

Two Speeches

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IF I COULD choose between the two rhetorical gladiators, I would rather have Mahmoud Abbas representing Israel and Netanyahu representing the other side.

Abbas stood almost motionless and read his speech (in Arabic) with quiet dignity. No gimmicks.

Netanyahu used all the tricks taught in a beginners course in public speaking. He rotated his head regularly from left to right and back, stretched out his arms, raised and lowered his voice convincingly. At one point he produced the required visual surprise. Last time it was a childish drawing of an imagined Iranian atom bomb, this time it was a photo of Palestinian children in Gaza playing next to a rocket launcher.

(Netanyahu was carrying with him a stock of photos to exhibit—ISIS beheadings and such—rather like a salesman carrying samples.)

Everything a bit too slick, too smooth, too “sincere”. Like the furniture marketeer he once was.

Both speeches were delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations. Abbas spoke two weeks ago, Netanyahu this week. Because of the Jewish holidays, he came late—rather like the person who arrives at the party after all the main guests have already left.

The hall was half empty, the sparse audience consisted of junior diplomats sent to demonstrate the presence of their government. They were obviously bored stiff.

The applause was provided by the bloated Israeli delegation in the hall and the Zionist dignitaries and indignitaries packed into the galleries, led by casino-mogul Sheldon Adelson. (After the speech, Adelson took Netanyahu to an expensive non-kosher restaurant. The police cleared the streets on the way. But Adelson publicly criticized the speech as too moderate.)

Not that it matters. One does not speechify in the General Assembly in order to convince its members. One speaks there for the home audience. Netanyahu did, and so did Abbas.

THE SPEECH of Abbas was a contradiction between form and content: a very moderate speech clad in very extreme language.

It was clearly addressed to the Palestinian people, who are still boiling with anger over the killing and destruction of the Gaza war. This led Abbas to use very strong language—so strong as to defeat its main purpose of promoting peace. He used the word “genocide”—not once, but three times. That was a bonanza for the Israeli propaganda machine, and it immediately became known as the “Genocide Speech”.

During the Gaza war, more than 2000 Palestinians were killed, mostly civilians, many of them children, almost all by bombardment from land, air and sea. That was brutal, even atrocious, but it was not genocide. Genocide is a matter of hundreds of thousands, millions, Auschwitz, the Armenians, Rwanda, Cambodia.

Also, Abbas' speech was totally one-sided. No mention of Hamas, rockets, offensive tunnels. The war was solely an Israeli affair: they started, they killed, they genocided. All good for a leader who needs to defend himself against the accusation of being too soft. But spoiling a good case.

The speech itself, shorn of the strong language, was quite moderate, as moderate as it could be. Its crux was a peace program identical with the terms Palestinians have proposed from the start of Yasser Arafat's peace policy, as well as with the Arab Peace Initiative.

It stuck to the Two State Solution: a State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital “alongside the State of Israel”, the 1967 borders, an “agreed-upon solution to the plight of the Palestinian refugees” (meaning: agreed upon with Israel, meaning: essentially no return). It also mentioned the Arab Peace Initiative. No Palestinian leader could possibly demand less.

It also demanded a “specific time frame” to prevent the charade of endless “negotiations”.

For this he was attacked by Netanyahu as the incarnation of all evil, the partner of Hamas, which is the equivalent of ISIS, which is the heir of Adolf Hitler, whose latter-day reincarnation is Iran.

I HAVE KNOWN Mahmoud Abbas for 32 years. He was not present at my first meeting with Yasser Arafat in besieged Beirut, but when I met Arafat in Tunis, in January 1983, he was there. As chief of the Israel desk of the PLO headquarters, he was present at all my meetings with Arafat in Tunis. Since the return of the PLO to Palestine, I have seen Abbas several times.

He was born in 1935 in Safed, where my late wife Rachel also grew up. They used to ruminate about their childhood there, trying to work out if Abbas was ever treated by Rachel's father, a pediatrician.

There was a striking difference between the personalities of Arafat and Abbas. Arafat was flamboyant, extrovert and outgoing, Abbas is withdrawn and introvert. Arafat made decisions with lightning speed, Abbas is deliberate and cautious. Arafat was warm in human relations, fond of gestures, always preferring the human touch (literally). Abbas is cool and impersonal. Arafat inspired love, Abbas inspires respect.

But politically there is almost no difference. Arafat was not as extreme as he seemed, Abbas is not as moderate as he looks. Their terms for peace are identical. They are the minimum terms any Palestinian leader – indeed any Arab leader—could possibly agree to.

There can be months of negotiations about the details—the exact location of the borders, the exchanges of territories, the symbolic number of refugees allowed to return, security arrangements, the release of the prisoners, water and such.

But the basic Palestinian demands are unshakable. Take them or leave them.

Netanyahu says: leave them.

IF YOU leave them, what remains?

The status quo, of course. The classic Zionist attitude: There is no Palestinian people. There will be no Palestinian state. God, whether He exists or not, promised us the whole country (including Jordan).

But in today's world, one cannot say such things openly. One must find a verbal gimmick to evade the issue.

At the end of the recent Gaza war, Netanyahu promised a "new political horizon". Critics were quick to point out that the horizon is something that recedes as you approach it. Never mind.

So what is the new horizon? Netanyahu and his advisors racked their brains and came up with the "regional solution".

The "regional solution" is a new fashion, which started to spread a few months ago. One of its proponents is Dedi Zuker, one of the founders of Peace Now and a former Meretz member of the Knesset. As he explained it in Haaretz: The Israeli-Palestinian peace effort is dead. We must turn to a different strategy: the "regional solution". Instead of dealing with the Palestinians, we must negotiate with the entire Arab world and make peace with its leaders.

Good morning. Dedi. When my friends and I put forward the Two-State Solution in early 1949, we advocated the immediate setting up of a Palestinian state coupled with the creation of a Semitic Union, to include Israel, Palestine and all Arab states, and perhaps Turkey and Iran, too. We have repeated this endlessly. When the (then) Saudi Crown Prince produced the Arab Peace Initiative, we called for its immediate acceptance.

There is no contradiction at all between an Israeli-Palestinian solution and an Israeli-pan-Arab solution. They are one and the same. The Arab League will not make peace without the consent of the Palestinian leadership, and no Palestinian leadership will make peace without the backing of the Arab League. (I pointed this out in an article in Haaretz on the day of Netanyahu's speech.)

Yet some time ago, this "new" idea sprang up in Israel, an association was formed, money was spent to propagate it. Well meaning Leftists joined. Not being born yesterday, I wondered.

Now comes Netanyahu in the General Assembly and proposes exactly the same. Hallelujah! There is a solution! The "regional" one. No need to talk with the wicked Palestinians anymore. We can talk with the "moderate" Arab leaders.

Netanyahu could not be expected to touch on the details. What terms has he in mind? What solution for Palestine? Great

men cannot be bothered with such details.

The whole thing is, of course, ridiculous. Even now, when several Arab states are joining the American coalition against ISIS, not one of them wants to be seen in the company of Israel. The US has asked Israel discreetly and politely to please keep out of it.

NETANYAHU IS always quick to exploit changing circumstances to promote his unchanging attitude.

The latest hot issue is ISIS (or the Islamic State, as it prefers to be called now). The world is appalled by its atrocities. Everyone condemns it.

So Netanyahu connects all his enemies with ISIS. Abbas, Hamas, Iran – they are all ISIS.

In logic classes one learns about the Inuit (Eskimo) who comes to town and for the first time sees glass. He takes it in his mouth and starts to chew. His logic: Ice is transparent. Glass is transparent. Ice can be chewed. So glass can also be chewed.

By the same logic: ISIS is Islamist. ISIS strives for a worldwide Caliphate. Hamas is Islamist. So Hamas wants a worldwide Caliphate.

They all want to dominate the world. Like the "Elders of Zion".

Netanyahu counts on the fact that most people do not know what he is talking about. By the same logic, France belongs to ISIS. Fact: the French revolution chopped off heads. ISIS chops off heads. Some time ago, the British chopped off the head of their king. All ISIS.

In the real world, there is no similarity at all between Hamas and ISIS, except their professed adherence to Islam. ISIS disclaims all national borders, it wants an Islamic world-state. Hamas is fiercely nationalist. It wants a State of Palestine. Nowadays it even talks about the borders of 1967.

There cannot be any similarity between ISIS and Iran. They stand on opposite sides of the historic divide: ISIS is Sunni, Iran is Shiite. ISIS wants to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, and possibly chop off his head, too, while Iran is Assad's main supporter.

ALL THESE facts are well-known to anyone interested in world politics. They are certainly known to the diplomats in the corridors of the UN. So why does Netanyahu repeat these misrepresentations (to use a mild word) from the UN rostrum?

Because he was not speaking to the diplomats. He was speaking to the most primitive voters in Israel, who are proud to have such a fluent English-speaking representative to address the world.

And anyway, who cares what the Goyim think?