

{JUNE 26 2004}

'THE STARLING WENT TO THE RAVEN'

An old, worn-out whore who waits in vain for a man to seek her favors is a pitiful sight indeed. The Israeli Labor Party is in this pathetic position, but it is difficult to feel any pity for it. For months now, the party has been waiting at the door of the Sharon government, hoping to be invited in at any moment. From time to time Sharon opens the door, shoots her a contemptuous look and slams the door shut in her face. This week it happened again, for the nth time.

Usually Shimon Peres is blamed for this situation. Quite rightly, of course. Peres is longing for the position of Foreign Minister the way a man dying of thirst in the desert longs for water. As a member of the government he could meet with kings and presidents, take part in international conferences, make solemn declarations and do all the things that give meaning to his life. For him, life in opposition is no life at all.

But the question is: Why was this man elected to his position as executive chairman of the party? Those who elected him knew where he wants to go. After all, he has already served as Sharon's foreign minister, spreading the good tidings that Sharon is no longer Sharon, that the leopard has changed every one of his spots and is now just like one of the sheep on his farm.

As the chief of the largest parliamentary faction outside the governing coalition, Peres is entitled by law to be addressed as the "Leader of the Opposition". No title could suit him less. While Menachem Begin, for example, flourished in opposition and spent 29 happy years there, Peres wilts like a flower without water. He has no idea what to do. If he were offered a plan for opposition activities on a plate, he wouldn't know what to do with it.

From the very beginning of his career, as an instructor in the Working Youth movement, Peres was a man of the government. As an assistant of David Ben-Gurion, as the Director General of the Defense Ministry, as a minister and as Prime Minister - he always identified with the government, worked for the government and represented the government. When Ben-Gurion compelled him to leave Labor in 1965 and participate in the founding of the opposition Raffi party, he was miserable and used the

first pretext to rejoin the government. When he lost an election and was stuck in opposition, he looked for the first opportunity to join a “national unity” government.

From this point of view, Peres is a perfect symbol of his party. From 1933, when it assumed power in the Zionist organization's governing institutions, until the 1977 “upheaval” which brought the Likud to power, Labor enjoyed 44 uninterrupted years in power. Indeed, the Likud victory dumfounded everybody. Until that moment, nobody could even imagine a government without Labor.

At the time, a Member of Parliament could not but pity the Labor members, who drifted along the Knesset corridors like ghosts. When they mounted the rostrum to speak about some subject, they automatically assumed the pose of government spokesmen and had to remind themselves in mid-speech that it was, after all, their job to criticize.

Throughout the last year one could hardly find a single sign that the Labor Party was in opposition. True, it regularly submits no-confidence motions, but that is an empty weekly ritual that is not taken seriously by anybody either in the Knesset or outside.

On no subject whatsoever does Labor really fight the government. It identifies itself with the Thatcherist economic policy of Treasury Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, which hits the poor (who vote for the Likud anyhow) and serves the economic elite (which belongs to the Labor Party). It cannot fight against the settlements, since Peres himself founded the first settlement in the center of the West Bank, Kedumim. The Separation Wall which imprisons the Palestinians in ghettos was initiated by the Labor Party, and when Sharon became Prime Minister he only changed its path. The mantra “We Have No Partner for Peace” was coined by the Labor leaders, Ehud Barak and Shlomo Ben-Ami. The idea of annexing the “settlement blocs” was conceived by Yossi Beilin, then a leading Labor member.

The close relations between Shimon Peres and Ariel Sharon are not accidental. As the prophet Amos said (3,3): “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” Both came from the same place: the court of David Ben-Gurion. Both represent variations of the same ideology. Indeed, as the ancient Hebrew proverb goes: “Not for nothing did the starling go to the raven, but because they are two of the same kind.”

The very name “Labor Party” is a misnomer - it is neither a party nor has it anything to do with labor. It has no roots at all in four of the five major components of Israeli society: the religious, the Oriental Jews, the new immigrants from Russia and the Arab citizens. It is limited to the fifth component – the Ashkenazi (European) Jews, especially the older generation. This is a well-established, privileged, indeed pampered elite that is comfortable in the existing situation, with nothing “burning in its bones” and no inclination whatsoever to get involved in party politics (with the odd exception).

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The party is in a shambles. It has, in fact, no real local branches, only small groups of interested functionaries. Worse: there are no signs of a new leadership, or even new ideas, after the collapse of the old concepts. One sees only a group of tired politicians, each of whom looks out only for himself, fighting to get a few minutes on television, where he can repeat obsolete phrases from the past. The public listens and yawns.

It is these politicians who elected Peres, because they could not agree on any other candidate for party chairman. This is not a symphony orchestra, but only a bunch of street musicians, each with his own tune in his head.

All this would not be important, if it did not have such grave implications. The absence of a real opposition creates a void in the political landscape and leaves the entire arena to Sharon and his henchmen. The small Meretz party, now called "Yahad" ("Together") is no effective opposition either - not only because of its size, but because it suffers from many of Labor's afflictions. It does not take part in the daily battles on the ground. It does not fight against the monstrous wall. The Prime Minister's bribery affair, which would have provided a field day for any real opposition, did not evoke a reaction from Yahad. Labor, of course, kept mum.

The small parties that represent the Arab citizens are much more active, but most of the Jewish public ignores them, much as it ignores the Arab public in general.

This is a disastrous situation. It sows despair among those who are longing for change but see no viable substitute that can assume power. It explains the odd result of all public opinion polls: the majority is ready to make sacrifices for peace, the majority votes for Sharon.

A change of government is impossible without a change of opposition. And a new opposition has a chance of arousing enthusiasm only if its agenda is really opposed to the government's agenda. For that, courage, faith and a fighting spirit are needed.

Until such an opposition comes to life, inside or outside the Labor Party, there is no chance of real political change.