

An Expensive Speech

Uri Avnery

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WINSTON CHURCHILL FAMOUSLY said that democracy is the worst political system, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

Anyone involved with political life knows that that is British understatement.

Churchill also said that the best argument against democracy is a five minute talk with an average voter. How true.

I have witnessed 20 election campaigns for the Knesset. In five of them I was a candidate, in three of them I was elected.

As a child I also witnessed three election campaigns in the dying days of the Weimar republic, and one (the last more or less democratic one) after the Nazi ascent to power.¹

Elections are a time of great excitement. The streets are plastered with propaganda, politicians talk themselves hoarse, sometimes violent clashes break out.

Not now. Not here. 17 days before the election, there is an eerie silence. A stranger coming to Israel would not notice that there is an election going on. Hardly any posters in the streets. Articles in the newspapers on many other subjects. People shouting at each other on TV as usual. No rousing speeches. No crowded mass meetings.

EVERYBODY KNOWS that this election may be crucial, far more so than most.

It may be the final battle for the future of Israel—between the zealots of Greater Israel and the supporters of a liberal state. Between a mini-empire that dominates and oppresses another people and a decent democracy. Between settlement expansion and a serious search for peace. Between what has been called here “swinish capitalism” and a welfare state.

In short, between two very different kinds of Israel.

So what is being said about this fateful choice?

Nothing.

The word “peace”—shalom in Hebrew—is not mentioned at all. God forbid. It is considered political poison. As we say in Hebrew: “He who wants to save his soul must distance himself”.

All the “professional advisers”, with whom this country is teeming, strongly admonish their clients never ever to utter it. “Say political agreement, if you must. But for Gods sake, do not mention peace!”

Same about occupation, settlements, transfer (of populations) and such. Keep away. Voters may suspect that you have an opinion. Avoid it like the plague.

The Israeli welfare state, once the envy of many countries (remember the kibbutz?) is falling apart. All our social services are crumbling. The money goes to the huge army, big enough for a medium power. So does anyone suggest drastically reducing the military? Of course not. What, stick the knife in the backs of our valiant soldiers? Open the gates to our many enemies? Why, that's treason!

So what do the politicians and the media talk about? What is exciting the public mind? What reaches the headlines and evening news?

Only the really serious matters. Does the Prime minister's wife pocket the coins for returned bottles? Does the Prime Minister's official residence show signs of neglect? Did Sara Netanyahu use public funds to install a private hairdresser's room in the residence?

SO WHERE is the main opposition party, the Zionist Camp (a.k.a. the Labor Party)?

The party labors (no pun intended) under a great disadvantage: its leader is the Great Absent One of this election.

Yitzhak Herzog does not have a commanding presence. Of slight build, more like a boy than a hardened warrior, with a thin, high voice, he does not seem like a natural leader. Cartoonists have a hard time with him. He does not have any pronounced characteristics that make him easily recognizable.

He reminds me of Clement Attlee. When the British Labor Party could not decide between two conspicuous candidates, they elected Attlee as the compromise candidate.

He, too, had no commanding features. (Churchill again: An empty car approached and Major Attlee got out.) The world gasped when the British, even before the end of World War II, kicked Churchill out and elected Attlee. But Attlee turned out to be a very good Prime

¹The Germans at that time were very good at graphic propaganda, both political and commercial. After more than 80 years, I still remember some of their election posters.

Minister. He got out in time from India (and Palestine), set up the welfare state, and much more.

Herzog started out well. By setting up a joint election list with Tzipi Livni he created momentum and put the moribund Labor Party on its feet again. He adopted a popular name for the new list. He showed that he could make decisions. And there it stopped.

The Zionist Camp fell silent. Internal quarrels paralyzed the election staff.²

Now Meretz is teetering on the brink of the electoral threshold, and Lapid is slowly recovering from his deep fall in the polls, building mainly on his handsome face.

In spite of everything, Likud and the Zionist camp are running neck and neck. The polls give each 23 seats (of 120), predicting a photo finish and leaving the historic decision to a number of small and tiny parties.

THE ONLY game-changer in sight is the coming speech by Binyamin Netanyahu before the two Houses of Congress.

It seems that Netanyahu is pinning all his hopes on this event. And not without reason.

All Israeli TV stations will broadcast the event live. It will show him at his best. The great statesman, addressing the most important parliament in the world, pleading for the very existence of Israel.

Netanyahu is an accomplished TV personality. He is not a great orator in the style of Menachem Begin (not to mention Winston Churchill), but on TV he has few competitors. Every movement of his hands, every expression of his face, every hair on his head is exactly right. His American English is perfect.

The leader of the Jewish ghetto pleading at the court of the Goyish king for his people is a well-known figure in Jewish history. Every Jewish child reads about him in school. Consciously or unconsciously, people will be reminded.

The chorus of senators and congress(women) will applaud wildly, jump up and down every few minutes and express their unbounded admiration in every way, except licking his shoes.

Some brave Democrats will absent themselves, but the Israeli viewers will not notice this, since it is the habit on such occasions to fill all empty seats with members of the staff.

No propaganda spectacle could be more effective. The voters will be compelled to ask themselves how Herzog would have looked in the same circumstances.

I cannot imagine any more effective election propaganda. Using the Congress of the United States of America as a propaganda prop is a stroke of genius.

MILTON FRIEDMAN asserted that there is no such thing as a free lunch, and this lunch has a high price indeed.

It means almost literally spitting in the face of President Obama. I don't think there was ever anything like it. The prime minister of a small vassal country, dependent on the US for practically everything, comes to the capital of the US to openly challenge its President, in effect branding him a cheat and a liar. His host is the opposition party.

Like Abraham, who was ready to slaughter his son to please God, Netanyahu is ready to sacrifice Israel's most vital interests for election victory.

For many years, Israeli ambassadors and other functionaries have toiled mightily to enlist both the White House and the Congress in the service of Israel. When Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin came to Washington and found that the support for Israel was centered in the Congress, he made a large—and successful—effort to win over the Nixon White House.

AIPAC and other Jewish organizations have worked for generations to secure the support of both American parties and practically all senators and congress(women). For years now, no politician on Capitol Hill dared to criticize Israel. It was tantamount to political suicide. The few who tried were cast into the wilderness.

And here comes Netanyahu and destroys all of this edifice for one election spectacle. He has declared war on the Democratic Party, cutting the bond that has connected Jews with this party for more than a century. Destroying the bipartisan support. Allowing Democratic politicians for the first time to criticize Israel. Breaking a generations-old taboo that may not be restored.

President Obama, who is being insulted, humiliated and obstructed in his most cherished policy move, the agreement with Iran, would be superhuman if he did not brood on revenge. Even a movement of his little finger could hurt Israel grievously.

Does Netanyahu care? Of course he cares. But he cares more about his reelection.

Much, much more.

²I published two articles in Haaretz calling for a joint list of the Zionist Camp, Meretz and Ya'ir Lapid's party. It would have balanced the Left and the Center. It would have generated rousing new momentum. But the initiative could only have come from Herzog. He ignored it. So did Meretz. So did Lapid. I hope they won't regret it.