

# A Day and Night-mare

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**B**INYAMIN NETANYAHU SEEMS to be detested now by everyone. Almost as much as his meddling wife, Sarah'le.

Six weeks ago, Netanyahu was the great victor. Contrary to all opinion polls, he achieved a surprise victory at the last moment, winning 30 seats in the 120-member Knesset, leaving the Labor Party (re-branded "The Zionist Camp") well behind him.

The extra seats did not come from the Left. They came from his nearest competitors, the Rightist parties.

However, it was a great personal triumph. Netanyahu was on top of his world. Sarah'le was radiant. Netanyahu left no doubt that he was now the master, and that he was determined to order things according to his wishes.

This week he had his comeuppance. On the very last day of the period allotted to him by law to set up his new government, he was near desperation.

AN OLD Hebrew saying puts it succinctly: "Who is a hero? He who turns an enemy into a friend."

In this sense, Netanyahu is an anti-hero. He has a peculiar talent for turning friends into enemies. Sarah'le is a great help in this.

Winston Churchill once advised that at the moment of victory, one should be magnanimous. Magnanimity is not one of Netanyahu's outstanding virtues. He made it clear that he, and he alone, was now the master.

Right after the election Netanyahu decreed that the next government would be a narrow coalition of orthodox and rightist parties, which would be able at long last to do the things he really wants to do: put an end to this two-state nonsense, castrate the Supreme Court, muzzle the media and much more.

Everything went just fine. Netanyahu was invited by the President of the State to form the next government, coalition talks went smoothly, and the contours of the coalition were clear: Likud, the Ashkenazi orthodox Torah party, the Oriental orthodox Shas party, Moshe Kahlon's new economic reform party, Naftali Bennett's nationalist-religious party and Avigdor Lieberman's ultra-rightist party. Altogether: a comfortable 67 of the 120 Knesset members.

Party chiefs don't have to love each other to set up a coalition. They don't even have to like each other. But it is not really very comfortable to sit together in a government

when they hate and despise each other.

THE FIRST to throw a bomb was Avigdor Lieberman.

Lieberman is not considered a "real" Israeli. He looks different, speaks with a very thick foreign accent, his mind seems to work in a different way. Although he came to Israel decades ago, he is still considered "a Russian". Actually he came from Soviet Moldavia.

There is a saying that has been attributed to Stalin: Revenge is best served cold. This Tuesday, 48 hours before the end of the time allotted by law to the formation of the new government, Lieberman dropped his bomb.

In the election, Lieberman lost more than half of his strength to Likud, shrinking to six seats. In spite of this, Netanyahu assured him that he could retain his post as Foreign Minister. It was a cheap concession, since Netanyahu makes all important foreign policy decisions himself.

All of a sudden, without any provocation, Lieberman convened a press conference and made a momentous announcement: he was not joining the new government.

Why? All Lieberman's personal demands had been satisfied. The pretexts were obviously contrived. For example, he wants "terrorists" to be executed, a demand resolutely resisted by all security services, who believe (quite rightly) that creating martyrs is a very bad idea. Lieberman also wants to send to prison orthodox youngsters who refuse to serve in the army, a ridiculous demand from a government in which the orthodox parties play a central role. And so on.

It was a clear and blatant act of revenge. Obviously Lieberman had taken the decision right from the beginning but kept it secret until the very last moment, when there was no time for Netanyahu to change the composition of the government by inviting, for example, the Labor Party.

It was indeed revenge served cold.

WITHOUT THE six members of Lieberman's party, Netanyahu still has a majority of 61, just enough to present the government to the Knesset and get a vote of confidence. Just.

A 61-member government is a continuous nightmare. I would not wish it on my own worst enemy.

In such a situation, no member of the coalition parties can go abroad, for fear of a sudden opposition motion of no-confidence. For Israelis, that is a fate worse than death.

The only way for a coalition MK to travel to Paris would be to make an agreement with a member of the opposition who wants to go, say, to Las Vegas. Hand Washes Hand, as the saying goes.

But there is a much worse day-and-night-mare for Netanyahu: in a 61-member coalition, “every bastard is a king” as a Hebrew saying goes. Each and every member can obstruct any bill produced by the government, allow any opposition motion to win, absent himself from any crucial vote.

Every day would be a field day for blackmail of all kinds. Netanyahu would be compelled to accede to every whim of every member. Even in Greek mythology no such torture was ever invented.

THE FIRST example was given already on the very first day after the Lieberman bomb.

Bennett, who had not yet signed the coalition agreement, found himself in a position in which there would be no Netanyahu government without him. He racked his brains on how to exploit the situation and get something more than was already promised to him (and humiliate Netanyahu in the process). He came up with the demand that Ayelet Shaked become Minister of Justice.

Shaked is the beauty queen of the new Knesset. In spite of her 38 years, she has a girlish appearance. She has also a beautiful name: Ayelet means gazelle, Shaked means almonds.

Her mother was a leftist teacher, but her Iraqi-born father was a rightist Likud central committee member. She follows in his footsteps.

This almond-eyed gazelle excels in political activities based on hatred: an intense hatred of Arabs, leftists, homosexuals and foreign refugees. She has authored a steady stream of extreme rightist bills. Among them the atrocious bill that says that the “Jewish character” of Israel takes precedence over democracy and overrides basic laws. Her incitement against the helpless refugees from Sudan and Eritrea, who have somehow succeeded in reaching Israel, is just a part of her untiring efforts. Though the No. 2 of a rabid religious party, she is not religious at all.

The relationship between her and Bennett started when both were employees of Netanyahu's political office, when he was leader of the opposition. Somehow, they both incurred the wrath of Sara'le, who never forgets or forgives. By the way, the same happened to Lieberman, also a former director of Netanyahu's office.

So now is payment day. Netanyahu tortured Bennett

during the negotiations, letting him sweat for days. Bennett used the opportunity after Lieberman's desertion and put up a new condition for joining the coalition: Shaked must be Minister of Justice.

Netanyahu, bereft of any practical alternative, gave in to open blackmail. It was that or no government.

So now the gazelle is in charge of the Supreme Court, which she detests. She will choose the next Attorney General (known in Israel as the “judicial advisor”) and stuff the committee that appoints the judges. She will also be in charge of the ministers' committee that decides which bills will be presented by the government to the Knesset—and which not.

Not a very promising situation for the Only Democracy in the Middle East.

NETANYAHU IS too experienced not to know that he cannot à la longue govern with such a shaky coalition. He needs at least one more partner in the near future. But where to find one?

The Arab party is obviously out. So is Meretz. So is Yair Lapid's party, for the simple reason that the orthodox will not sit with him in the government. So only the Labor Party (aka Zionist Camp) is left.

Frankly, I believe that Yitzhak Herzog would jump at the opportunity. He must know by now that he is not the popular tribune needed to lead his party to power. He has neither the stature of an Apollo nor the tongue of a Netanyahu. He has never voiced an original idea nor led a successful protest.

Moreover, the Labor Party has never excelled in opposition. It was the party in power for 45 consecutive years before and after the founding of the state. As an opposition party it is pathetic, and so is “Buji” Herzog.

Joining Netanyahu's government in a few months would be ideal for Herzog. There is never a lack of pretexts—we experience at least once a month a National Emergency that demands National Unity. A little war, trouble with the UN and such. (Though John Kerry this week gave an interview to Israeli TV that was a masterpiece of abject, belly-crawling self-humiliation.)

Getting Herzog won't be easy. Labor is not a monolithic body. Many of its functionaries do not admire Herzog, consider Bennett a fascist and Netanyahu a habitual liar and cheat. But the allures of government are strong, ministerial chairs are so comfortable.

My bet: Netanyahu, the great survivor, will survive.