bad situation which a wise person would never have got into in the first place.

No. 3: He is an effective orator. That is not a necessary requirement, of course. David Ben-Gurion was a poor speaker, Levi Eshkol was a lousy one. Both were Demosthenes-like compared to Golda Meir, whose vocabulary in Hebrew and English consisted of about a hundred words, badly accented. That was enough for her to convince any audience.

Netanyahu is an accomplished speaker in the opposite sense. He speaks a good Hebrew, he has a baritone voice,

¹In Israel, for the time being, the army abhors senseless adventures. The top army officers are, as a rule, much less reckless than the politicians.

²It was disclosed recently that his personal hair-stylist, on the government payroll, earns more than a cabinet minister. Rightly so, I think.

his gestures are appropriate. Indeed, one often gets the impression that he has spent hours in front of a mirror to get the delivery exactly right.

Yet he convinces only those who want to be convinced. For discerning listeners, the whole performance is too studied, too perfect. Like his hair, too slick, too perfectly hued white-blue.²

When Netanyahu speaks to the world as the representative of Israel, he delivers a credible performance. Not brilliant, not very convincing, perhaps, but not shameful either.

MANY PEOPLE, both in Israel and outside, believe that Netanyahu is a total cynic, a man without real convictions, whose only aim is to stay in power forever.

I don't believe that is true.

A cynic without convictions would be far less dangerous. But Netanyahu is not a cynic.

He grew up in the shadow of his father, Ben-Zion, a bitter family tyrant, who was convinced that he did not receive the respect due to him from his academic colleagues and institutions because of his political convictions. Because of this he emigrated temporarily to the US, where Binyamin grew up as an all-American boy.

The father was an ardent extreme rightist. The leader of the Zionist right, the brilliant Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, was far too moderate for him. Ben-Zion specialized in the history of the Spanish inquisition and wrote a weighty work on it, but his colleagues did not accord him the honors that were—he believed—his due. He became very bitter.

Binyamin adored his father and considered him a genius, but the father admired his elder son, Yoni, a military officer who fell in the famous Entebbe raid. Of "Bibi" the father had a rather low opinion. He once said publicly that Binyamin could make a reasonable foreign minister, but not a prime minister. In Israel, the foreign office is treated with some disdain. A real he-man aspires to become defense minister.

All this instilled in the young Binyamin a burning ambition to show his dead father that he could indeed make an excellent prime minister. It also formed the ideological

base of all his thoughts and actions: the unshakable conviction that the Jews must take possession of “the whole of Eretz Israel”—the entire land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river.

Every word Netanyahu has ever said that contradicts this basic conviction is a blatant lie. But, as the ancient Romans should have said: “Sweet and fitting it is to lie for the fatherland.”

WITHIN THIS boundaries, Netanyahu is indeed a cynic. He clings to power, and has no inclination whatsoever to ever give it up.

And, indeed, he is a consummate politician. There is no sign that he respects any of the people he appointed ministers. He seems to have taken a delight in appointing each of them to the job most inappropriate for him or her. The Culture Minister, Miri Regev, a vulgar, primitive, quite uncultured female politician is a supreme example, but most of her colleagues are not much better suited to their jobs.

None of these can endanger his position in the least. Compared to them, he is a towering figure.

In the other parties, inside the government coalition and outside, the situation is not much better. Some of them showed some promise (at least in the polls) but this proved to be short-lived. Moshe Kahlon, the present finance minister, is a nice fellow, but as a national leader he is knee-high. So is Ya'ir Lapid, the former finance minister now in opposition, who firmly believes that fate has chosen him as Netanyahu's successor. His only problem is that few others share this belief.

Much more ominously, the Labor Party (now “Zionist Camp”) is devoid of any personality who could come even near to Netanyahu's leadership stature. The party leader, Yitzhak Herzog, is a sad disappointment.

Almost all the party functionaries avoid even mentioning the salient national issue: the occupation. They hardly ever utter the dangerous five-letter word: PEACE. Much better to talk about a “political arrangement”, “final settlement” and such. Blah-blah-blah.

NETANYAHU'S MAIN instrument of rule goes back to ancient Rome (as befits the son of a historian):

Divide et Impera.

He is a consummate hate-monger. Jews against Arabs, Oriental Jews against Ashkenazis, religious ones against the secular. (He himself is a non-believer, but the religious of all stripes are his strongest allies.)

Hatred goes with fear. It is an ancient Jewish belief

that the whole world is out to destroy us (“but God saves us from their hands”, as every Jew declaims on Passover eve). True now more than ever.

The Iranians are out to get us. The Arabs want to wipe us out. The Leftists are worse: they are traitors. It is Bibi, the Only One, who saves us from all of them. God may help a bit.

BUT THE real danger of Netanyahu's reign is his total lack of an answer to Israel's main problem, its existential question: the 130-year war with the Palestinians, and by extension with the entire Arab and perhaps Muslim world.

Bound by his father's ideology, he is unable even to contemplate giving up an inch of our holy fatherland.³

Some Bantustan-like disconnected enclaves for the Palestinians—why not, as long as we cannot drive them out altogether. But not more.

This prevents any effort for peace. It guarantees an apartheid state or a bi-national state with a permanent civil war. Netanyahu knows that very well. He has no illusions. So he has uttered the logical answer: “We shall live forever by the sword”. Good Hebrew, terrible statesmanship.

Under his rule, Israel will irrevocably slide down the slope towards eventual disaster. The longer his reign, the greater the danger.

All in all, Netanyahu is a man without intellectual depths, a political manipulator without real solutions, a man with an imposing front but empty inside.

In the meantime, he is great at inventing issues that divert attention from the fateful problem. All of Israel has been consumed for months with the debate about the “natural gas plan”—the way of dividing the profits from the natural gas reservoirs discovered in the sea near the shores of Israel. Netanyahu supports with all his might the “plan” that pours the riches into the pockets of a handful of tycoons connected somehow with Sheldon Adelson, his protector (and, some say, his owner).

IN THE meantime, “King Bibi” and his highly unpopular royal consort, Queen Sarah'le, can look about with satisfaction. There is no one around who could endanger their unlimited reign (“term of office” seems an inappropriate definition).

They think about building a royal (sorry, prime ministerial) palace instead of the rather shabby present residence in the center of Jerusalem. All around them there is nothing but a political desert.

I would pray to God to deliver us. But unfortunately, I don't believe in Him.

³Like many Israelis he does not believe in God, but believes that God has promised us this land. Actually, God was even more generous and promised us all the land between the Nile and the Euphrates.