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# Israel. A Day In November

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Rahm Emanuel is, so it seems, the American most hated by the leaders of Israel. He is considered the most dangerous opponent of the Netanyahu government in the White House. Behind closed doors, they shower him – if one is to believe the media - with anti-Semitic epithets. “Jewboy” is one of them. In Zionist usage, he is a “self-hating Jew”.

And lo and behold, here he is strolling around the Galilee in shorts. He visits the occupied Golan Heights, which foreign diplomats normally take great pains to avoid. The IDF flies him between its installations. He prays at the Western Wall. A good Jewish tourist from America.

Emanuel's son has reached the age of Bar Mitzva; where better to celebrate than the Land of Israel, where his grandfather was a member of the Irgun – an outfit that the US administration would have branded a terrorist organization, like Hamas today.

In short, the self-hating Jewboy has revealed himself as a Zionist with a warm Jewish heart, an admirer of the IDF and a supporter of the annexation of the Golan Heights.

THE VISIT was not, of course, a passing whim. It joined a long series of gestures by Barack Obama designed to win the hearts of the Jews before the upcoming congressional elections.

It seems that at some stage, months ago, Obama came to the conclusion that he had lost the first round of his contest with Binyamin Netanyahu, and that it would be better to live and fight another day.

He himself spelled it out in a conversation with Jewish leaders: at the beginning of his path in the Middle East he stepped on some landmines. He has learned his lesson.

The result was a campaign of sweet-talk and flattery:

He invited Elie Wiesel, Mr. Holocaust in person, to a private lunch at the White House. Perhaps they exchanged memories about some common experiences, like “How to accept the Nobel Peace Prize and keep a straight face.” Wiesel's contribution to peace is one of the great mysteries of the universe. (My own opinion of Wiesel found its expression in a Hebrew word I invented especially for him: “Shoan” (something like “Holocauster’).)

After that, Obama met with several sets of “Jewish leaders” and told them about his unwavering support for the security of Israel, his admiration for Netanyahu and love for Israel in general. Never mind that just recently a major opinion poll has shown that these “leaders” represent mostly themselves – the great majority of the younger Jewish generation in the US opposes the policies of the Israeli government and is becoming more and more alienated from Israel.

Sending his No. 1 confidante to Israel in the guise of an ardent Zionist and extending an invitation to Netanyahu to come and visit him in the White House are further stages in this campaign.

WHAT IS the aim? Well, that is as clear as the mid-day sun.

On November 2, the 93rd anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, elections will be held in the US. All the seats in the House of Representatives and 34 in the senate will be up for grabs.

For Obama, these elections are hugely important. In the worst case, the Democrats will lose control of one of the houses of Congress, making it impossible for Obama to get most of the laws he desires passed. The best he can realistically hope for is that the Democratic majority in both houses will be reduced, making the life of the President much more difficult.

AIPAC has already shown that it can have a big impact on election results. When the lobby decides to topple a member of Congress, that is the end of his political life. When the lobby concentrates its financial and political might on a certain spot, it is almost invincible.

Obama now needs all the support he can get in both houses. Therefore, he must neutralize the pro-Israel lobby. The expense of the Bar Mitzva party of the Emanuel family was a negligible price to pay for this.

When Obama says that he stepped on a landmine, he means the mine called AIPAC.

THE PHENOMENON itself is nothing new. It repeats itself every four years, and sometimes every two.

Since the first day of the State of Israel, all Israeli governments have been aware that an election year in the US provides them with unparalleled political opportunities.

Israel was founded in May 1948, half a year before the US elections. Harry Truman was in a critical situation. Many believed that he would be roundly defeated. He was in desperate need of money. Some rich Jews dug into their pockets and saved Truman, who won by the skin of his teeth.

All of Truman's political and military aides advised him not to support Israel's independence. But Truman recognized the new state (de facto at least) immediately after it was established.

From that day on, whenever the Israeli government needs US support for a controversial act, it waits for an American election year. This has almost always succeeded. The exception: a week before the 1956 elections, the Ben-Gurion government (urged on by Shimon Peres) invaded Sinai in cahoots with France and the UK. The Israeli leaders believed that no American politician would dare to oppose Israel on the eve of elections.

They were wrong. President Dwight Eisenhower, a former supreme allied commander, was supremely confident of his election victory. Therefore he ignored the Jewish lobby and, together with his Soviet colleague, presented Israel with an ultimatum. That got David Ben-Gurion out of Sinai and Gaza in a jiffy.

Those who hoped that Obama would prove to be a second Eisenhower were wrong. In spite of some resounding successes, his political situation is far from impressive. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has not improved his political health. As a realistic politician, he has decided that this is not the right time to take on the Jewish establishment.

Perhaps he remembered the sober advice of Niccolo Machiavelli: If you can't kill the lion, don't provoke it.

HOWEVER, THERE is a huge landmine buried on the road to election day: the settlement freeze.

When Obama compelled Netanyahu to freeze the settlements officially in the West Bank (and unofficially in East Jerusalem, too), a ten-month period was agreed upon. This will come to an end in September.

When the time comes, Netanyahu will face immense pressures from the settlers and their allies to start building again. "What are you afraid of?" they will say, "two months before the elections Obama will not dare to lift a finger! And (quoting a Jewish sage) if not now, when?"

The situation in Israel will increase the temptation. It seems that "we have never had it so good". There are no attacks. Our economy is booming. In spite of the criticism echoing around the world, Israel's political standing is robust. Just last week Israel was accepted as a member of the OECD, the world's most prestigious economic club. Obama has capitulated. When the army's Homeland Command held extensive exercises this week, the people just winked and did not bother to run to the shelters.

The temptation to renew the building in the settlements will be strong. But Netanyahu will think about the day after. And so will Obama.

AND INDEED, what will happen the day after the elections?

Optimists believe that on that morning, a new era will start. No further elections are planned before November 2012, when Obama's first term expires. For an entire year, at least, he will be free to act.

That is a "window of opportunities". A wide-open window. During this time Obama can realize his hope of bringing peace and retrieve the position of the US in the Middle East. As an added bonus, he will also be able to vent his accumulated fury against Netanyahu.

According to this forecast, in this one year, from the end of 2010 to the end of 2011, the final act of the drama will be enacted. Obama will present an American peace plan, the pressure on the Israeli government will intensify, Israel will finally have to choose between peace and territories, peace will at long last be on its way.

But there is also an opposite forecast: Obama will continue to disappoint, as he has disappointed until now. He will already be thinking about the next presidential election and continue to be afraid of AIPAC.

This forecast has a lot going for it. When I was very young, my father admonished me never, but never, to yield to blackmail. He who pays a blackmailer once will continue to pay to his last day. A blackmailer never lets go of his victim.

(In the course of my life I have tried to adhere to this advice. My technique is this: when somebody tries to blackmail me, threatening to do me some harm, I imagine that he has already done so. This way, the threat loses its sting.)

AIPAC is blackmailing Obama, and until now it has been successful. It will go on doing so after November. Obama should face up to the idea and decide: no more.

Will he have the courage to do so? I don't know. I hope.

*Gush Shalom*, 30 May 2010.