

{DECEMBER 17, 2005}

THE PIED PIPER

Some 721 years ago, the town of Hamelin in Germany was suffering from a plague of rats. A citizen called Bunting offered to get rid of them for an agreed fee. When he played on his flute, the entranced rats came out of their holes and followed him to the river where they drowned. But when the piper presented his bill to the town fathers, they wouldn't pay him.

The piper wrought a terrible revenge. He played his pipe once again, and this time all the children of the town came out and followed him. He led them to a cave in a mountain, and none of them was ever seen again.

Ariel Shron is a modern version of the piper. After they had suffered a terrible election defeat, the Likud fathers called on him and begged him to come to their rescue. And, indeed, he blew his pipe and the voters followed him to the ballot box. In two election campaigns he led his party from 19 to 38 Knesset seats (soon joined by Nathan Sharansky's 3 seats).

Did the Likud fathers pay his fee? Nothing of the kind. They turned his life into hell, obstructed him at every turn and, in the end, the Likud Knesset faction itself turned against its own Prime Minister.

Now the day of revenge has dawned. Sharon is blowing his magic pipe and the Likud voters are following him in droves, accompanied by some of the Likud fathers themselves. The remaining Likud may well be drifting down the river, mourned by few.

Not only the children of the Right follow the Pied Piper, but also many of the children of the Left. He is leading them to the mountain that threatens to swallow them up like the poor children of Hamelin.

Yesterday, when I was walking in the street, someone shouted after me: "Hey, when are you joining Sharon?"

"Why would I do that?" I asked him.

"Because he is implementing your plan!" he answered triumphantly.

This illusion is gaining ground. Many Leftists, who have spent the last few years luxuriating in a warm and comfortable despair that releases them from any duty to

AVNERY | THE PIED PIPER

stand up and fight, have now found an even more agreeable solution: Sharon, the man of the Right, will realize the dream of the Left. One has only to vote for Sharon, and then the longed-for peace will come. No need to make any effort, to struggle, even to lift a finger.

“Haaretz” published an article this week by a Leftist, explaining why he will vote for Sharon. It goes like this: Sharon is like de Gaulle. De Gaulle, contrary to his promises, got France out of Algeria and made peace with the insurgents. He lied and cheated for the good cause. Sharon, too, lies and cheats. Ergo, Sharon will get Israel out of the Palestinian territories and make peace. Ain’t it logical?

If anyone is looking for proof, he could find it in this week’s statement by one Kalman Gayer, an American who advises Sharon on opinion polls. He disclosed Sharon’s “real” plan in Newsweek: to give the Palestinians back 90% of the West Bank and to compromise over Jerusalem.

The Likud uttered a heart-rending cry, the Left was bewildered. What? Really? Sharon prepared to “give up” more than Ehud Barak? But someone who is familiar with the peculiar language of Sharon could easily interpret the code: According to Gayer himself, Sharon does not believe that this will happen in his lifetime, because there is no Palestinian partner for peace. So he is prepared, in the meantime, to give back only half of the West Bank.

Thus, miraculously, we come back to Sharon’s original formula: to annex unilaterally 58% of the West Bank, not to conduct any peace negotiations with the Palestinians and to keep the whole of Jerusalem.

In the meantime, Sharon (through his Minister of Defense, who has now followed him out of the Likud) is distributing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of building permits in the settlements, continuing the construction of the wall, destroying Palestinian homes in Jerusalem and maintaining the blockade of the Gaza Strip. His continuous silent effort to undermine the position of Mahmoud Abbas is already bearing fruit. But who cares, when the intoxicating music of the flute is befuddling the senses and the brain of so many peace-loving Leftists?

If Sharon wins the elections, 101 days from now, and returns as Prime Minister – what will he do?

The simple truth is: nobody knows. Certainly not the bunch of “confidants”, “strategists”, “advisors” and other hangers-on. Only Sharon himself knows – and perhaps not even he.

Perhaps pressures will be exerted on him that he will be unable to withstand. Perhaps the opposite will happen, and he will easily fend off the pressures. Perhaps he will take possession of the defeated Likud. Perhaps he will set up a coalition with Labor.

The possibilities are almost endless. The real danger lies in the set-up of Sharon's party itself. It has no ideology but Sharon. No program but Sharon. No plan but Sharon.

This is a party of one leader, committed to nothing. His word is its command. He alone will compose its list of candidates. He alone will draft the party program – which will be irrelevant anyhow, since Sharon alone will decide what to do at any time.

Sharon has never been much of a democrat. Right from the beginning, he has had a profound contempt for parties and politicians. He was and has remained a foreign body in the Knesset. From his early youth he has been firmly convinced that he must become the leader of the people and the state, since he, and he alone, is the one who can save them from perdition. He did not see himself as a leader bound by all kinds of democratic nonsense, like Gulliver bound by the Lilliputians, but as a free agent, released from all bonds, able to fulfill his historic mission: to fix the borders of the Jewish State with the maximum possible area.

He does not hide his intention to change the political system of Israel and to establish a presidential regime. In Israel, a country with neither a constitution nor a strong parliament like the US Congress, such a system means one-man rule. If he succeeds in winning a decisive enough victory in the coming elections, he may be able, with the help of a few bribed lawmakers, to change the laws of the country and turn himself into an all-powerful president – for four years, for seven, for a lifetime.

This danger would not have been so real, if the Israeli democracy had not lost its inner strength. The politicians are detested by the public, the big parties evoke loathing, political corruption has become proverbial. In such a crisis, the public tends to long for a strongman. The man from the Sycamore Ranch is only too happy to oblige.

Sharon does not resemble the great dictators of the between-the-wars era. As has been already pointed out this week (and by a right-wing commentator, of all people) he has much more in common with Juan Peron, the Argentinian dictator of the 1940s and 1950s – a Rightist general in a Leftist disguise, an untrammelled autocrat, who put an end to all vestiges of democracy.

Only one thing is certain for anyone who knows the man: he will never abandon his historic aim: to annex as much territory as possible, with as few Arabs as possible. He has executed the Disengagement Plan with utmost vigor not in order to bring peace, but to realize this principle. Everything else is “pragmatic” – and one should not forget that this term is rooted in the Greek word “pragma”, which means “deed”.

Not the talking is important, but the actions. In dealing with Sharon, one should not listen to his words but pay close attention to his hands. And what his hands do may be quite different from what innocent Leftists may imagine, those that are marching now with eyes closed behind the man with the magic flute.