

# A Bribery Case

Uri Avnery

January 2, 2016

**W**HEN THE STATE of Israel was founded, the new foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, did something that seemed quite natural. He sold his private apartment.

In his new function, he was accorded an official residence. A modest one, needless to say.

Sharett thought that it was unseemly for a public official to retain a private apartment when he was living at the public expense.

He did not keep the money he received for his private apartment. Rather, he donated it to several human rights associations—the very same that are now under fierce government attack and labeled “leftists”, a label only slightly less negative than “treasonous”.

Today, such an act would be considered insane. Why, the present Prime Minister lives in an official residence and keeps two more houses, one of which is a luxury villa in a colony of the very rich.

In many respects, Sharett was an exception. He was born in Ukraine as Moshe Shertok, came to Palestine when he was 10 years old, lived for some years in Arab neighborhoods where he learned Arabic, served during World War I in the Ottoman army and became the Zionist expert on foreign relations. All this was quite unusual: almost all Zionist leaders neither knew Arabs nor liked them, they did not understand Arabic and saw the Arabs right from the beginning as enemies.

Lest this be understood as flattery by an admirer, I must add that he did not like me at all and said some very unkind things about me, which I countered with some quite unkind remarks of my own.

Yet I could not refrain from remembering his decency this week, on the day on which the highest court in Israel sent a former Prime Minister to prison for bribery.

WHEN THIS happened, the accused, Ehud Olmert, was almost jubilant.

A lower court had found him guilty of a much more serious bribery accusation and condemned him to a much longer prison term. The Supreme Court, after dragging his case out for as long as possible, reduced the offense and the prison term from 6 years to a mere year and a half. As usual in Israel, a third will be remitted for good behavior in prison, so he will probably “sit” for one year only.

Hallelujah. The former Prime Minister will spend only one year in prison, where he will join a former President of Israel who has been sent there for rape.

The present Prime Minister and his wife are under investigation for using government funds to pay the expenses of their two private homes. The present attorney of the Netanyahus has asked the Attorney General for a private conversation, in which he was going to ask him (according to a written note) to quash the investigation, hinting that Sara Netanyahu was mentally unstable. The Attorney General refused to see him, but the matter is dragging on.

By the way, the all-powerful Attorney General (known in Israel as the “Legal Advisor to the Government”), was, before his appointment, the private attorney of the Netanyahu family. He will finish his term in a month, when he will be replaced by the present Cabinet Secretary, a person even closer to Netanyahu.

Several other leading political luminaries are under criminal investigation for this and that. One of them is Sylvan Shalom, the former Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, who had to resign last week after being suspected of raping or molesting six women who were working under him (no pun intended).

The police officer in charge of the department responsible for all these investigations has just been reinstated, after being suspended on suspicion of sexually molesting female officers.

Which reminds me of an anecdote I heard many decades ago. A politician approached the then education minister, a member of the Labor party: “Congratulate me! I have just been acquitted!” to which the minister replied dryly: “Curious. I have never been acquitted!”

SINCE THEN, Israel's public morality has changed radically. Ehud Olmert is, perhaps, its most typical representative.

His father was an Irgun underground fighter and when Menachem Begin founded his political party, Herut (“freedom”) in the new state, the father was elected to the Knesset.

Ehud was born a few days after the end of World War II and grew up in neighborhoods founded by ex-Irgun members near Haifa. All these neighborhoods were quite poor, which perhaps explains Ehud's lifelong craving for

money and precious objects. The fact that he never served in any war perhaps explains his light finger on the trigger.

He joined, of course, Begin's party but when a new star appeared, he saw a chance for speedy advance. The star was Shmuel Tamir, also a former Irgun member, who had studied law when exiled by the British to Africa. Tamir was extremely ambitious, and when he thought he saw a chance to overthrow and replace Begin as the party's leader, he executed a putsch at the party's conference. The much younger Olmert joined him immediately.

Both had misjudged. The benign-looking Begin bared his teeth, the putsch collapsed, Tamir and his adherents were thrown out. They founded a small new party, called "Free Center". "Center" because they attacked the nationalist right-wing ideology of Begin and positioned themselves in the moderate center.

Soon after, the Six-day War broke out and Israel became an empire with huge occupied territories. And, lo and behold, literally overnight the Free Center became the most extreme right-wing party, preaching annexation and accusing Begin of softness and moderation.

I WAS a member of the Knesset at the time, and saw Olmert for the first time when he was a junior assistant of Tamir. He was always walking behind him, carrying his files and books.

But Tamir underrated this ambitious young man. When he preferred another young assistant, Olmert split the small party into two even smaller, under another veteran leader. Then he split this party too, threw its leader out, and took over. Realizing that this would lead to nothing, he rejoined Begin and was put on the candidates list.

He could have advanced slowly in the ranks, but he was impatient. So he jumped from the Knesset to the Jerusalem municipality and attacked the legendary, but aging, Teddy Kollek. He was elected mayor of Jerusalem, a prominent and very visible position.

Kollek, a Labor man, was an aggressive nationalist. Immediately after the 6-Day War he destroyed the Arab neighborhoods near the Western Wall in order to create the huge piazza. He created Jewish neighborhoods in the newly annexed East Jerusalem. Fortunately, he did not implement the idea of his old mentor, David Ben-Gurion, to raze the ancient Ottoman-built wall of Jerusalem, a symbol of the city. Ben-Gurion, already a bit senile, insisted that it was not Jewish enough.

Olmert, the centrist who became radical, then centrist again, became radical again. He founded more Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, including the highly controversial Har Homa settlement. My friends and I organized a long but in the end unsuccessful struggle against it.

Now the atrocious settlement overlooks Bethlehem.

It was not the only architectural atrocity of Olmert's rule in Jerusalem. Another, even worse, has helped to bring about his eventual downfall this week.

IN THE center of West Jerusalem there was a hilly rise coveted by builders. A group of developers spread large bribes right and left to obtain the license to build a huge housing project there called "Holyland".

This atrocity was indeed built. It consists of a group of high-rise buildings and an even more atrocious many-storied tower which overlooks all of Jerusalem, including the holy places. The mayor, Olmert, among others, was accused of receiving a large bribe.

But by this time, Olmert had already advanced. He left the municipality, returned to Begin's party, became again a Knesset member, helped Ariel Sharon to split the party (now called Likud) and create a new party ("Kadima", Forwards.)

When Sharon assumed power, Olmert expected to take hold of the important Treasury Ministry, but Sharon was compelled to turn it over to Binyamin Netanyahu. Olmert had to be satisfied with the much less important Trade Ministry. As a consolation prize, Sharon conferred on Olmert the title of Deputy Prime Minister.

That was an empty title, and Olmert's colleagues laughed behind his back. Not for long. Sharon suddenly fell into a lasting coma, and before anyone could move, Olmert assumed power as the deputy, and then as the next Prime Minister. He had arrived.

But his misdeeds caught up with him. A heap of corruption scandals compelled him in the end to resign. At the last moment, he offered the Palestinian leadership tempting concessions, but it was too late. The Palestinians decided that his political end was near, and waited to deal with his successor.

By that time, a dozen corruption allegations were hovering in the air. He defended himself by always accusing his underlings, always asserting that he knew nothing about anything, that it had all happened behind his back.

But in the end, he went too far. When he forsook his loyal (female) secretary in order to save himself, she opened her mouth. That was too much.

After a very long judicial battle, the final decision was made this week by the Supreme Court: Olmert was found guilty of one of the many bribery cases he was suspected of, and sent to prison.

I never liked the man very much, neither politically nor personally. Yet I must confess that at this moment, I feel neither joy nor satisfaction. I rather pity him.