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A Sparkling Bubble

A FRIEND of mine, who was brought up in Egypt, took part in the interrogation of Egyptian officers captured in the 1956 Sinai war.

An Egyptian lieutenant-colonel told him: "Every time David Ben-Gurion gave a speech declaring that he was holding out his hand for peace, we put our forces on alert."

And, indeed, it was a typical method of Ben-Gurion: before launching a military operation, he would make a speech culminating with "We are holding out our hand for peace!" He frequently added that he was ready to meet the Arab leaders face to face, that he was in favor of negotiations without pre-conditions, and such.

NOW, BEN-GURION has an heir.

True, even in his darkest dreams Ben-Gurion could not have imagined an heir like Olmert - a politician personifying all the traits that Ben-Gurion detested. But, as the Bible says, "the dead praise not the Lord" (Psalm 115) nor can they choose their heirs.

Last week, Olmert went all the way to Ben-Gurion's grave in the remote Negev and made a speech designed to establish his status as his successor. No point wasting words on this pretension. But it is certainly revealing to analyse the speech itself.

On the face of it, a peacenik speech the likes of which we have not heard for some time. Some said that this was an answer to the words addressed to him by the writer David Grossman at the Rabin memorial rally. And indeed, there is a resemblance between the two: just as Grossman's speech was rich in sublime values and poor in practical proposals, so Olmert excelled in impressive phrases but failed the test of content.

WHAT DID he say, after all?

"If you (the Palestinians) set up a new government that will undertake to fulfill the principles of the Quartet, a government that will realize the Road Map and bring about the release of Gilad Shalit - I shall propose to Abu-Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) to meet him immediately, with the aim of conducting a real, open, sincere and serious dialogue between us and you." (I have translated the words literally, since the official translation has edited the text.)

Looks good. But if one looks again, one realizes that it is just a soap bubble.

Since the days of Ben-Gurion, all our governments have used this tactic: say "yes" to every peace proposal, and add a small prior condition that turns "yes" into "no".

What does Olmert demand from the Palestinian government? Little things: to recognize Israel's right to exist without fixed borders (and without Israel recognizing the right of a Palestinian state to exist within the 1967 borders), to stop the violence (without a parallel commitment by Israel) and to recognize all the agreements signed in the past (almost all of which have been violated by Israel no less than by the Palestinians.)

On top of this, the Palestinian government must fulfill its "obligations" under the Road Map. This ridiculous document, a product of Bush & Co., demands that the Palestinians' first step must involve dismantling all the "terror organizations". Meaning: all the military organizations of the Palestinian parties. As long as the occupation is in force, this is a completely impossible and unreasonable demand and the Palestinians, of course, do not agree. It's like demanding that Israel must dismantle the IDF as a first step.

Olmert does not suggest that Israel, too, would follow the Road Map. According to that document, parallel to the dismantling of the Palestinian organizations, Israel must stop all settlement activities. In practice, these were not suspended for a moment and are in full swing even now.

What will happen if the Palestinians fulfill all these one-sided conditions? Olmert will agree to meet Abu-Mazen "*immediately*". What for? In order to conduct a "*real, open, sincere and serious dialogue*."

The words were chosen meticulously. Not "negotiations", God forbid, but "dialogue". A strictly non-committal term. If we eliminate from the text all the nice words that only serve as decorations - "immediately", "real", "open", "sincere", "serious" - all that remains is the agreement to a meeting. Perhaps there are people who are eager to meet Olmert - it's a matter of taste - but this has no political meaning at all.

OLMERT DOES not spare words. "*In the framework of the dialogue* (again "dialogue" and not "negotiations") *and in accordance with the Road Map* (see above) *you (the Palestinians) will be able to establish an independent and viable Palestinian state, with territorial contiguity in Judea and Samaria* (Olmert uses these occupation terms instead of the term "West Bank", which has become a symbol of the opposition to the occupation), *a state with full sovereignty and defined borders.*"

Now that is really nice. No more "temporary borders", as in the Road Map, but "defined borders". Only one little detail: where will these run?

Some might say: one does not disclose his final positions before the start of the negotiations (sorry, dialogue). But the Palestinians are expected to give everything before the start.

"We, the State of Israel, will agree to the evacuation of many territories and the settlements that we have established therein. This is extremely difficult for us - akin to the Parting of the Red Sea (a Hebrew saying) - but we will bear it, in exchange for true peace between us and you."

Sounds nice. But what does it mean? The evacuation of "many territories" and not "all the territories", not even "most of the territories". (In Israeli usage, "territories" means "occupied territories", a term official spokesmen prefer to avoid.)

Also, not "the borders that existed on the eve of the Six-Day War". Not even "borders based on the Green Line", which would allow for small changes and an agreed swap of territories. But a new border which would annex to Israel the "settlement blocs", as defined by the Separation Wall. That means the annexation of at least 10% of the West Bank, and perhaps much more.

And what's to stop that? After all, at this stage the other side would already be disarmed and would have agreed to recognize an Israel without fixed borders.

That is the old plan of Ariel Sharon: to dismantle the small and dispersed settlements, in which some 20% of the settlers live, in order to annex to Israel the territories occupied by the remaining 80%. Olmert does not say what would happen to the expanded Jordan Valley, which constitutes about 20% of the West Bank and which is already completely cut off from it (with the exception of Jericho). Nor does he mention East Jerusalem, in which another 200 thousand settlers have established themselves.

He promises that with the release of the captured soldier, Gilad Shalit, he would be prepared *"to release numerous Palestinian prisoners, including ones who were sentenced to lengthy prison terms, in order to increase the trust between us and prove that we indeed hold out our hand for peace."*

After eliminating all the bla-bla from this sentence, what it says is that he would agree to release veteran prisoners, with "blood on their hands", which he and his predecessors have always refused to do, in return for the soldier, as demanded by Hamas. That only confirms the Palestinian view that Israel understands only the language of force and that it would never give up anything unless compelled to do so.

It seems that Olmert was in an especially generous mood, so he added: *"(After) the cessation of terrorism and violence... we will significantly diminish the number of road-blocks, increase freedom of movement in the territories, facilitate movement of people and goods in both directions, improve the operation of the border-crossings to the Gaza Strip, and release your monies held by us, in order to alleviate the humanitarian hardship which many of you suffer."*

"Thank you, really thank you from the bottom of our hearts," a Palestinian might reply. Not the end of the occupation, not even the lifting of the blockade of Gaza. The dismantling of *some* road-blocks, leaving the others where they are. Not the return of freedom of movement, but an agreement to "increase" the permitted movement. And no opening of the passage between the Gaza strip and the West Bank (as provided for in the Oslo agreement 13 years ago.) But at least, we would give back the Palestinian money "held" by us. "Embezzled" would be a more proper term.

And what did Olmert *not* say in his speech? He did not propose a cease-fire in the West Bank. Why? Perhaps because the army chiefs object. But even a child can understand that without a cease-fire there, the cease-fire in the Gaza Strip will not hold. The members of the organizations in Gaza will not be able to sit still while their defenseless comrades in the West Bank are being arrested, wounded and killed. Not to mention the dismemberment implied in this proposal, contrary to the Oslo agreement, which states unequivocally that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip constitute "a single territorial unit".

SO HOW to define this speech?

It is easy to say what it is not: it is not a "turning point" in the policy of the government. A "turning point" is a change of direction, which would necessitate the preparation of the public, explaining the nature of the change, its reasons and expected results. Nothing of the sort has been done. Even the spokesmen of the extreme right did not get excited.

The correct definition is "spin" - just some more sleight of hand prepared by "image advisors" and publicity experts.

True, even spin can have some positive value. Olmert has decided to devote the spin to matters of peace, not matters of war. This shows that he believes that Israeli public opinion is moving in this direction. The Israeli peace camp can congratulate itself for that. But there is no cause for dancing in the streets.

WHY DID Olmert make such a speech at all? And why now?

There is an internal reason. In Israel, the impression has (quite rightly) gained ground that this is a government without an agenda, without a political plan, a "hollow" government (to use Grossman's phrase), whose only concern is political survival.

Olmert thought it necessary to fill the vacuum and to create the image of a Prime Minister who knows what he is doing and is working towards a clear goal.

And there is also an external reason, which may be more significant. Olmert may be bankrupt, but President Bush is even more desperate. He has come to the Middle East in order to convince the American voter that he knows what he is doing in Iraq and in the whole region. He needs a manifest achievement. He is carrying on the tradition of his predecessors that an American president who does not know what to do turns to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and achieves a "breakthrough".

Bush demanded that Olmert make a gesture to impress the world. So he made a gesture - delivering a speech full of nice phrases and promises with nothing behind them.

It must be remembered: Bush wants to look like a resolute statesman, who is constructing a front of "moderate" Arab leaders against the Evil Axis of Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas. This is why he came to Amman, instead of summoning his servants to Washington. But the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan know the dangers of looking like Israeli agents. So Bush demanded that Olmert include in his speech a reference to the Saudi peace initiative, which was rejected out of hand by the Israeli government after it had been endorsed by all the Arab states. This initiative says that the entire Arab world would recognize Israel and establish normal relations with it if it withdrew to the borders of June 4, 1967. Now, suddenly, Olmert declares that there are "positive" elements in it. But he did not accept it this time either.

Bush has returned home and will forget the whole matter. Olmert's speech will join the many others which were forgotten the day after they were delivered. Just another speech by an Israeli leader "holding out his hand for peace".