

{MAY 4 2004}

THE GOLEM TURNS ON HIS CREATOR

In Jewish legend, the Golem was a man-made creature endowed with enormous strength. Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, also known as the Maharal, created him of clay and gave him life by putting a piece of paper with the secret name of God under his tongue. The Golem helped the Jews defend themselves against anti-Semitic rioters, but one day he turned against his creator. He sowed ruin and destruction, until, at the last moment, the rabbi succeeded in extracting the piece of paper from his mouth. The Golem turned back into a heap of clay.

Ariel Sharon is not a rabbi and the Kabbalah is a closed book to him. But he has created a Golem: the settlement movement in the occupied territories.

He was sure that the Golem would serve him. After all, the settlers owe him everything. It was he who nursed them for decades, diverted funding to them on a massive scale, put at their service all the political positions he occupied one after the other: the ministries of agriculture, defense, foreign affairs, housing, industry and trade, infrastructure, and, finally, the Prime Minister's office.

(I remember about 25 years ago, visiting Sharon at home in the preparation of a biographical essay I was writing about him. My wife and I were sitting in the kitchen with Lilly Sharon, who served us her delicacies, when I noticed that the chiefs of the settlers were sitting in the adjoining room. Sharon himself went back and forth between us, sharing his time with us equally. Even at that early stage the settlers clearly treated him as their patron.)

During all these years, ever since he served as the Commanding General of the Southern Sector in the early 70s, he preached to everybody he met, Israelis and foreigners alike, the gospel of the settlements, spreading maps in front of them (he always has maps) and demanding that they act. According to him, it was vitally important to set up settlements in order to turn all of Eretz Israel - from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, at least - into a Jewish State, to tear the Palestinian territories into ribbons and prevent the creation of a Palestinian state, which would be an obstacle to the achievements of the full aims of Zionism.

Like a bulldozer without brakes, Sharon leveled all opposition. He saw to it that tens

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of billions of dollars were turned over to the settlements (the exact amount cannot be ascertained, being hidden in various corners of the budget), bent the laws to their benefit and enlisted the officers of the army in their service. In this way, a closely woven network of settlements and special roads came into being, with perhaps 250,000 settlers (who is counting?) When he coined the slogan “unilateral disengagement”, it never occurred to him that the settlers might oppose him. Don't they owe him? Are they not his pampered children? Aren't they eternally in his debt?

Sharon offered them a deal that seemed to him eminently reasonable (as it had once looked to Yossi Beilin, who invented it, and then to Ehud Barak, who tried to implement it): Give up the isolated settlements, with a few tens of thousands of settlers, in order to secure the future of the big settlement blocks, with 80% of the settlers, which will be incorporated into Israel. Sacrifice some fingers in order to save the whole body. This way not only do we save the settlement enterprise, but we also gain the better part of the West Bank. But the Golem, once the piece of paper is under his tongue, demonstrates a logic of his own. He does not intend to give up the dozens of small settlements, especially as that is were the hard core of Messianic fanatics lives. He also understood that the evacuation of the first settlement would create a precedent that would endanger all the others. The real settlers may have nothing but contempt for the Gush Katif “settlers”, who are first and foremost calculating businessmen, but they understand the crucial importance of the battle for Gush Katif.

Like the Maharal, Sharon underrated his Golem. He treated him as a servant. How could he respect a creature that he had created with his own hands? Now he is learning that it is much easier to create a Golem than to reverse the process.

In the surfeit of interviews that Sharon gave last weekend, he declared that the settlers are only a small minority of the people. And indeed, even according to the settlers themselves, they constitute less than 4% of the citizens of Israel. But the numbers do not reflect their actual power. In a democratic society, a small, fanatical and highly motivated minority can influence matters more than a big but apathetic and flabby majority.

Sharon speculated on the unpopularity of the settlers in Israel. They are violent and unruly; they speak, dress and behave differently, even their body-language is different. The ordinary Israeli sees them as a bizarre sect. Also, at long last it has dawned on the Israelis that the settlements are devouring the billions that are needed for Israel's economic and social recovery.

But in the course of the decades, the settlers have set up an extensive apparatus of control and propaganda. Patiently, they have infiltrated the army, where they now occupy the key positions once held by Kibbutzniks. Their independent media are

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expanding, while the Left has in the course of the years given up literally all their independent media. The settlers are in possession of huge funds, not only the money that flows to them through hundreds of channels from the state coffers, and not only the lavish donations from American Jewish multi-millionaires, but also from the plentiful resources of the American Christian evangelists.

One may well ask: what foolishness possessed Sharon, when he proposed that the Likud members, of all people, should decide on his plan? Did he not realize that this is the only arena where the settlers can command superior forces?

Why? As usual with victory-drunk generals: out of sheer arrogance and contempt for the opponent. At the pinnacle of political power, he disparaged the settlers. He did not dream of the mass home visits. He underrated their emotional appeal and their well-oiled logistic machine, that was created with the money of the state.

Most of the settlers constitute a disciplined body. Like any messianic sect, they unquestioningly obey their commanders, the “Yesha rabbis” (Yesha is the Hebrew acronym for Judea, Samaria and Gaza.) This is a totalitarian structure, in the true sense of the term: total faith, total organization, total discipline.

“My head supports the Sharon plan, but my heart supports the settlers,” a Likud member confessed. That is quite natural: when a settler pair with attached baby (there is always a baby attached!) knocks at the door and asks: “Do you want to evict us from our home?” - how can he resist? After all, from the day he was born he has heard that the national aim is to possess the whole of Eretz Israel, that the settlers are the salt of the earth, that one can ignore the rest of the world - and suddenly this man, Sharon, comes and says the opposite?

Yet it must be remembered that less than 2% of the Israeli electorate voted against the Sharon plan in this party referendum. (In the last elections, the Likud received less than 30% of the votes. Less than a quarter of these are Likud members, who were entitled to take part in the referendum. Of these, less than half did actually vote, and of these, less than 60% voted against the plan. These, together with the settlers who are not Likud members, compose the Golem.)

One good thing has come from this referendum: suddenly the public has woken up and seen the Golem that has come to life in their midst. From the first moment, the writing was on the wall: the settler movement is sucking the marrow from the state, it is an obstacle to peace, it is a danger to Israeli democracy and to the future of the state itself. Now the general public, too, sees the danger represented by this rampaging Golem.

It is not too late to remove the piece of paper from beneath the Golem’s tongue. Not yet!