

{OCTOBER 1, 2005}

THE GLADIATORS

The contest between Binyamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon in the Likud Central Committee resembled a duel between two gladiators in the Roman arena. The more so since many of the Committee members behaved like the Roman rabble who screamed, rioted and demanded blood.

In this fight, Netanyahu resembled the Retiarius, a gladiator who had nothing on but a short tunic and who sought to entangle his opponent with a cast-net held in his right hand and, if successful, to dispatch him with the trident that he carried in his left. Sharon was like the Secutor, who wore armor and carried a sword. The former had the advantage of mobility and agility, the other moved clumsily but was well protected.

Many heaved a sigh of relief when Netanyahu was defeated at the last minute, contrary to expectations and polls. Since Netanyahu had positioned himself on the extreme right, supporting the settlers and opposing any withdrawal, he made Sharon look like the Man of Peace. But that is, of course, an illusion. The difference between the two, if there is one at all, is negligible. If Netanyahu were Prime Minister, he would behave exactly like Sharon, and in opposition Sharon would behave exactly like Netanyahu.

Sharon is now making both peace-loving and war-like declarations - depending on the audience he is addressing. Before the UN General Assembly and the Americans he sings hymns to peace, but he vows to the Likud that he will not give up another inch. All these declarations are not worth a garlic peeling, to use a Hebrew expression. One should not believe a word he says, only his actions count. In the meantime he builds the Separation Fence, enlarges the settlements, initiates provocations, bombs and arrests.

On the face of it, therefore, nothing that has happened in the Likud Central Committee has any impact on the chances of peace. Just a duel between two gladiators in the arena, much ado about nothing. But that is an optical illusion.

In fact, peace has won a great victory in the Likud arena.

This has nothing to do with the personality or intentions of Sharon, but everything

with the substance of the decision.

In theory, no ideological matter was at stake. The committee members were voting, officially, only on a technical point: whether to hold the primaries for Party Chairman early, next month, or at their scheduled time, in half a year. Big deal.

But what was really at issue was whether to throw Sharon out, because he has uprooted the settlements and withdrawn from the Gaza Strip. The attacks on him were focused on this point. His opponents claimed that he had betrayed the Likud principles, that the Likud opposes the ceding of any part of the “fatherland” to the “Arab enemy”, that the evacuation of any settlement is a crime. That’s what the battle was all about.

The decision was therefore of historic importance. The Likud is the present incarnation of the Revisionist Party, which was founded some 80 years ago under the slogan “The Jordan has two banks – one belongs to us and the other one too.” Its very name reflects this claim. The founder, Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky wanted to annul the 1920 decision of the British government to separate Transjordan (the present Kingdom of Jordan) from Palestine. That was the “revision” he strove to attain.

Even when the party, in its successive incarnations, in practice gave up the claim on Transjordan, it insisted vigorously on “The Whole of Eretz-Israel” between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. In order to achieve this, it promoted the settlements in all the occupied territories, denied the very existence of the Palestinian people and obstructed every step that could have led towards peace.

And now, on Monday, September 26, 2005, the Central Committee of this party has voted for a leader who evacuated and destroyed 25 settlements, has used the Israel Defense Forces to “drive out Jews” and has officially given up a part of Eretz Israel. From this day on, the Likud is not what it used to be.

Some people make light of this victory because of the tiny margin - 52% against 48%. But that is not important. The astounding thing is that any committee members at all voted for the man who did this.

It is being said that this decision was not ideological, but jobological. The committee members voted against their convictions in order keep the Likud in power and save their government jobs. The polls have shown that the Likud would lose the elections if Sharon were thrown out. The head overcame the heart, the greed for power was stronger than the ideology.

If that is true, the victory is even more important. The 3060 members of the Likud Central Committee come from all parts of Israel. They come from all social strata, not just from the “elites”. They sense the mood of the general public. If they have arrived at the conclusion that loyalty to the settlements and Greater Israel will lose them the elections, this has far-reaching significance.

I wrote recently that “the center has held”. Now it is also clear that the right wing has remained loyal to Sharon. His opponents, the Loyalists of Greater Israel, are in a state of collapse. After their rout in the Central Committee, they are foundering among the 100,000 party members. Polls show that a large majority of these now support Sharon. The Likud ministers and Knesset members behave like soldiers of a defeated army after the cry “sauve qui peut” is sounded.

That is not the end of it. On the contrary, we are facing a hard year. Sharon will try to freeze everything, except the building of the Fence and the enlarging of the settlements. The pretext will be the need to wait for the results of the Palestinian elections, in January 2006, in order to know “with whom we are dealing”. After that, the Israeli election will take place, probably in November 2006, and “nobody can expect Sharon to take unpopular steps before elections”. President Bush, who is also a political animal, will surely understand that. The prolonged freeze may cause new disasters.

In spite of this, the long march towards peace has taken another step. A small step, but an important one.

And that in the Likud Central Committee, of all places. Who would have believed it.