

{DECEMBER 24, 2005}

'THE MAIN THING IS TO HAVE NO FEAR'

Something bad is happening to the election campaign of Amir Peretz. It is just shuffling around.

The surge that started with his election as leader of Labor has petered out. Events in the country are chasing each other: the “big bang” of the new Kadima party, the acts of prostitution of Shimon Peres and Shaul Mofaz, Ariel Sharon’s minor stroke, the Likud primaries, the Qassam rocket hitting Ashkelon. Peretz has been pushed to the margins.

Of course, the real election campaign has not yet started. In 1999, it was said about Barak, at this stage, “Ehud is not taking off!” and still he soared to victory. Nevertheless, the situation does give cause for concern.

These days, no exciting initiatives are coming out of the Peretz camp. On TV and the radio, the same tired old Labor politicians are churning out the same tired old Labor messages. At the moment, the polls give Peretz 22 seats, compared to 39 for Sharon and 12 for Netanyahu.

There is not much time left. Peretz must make bold strategic decisions. Now. At once. This is a test of leadership. A fateful test, because a defeat would not only spell disaster for the Labor Party, but for the peace camp at large and, indeed, for Israel.

In this battle, as we have said before, the advantage lies with the side that determines where the battle will be fought. It is in the interest of Peretz that the campaign be about social and economic issues, while both Sharon and Netanyahu want to fight it out in the national security arena. The polls show that the majority believes that Peretz is the best candidate to solve the social problems, but a large majority sees in Sharon the only one able to provide security.

The experts surrounding Peretz tell him: speak only about social matters. Don’t speak at all about war and peace, and, if you can’t avoid it, be vague. You must garner votes from the center, and the people there don’t believe in peace.

Sounds logical. But it’s bad advice, nevertheless.

First of all, the question arises whether Peretz is in a position to put the social

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problem at the center of the campaign and impose it on his opponents. That is almost impossible.

In Israel, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense, with the help of the army commanders, can create tension at any time and at any place. It works like this: the army kills a Palestinian militant in a “targeted elimination” and declares that he was a ticking bomb who was planning a suicide attack. His comrades respond with a salvo of Qassam rockets and mortar shells, in the cause of revenge. The army reacts to this “criminal terrorist outbreak” with more assassinations, as well as artillery fire and attacks from the air. And voila, we have our “security tension”.

There are several variations on this theme. Hizballah is always ready to do its bit and “warm up” the northern border, if the Israeli army provides even the slightest provocation. And if nothing happens on the ground, there is always an army intelligence officer ready to sound the alarm: Iran will any minute now have an atom bomb and transport us straight to Alaska.

Sharon and Mofaz have no moral or practical problem with creating bloody headlines. As a matter of fact, one of Peretz’s advisors said so on TV, but was immediately silenced by his colleagues. How can you slander the army in this way? In an election campaign, that will backfire on us! And, as usual, when the national flag goes up the pole, we must all stand at attention and salute. (It was Vladimir Jabotinsky, the spiritual father of the Likud, of all people, who once said: “I shall not stand at attention while somebody sings the national anthem and empties my pockets!”)

If the impression gets around that Peretz has no convincing solution to our existential problems, or – even worse – that he has a solution but is afraid to voice it, his credibility as a candidate for Prime Minister will be zero.

There is no choice. He must speak up. And there is nothing to be afraid of.

Let’s take the Jerusalem question.

For decades now all Israeli governments have been repeating the mantra: “United Jerusalem, capital of Israel for all eternity.” Netanyahu has a bad habit of accusing all his opponents – from Shimon Peres in 1996 to Sylvan Shalom a week ago – of a sinister design to “divide Jerusalem”.

Two weeks ago, Amir Peretz gave in to his advisors and repeated the sacred mantra: he, too, is for the United Jerusalem, Capital of Israel for all Eternity. Amen.

This is a mendacious statement. Every child knows that there will be no peace without East Jerusalem becoming the capital of the Palestinian state. Peretz knows this better than most. Worse, it is a politically stupid statement.

That became clear on the morrow, when Israel’s largest mass-circulation daily, Yediot Ahronoth, published a poll that shocked the politicians: 49% of the Israeli public is

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ready to accept the division of Jerusalem, with another 49% opposed. Since an ordinary person is reluctant to give an answer that runs counter to the perceived consensus, it appears that a majority is now ready for the partition of the city.

I, for one, was not surprised at all. Eight years ago, after Gush Shalom had published a revolutionary manifesto that coined the phrase “United Jerusalem, Capital of the Two States”, I talked about it with a taxi driver. Most of our taxi drivers are super-patriots, so I was not surprised when he cried out: “No! Never!” But his explanation did surprise me: “I don’t want a united Jerusalem! I want the Arabs to get out of my sight! Let them take their neighborhoods in Jerusalem to the devil or to a Palestinian state, I don’t give a damn!”

At that time, already, we broke the taboo surrounding Jerusalem. Within a few weeks, 800 artists, writers, poets and academics signed the manifesto, and thousands of citizens from all walks of life added their signatures. In 2000, when it was (mistakenly) assumed that Ehud Barak at Camp David was about to “give up” East Jerusalem, there was no outcry in the country. Bill Clinton’s Jerusalem formula of January 2001 – “What is Arab should be Palestinian, what is Jewish should be Israeli” – is accepted by many. It is also included in the Geneva Initiative. If Peretz had openly and loudly supported this, he would have gained points.

That is true for the other peace issues, too. Vagueness is good for Sharon, it is bad for Peretz. His strength lies in the fact that his social-economic message is well integrated with his national-security message. They are the two sides of the same coin. That is a refreshing and new message for most of the public. A message that is accurate, moral and also good election tactics.

A personal note: Lest I be suspected of voicing an opinion as one of the inexperienced commentators who have never borne actual responsibility, I would like to point out that I have myself directed five election campaigns for the Knesset and succeeded in four of them. True, it was always for small parties, devoid of money and an apparatus, but as far as the problems and pressures are concerned, the difference is not so big.

One feels that the public is fed up with deceitful campaigns. Voters are becoming more and more suspicious. This time, more than ever, they expect straight talking. And, indeed, after all the upheavals of the last few weeks, the picture that emerges presents the voter with a clear choice between three different options:

- On the right, the Likud, under the leadership of Netanyahu, has clearly shifted to the radical fringe. Netanyahu will now try to don a “moderate” mask, but to no avail. Not only does the party include openly fascist groups, but it is apparent that the entire Likud opposes “giving up” any part of Eretz Yisrael, thus striking peace from the agenda.

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- In the middle, the new Kadima party, under the leadership of Sharon, has given up the idea of a Greater Israel in the whole of the historical country, but opposes a real compromise with the Palestinians, arrived at by negotiation and agreement. Sharon wants to impose by force new permanent borders for Israel, by annexing most of the West Bank and all of East Jerusalem.

- On the left, Labor, under the leadership of Peretz, proposes negotiations with the Palestinians with the aim of achieving peace by compromise.

Peretz will have no chance, if the impression arises that there is no real difference between him and Sharon. He must convince the Labor Party refugees who are attracted by Sharon, that there is a profound difference between his program (negotiations and agreement) and that of Sharon (unilateral diktat). Sharon is interested in downplaying this difference, and by the same logic, Peretz must be interested in emphasizing it.

People in love with ambiguity will vote for Sharon. But a large part of the public, especially in the center, is longing for bold leadership with a clear message. Here – and only here! – lies Peretz's big chance.

As Rabbi Nachman of Braslav said many years ago: "All the world is a narrow bridge, and the main thing is to have no fear at all!"