

{NOVEMBER 19, 2005}

PLUCKING THE DAISY

Like a maiden plucking the petals of a daisy and murmuring “he will...he will not...he will...he will not...” many of our Leftists are trying to divine what their present idol is going to do.

Will Ariel Sharon remain in the Likud? Will he leave and set up a new party?

They fervently hope for the second possibility. Sharon as the head of a new party is the answer to their prayers – metaphorically, of course, since they do not believe in God – the right-wing general who will carry out a left-wing program. The Israeli de Gaulle, the Great Disengager, will become the leader of the biggest Israeli party and, in alliance with the left-wing parties, create a solid majority for peace.

It’s a fetching idea. There is only one problem: it is completely divorced from reality.

FIRST OF ALL, because Sharon is no de Gaulle.

It is a sad fact that almost all Israelis, including almost all so-called Leftists, have no idea what is actually happening in the West Bank, while the “agreement” imposed on Sharon in the Gaza strip by the exasperated Condoleeza Rice has created some optimism there.

Last week I was again in Bil’in, the heroic Palestinian village that has become the symbol of the struggle against the Fence. With a hail of tear gas canisters and stun grenades raining down on a peaceful demonstration carrying the portraits of Gandhi, Mandela, Arafat and Rabin, it was hard to detect the benevolent spirit of the New Sharon.

The activists – Palestinians, Israelis and “Internationals” – were attacked when they reached the path of the Fence and sat down in front of the bulldozers, which were busy at work putting up the “obstacle” that is cutting the village off from two thirds of its land. On the side that is earmarked for the extension of the huge neighboring settlement, we could clearly see where olive trees have recently been uprooted (presumably to be sold to Israeli villa owners, who like a touch of “authentic”

Palestinian flora.)

All over the West Bank, bad conditions are getting worse. The Fence/Wall is being completed. In Jerusalem, it cuts Arab neighborhoods into pieces, separating parents from sons and daughters, patients from their doctors, students from their schools. Dozens of permanent and temporary roadblocks all over the West Bank make normal activity of any kind impossible. Every night, people are arrested, some killed “while trying to escape”. The number of Palestinians in Israeli prisons is larger than ever.

All over the place, settlements are being enlarged and new ones springing up, disguised as “new neighborhoods” of existing ones. In Bil’in, for example, one could easily see how Modi’in Illit is creeping up, covering hills that just a few weeks ago were still covered with olive trees. Of the hundred or so “outposts”, that Sharon is obligated to evacuate according to the Road Map, not one has been dismantled. As of now, a vociferous debate is going on about whether one single “illegal outpost” – Amona near Ophra – should or should not be removed by force.

No one seeing what is actually going on in the occupied Palestinian territories can really believe that Sharon is on the march towards peace. Fortunately for themselves, the Leftists are blissfully ignorant.

SO WOULD it be a blessing for peace if Sharon sets up his new party?

The contrary is true.

Let’s assume for a moment that Sharon realizes his threat and sets up such a party, and that it wins 35 seats in the coming elections (which will probably be held in March 2006). Let’s further assume that the remaining rump Likud is reduced to 26 seats. That would give them together 61 out of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Even if Labor, under the new leadership of Amir Peretz, increases its share to 30, the Sharon-Likud coalition will hold an absolute majority, which can be reinforced whenever necessary with the religious and extreme-right factions.

In other words, the new party would be a device to lure Leftists and centrist voters to the Right, giving Sharon a free hand to do what he really wants to do - impose unilaterally a “final status” that would annex to Israel more than half the West Bank, condemning the Palestinians to life in small, isolated enclaves, completely dominated by Israel.

Some intelligent Leftists, while conceding that this may be true, assert that “Sharon can change”. After being feted by the whole world as the Man of Peace, he may be intoxicated by this unexpected glory, set up a coalition with Labor and make peace. All I can say is that relying on this would be a huge gamble, playing va banque with the future of our country. Judging from my knowledge of Sharon, the odds are forbidding.

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What Israel needs now is a clear choice between clear alternatives. With the rise of Amir Peretz to the Labor party leadership, such a choice is possible. He unequivocally supports peace negotiations with the Palestinian leadership and a viable Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, as well as a domestic policy balancing economic growth with social solidarity.

In the coming general elections, Peretz may yet attain a surprise victory, as he did in the Labor elections. But even if he fails to propel Labor into the leading position, an impressive gain may create the conditions for the Left to return to power in the elections thereafter.

So, please, throw away the daisy and start working.