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Ehud von Olmert

THE NAME of Franz von Papen is familiar to everyone who knows the history of the German republic that was born after World War I and that died when Hitler came to power.

What made him deserving of a place in history? Not his talents. On the contrary, during his short term as Reichskanzler (chancellor), he was as much a failure as his predecessors. Neither was he a very interesting person - just an ordinary politician from the minor nobility ("von"), a member of the "Zentrum", a German party like our own "National-Religious Party", before it lost its mind.

No, the name of von Papen is remembered only because he paved the way for the Nazis to take over Germany. It was he who advised the President of the Reich, an almost senile Field Marshal, to appoint Hitler as Reichskanzler. Von Papen told him that Hitler was just another demagogue with a big mouth, who, once in power, was sure to moderate his views. And anyhow, for safety's sake, all the important positions - War Minister, Foreign Minister etc. - would be given to non-Nazis. Hitler would be Kanzler in name only, unable to move.

Well, everybody knows what happened next. After getting his foot in the door with the help of von Papen, Hitler stormed into the building, instituted a reign of terror, threw his opponents (including the assistants of von Papen himself) into concentration camps, changed the law and established the dictatorship that led Germany to disaster.

Now there is a danger of Ehud Olmert becoming the Israeli von Papen.

I HAVE always been careful to avoid the example of the famous shepherd who used to cry "Wolf! Wolf!" just to tease the others.

Many times, this or that Israeli politician has been accused of being a fascist. But to be a fascist, it is not enough to espouse extreme nationalist views or to carry out racist policies.

There is no scientific definition of fascism. But from experience one can say that it is a combination of world view and personality type, radical nationalism, racism, a cult of violence, dictatorship and more. When asked who is a fascist, I answer: When you see one, you will know.

Or, as the Americans say: If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is a duck.

More than once, Menachem Begin was called a fascist, but he was far from it. He was indeed an extreme nationalist, but also a confirmed democrat, with decidedly liberal views (like his guide and master, Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky). Rehavam Ze'evi, who advocated "voluntary transfer" of the Arab population, came close to the definition, but he lacked the special character that makes the fascist.

The only leader in the history of Israel who can accurately be defined as a fascist was Meir Kahane. He did not grow up in this country but was an import from the US. He was and remained alien in appearance and style, and failed to impress the general public.

Now Israeli democracy is threatened by a much more dangerous individual.

AVIGDOR LIBERMAN is a clever person. It is not easy to nail down his views. They are always formulated in a slick and elusive way. But the rule applies to him: When you see him, you will know.

When he came to Israel from the Soviet Union, he already brought with him a racist outlook. He wants a purely Jewish state, with no Arabs. For this, he is prepared, so he says, even to give up Israeli territory in which a dense Arab population is living. He proposes to get these citizens out of Israel, together with the land they are living on. Not a second Naqba, God forbid: the Arabs will not be driven from their lands, as then, but will be expelled together with their land. In return, Israel will annex the territories on which the settlers, one of whom is Liberman himself, are living.

What's wrong with that? The basic idea is wrong: the turning of Israel into a state "cleansed" of Arabs. In German that would be called "Araber-rein". (Actually, it's an inversion of the Nazi phrase: not Juden-rein, but Rein-für-Juden. That is clearly a racist slogan, which appeals to the most primitive instincts of the masses.

The chances of this actually happening are, of course, nil. But the very voicing of this idea prepares the way for something even worse: the simple expulsion of the masses of Arabs from Israel proper and the occupied territories. Without euphemisms, without exchanges of territory, without any kind of spin. Once the fascist genie gets out of the bottle, no power can stop it before it leads to disaster.

The annexation of the settlements will, of course, put an end to any chance of peace.

But the menace of Liberman lies not only in his acknowledged or unacknowledged views. It is imprinted in his character. Witness: he is the sole leader of his party, which is almost entirely composed of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Like previous waves of

immigration, this is a group of people who did not grow up in a democratic society, and tend to have an oversimplified view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Many of them live in Israel as if on an island, read only the local Russian-language press (almost entirely far to the right), and are isolated from the liberal and democratic tendencies in the country. They have pushed out Nathan Sharansky, who looks too weak, and vote for a tough, authoritarian leader whose main election slogan, even in Hebrew-language broadcasts, was "Da, Liberman!" (Yes, Liberman!) What does that remind one of?

Liberman does not hide his intention of totally changing the structure of the Israeli political system and establishing an authoritarian regime, headed by a strong leader (himself). As a first step, he has submitted a bill for the establishment of a "presidential" regime, in which the president would have almost dictatorial powers. He would not be dependent on the Parliament, which would become unimportant, and would control all the instruments of power himself. The immediate model is Vladimir Putin, the gravedigger of Russian democracy, but it seems that Liberman is far more extreme.

WHY DOES Ehud Olmert court this man? Why does he insist on including him in his government and agreeing to vote for his proposals? Why is Libermania fast becoming the hottest topic in Israeli politics?

Simply: Olmert, completely bankrupt, is clutching at straws.

Only seven months after becoming Prime Minister by a stroke of luck - Ariel Sharon's stroke - he is left with nothing, and right with nothing, too, it seems:. The public already understands that the Lebanon War, in all its facets, was a total fiasco. His refusal to appoint a Judicial Commission of Inquiry has deepened the feeling of defeat. The central slogan of his election campaign - "Convergence" - has become a bad joke. From the famous "Social Agenda" nothing has remained. Olmert & Co. have been left without any plan, any mission, except one: to hold on to power at any price.

One of the hallmarks of a person like Liberman is a talent for sensing and exploiting the weaknesses of others. He is making Olmert a seductive offer: he would join the government and bring with him his 11 votes in Parliament - without anything in return. Literally for nothing.

In the past he has demanded the post of Minister of Defense, or at least Minister of Police (officially "Minister of Interior Defense"). Now he talks about a nebulous title: "Minister in Charge of Long-Range Strategy" (translation: the bombing of Iran). But he does not insist even on that. He is prepared to be a minister without portfolio, not even demanding

that two or three of his colleagues also become ministers, as the size of his party would justify.

An offer that cannot be refused. Liberman knows that the title is unimportant. What is important is to get his foot in the door and gain legitimacy as a minister. The rest will come in due course.

For the despairing Olmert, out to hold on to power, this looks like a gift from heaven. He has opponents in the government, especially in the Labor Party. His parliamentary majority is not safe. And here comes Liberman and provides him with complete security in office. People have sold their souls to the devil for less.

The official justification is: "One cannot reject any Zionist party" (a wording that automatically counts out all Israeli Arab parties). Adapting the famous words of Dr Samuel Johnson, it could be said: "Zionism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

Olmert wants to gain some more years - or months, or weeks - in power. Power for its own sake. Power for no cause or purpose, for no idea, for no action. In return, he is ready to open the door to the forces of darkness. What does he care? After him the deluge.

I HAVE said more than once that I believe in Israeli democracy. The immigrants from the Soviet Union are not the only ones who grew up in a dictatorial system - almost all Israelis, or their parents, grew up under tyrannical regimes. But Israeli democracy, the miracle that has no logical explanation, is holding up even in these difficult circumstances.

However, we cannot ignore the dangers that threaten our democracy now. Years of a brutal occupation have corrupted the state and the army, racism is flourishing in our daily life - not only against the inhabitants of the occupied territories, not only against the Arab citizens of Israel proper, not only against foreign workers. There exist in our society deep schisms that can be exploited by fascism in its search for power.

When Rome was in danger from the approaching Carthaginian army, the cry went up: "Hannibal ante portas!" We should now raise the cry: "Liberman at the gate!"

Ehud Olmert will be a passing episode in the annals of Israel. In a few years, nobody will remember him. Unless he acquires the status of the Israeli von Papen.