

{OCTOBER 30 2004}

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IRRELEVANT

I remember standing on the roof of a warehouse near Beirut harbor and observing the armed and uniformed PLO fighters, headed by Yasser Arafat, getting on the ships that took them westwards. “End of the Arafat era!” rejoiced the newspapers in Israel the next day. “Arafat is politically a dead horse!” said the radio commentators. “Thank God we are rid of him once and for all!” TV talk-show hosts announced.

When I came back to Tel-Aviv, I was invited to a radio debate. For the sake of balance, a right-wing journalist was also invited. It was Tommy Lapid, the present Minister of Justice. Before entering the studio, we chatted. I wonder if he remembers now what I told him then: “You have buried him a hundred times, and you are going to bury him a hundred times more.”

22 years later, the same announcements fill the media again: “End of the Arafat era! Arafat is politically a dead horse! Thank God we are rid of him once and for all!”

The man who years ago was officially declared by the Israeli government to be “irrelevant”, was headline news all over the world this week. There are very few leaders around whose state of health would command similar attention.

I don’t know how serious his medical condition really is. I only hope that he will recover fully. And I know that if, God forbid, he should pass away, Israelis will learn to appreciate him in his absence.

In the days of the first Camp David conference, a noted Egyptian thinker, Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, told me: “If Arafat didn’t exist, you would have to invent him. With Arafat around, you have a single address to negotiate with and make peace. If he were not there, the Palestinian people might split into a hundred splinters, and you would have to talk with each of them.”

If one does not want peace and prefers a Greater Israel, one does not need Arafat. On the contrary. But if one thinks that peace is essential for Israel to develop and flourish, one needs him very much.

“My hand,” Arafat once said, “is the only hand that can sign a peace agreement with

Israel.”

Since this is so, there is no substitute for Arafat: he is the only Palestinian leader with the towering moral authority that is needed not only to sign a peace treaty with Israel, but – which is even more important – to carry his people with him. Any peace agreement will demand from the Palestinians concessions that will tear their hearts, such as giving up the right to unlimited return of the refugees to the territory of Israel. No other Palestinian leader would have the courage to stand up and ask his people to do this.

Where does his authority come from? I have seen him many times in the company of other Palestinian leaders. Each time I was impressed by the power of authority that he radiates, without any manifestations of power. It is difficult to explain its source. Unlike Fidel Castro, for example, who appeared on the world stage at the same time as Arafat, the Palestinian leader has no army, no vast secret police apparatus and no prisons for his opponents. His power emanates solely from the respect his compatriots accord him as the “Father of the Nation”, the Palestinian George Washington.

Already at our first meeting in besieged Beirut, in July 1982, I was struck by the total absence of ceremonial around him. During meetings, his people interrupt him and debate with him. His authority is clear without the need for any outward signs.

A European reporter once asked me about his hobbies. What does he do when he is not busy with the Palestinian cause? I answered that he has no hobbies, that there is not a single moment when he is not busy with the Palestinian cause. His identification with the Palestinian struggle is total. He has no other life.

Everyone who sees him for the first time in the flesh is amazed by the huge difference between the media personality and the man. On TV he looks fanatical, aggressive. In real life he is a warm person, considerate, radiating emotions. Even a person meeting him for the first time needs only a few minutes to feel like an old acquaintance. He loves to pamper his guests at meals, offering them choice morsels with his fingers. He likes to touch the people he talks with, to take them by the hand and conduct them along the corridors, to offer them small presents.

He is no intellectual, not a man of books and theories. He is all intuition. He grasps things with incredible speed and never forgets details. Once, talking with him, I made a mistake about the number of Agudat Israel members of the Knesset. He corrected me at once. Another time, I got the date of one of the Oslo agreements wrong. He corrected me then, too. “I am an engineer by profession,” he said and laughed. “I never forget a number.”

Like all Arab heroes in history, he is a man of gestures. One gesture is worth a thousand words. On the day of his return to Palestine he invited me in, just when he

was about to give a press conference to the media of the Arab world. He entered the hall, went straight up to me, and after the usual embrace he took my hand and drew me, almost forcibly, towards the tribune. He led me up the stairs, asked his spokesman to get up and seated me next to him. For an hour he spoke in Arabic to the media people, turning to me from time to time for confirmation.

I sat there and racked my brains: What was this whole exhibition about? Suddenly I got it. In this simple way he was showing to the entire Arab world: This is it. I am sitting with the Israelis. I am going to make peace with them.

He flourishes in situations of great stress. I have seen him more than once in such a situation, when he was at his best, focussed, eyes glittering, joking. He is used to this: his whole life consists of ups and downs, successes and failures. He has, of course, made many mistakes (his support of Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War springs to mind), but they pale in comparison to his huge achievement. It was he who created the modern Palestinian national movement when the Palestinian people had almost vanished from the map, and he has brought them to the threshold of national independence. Like Moses, he has led his people from slavery to the gates of the Promised Land. I hope that it will not be said about him that, like Moses, he saw the Promised Land from afar but did not enter it.

Everything he achieved was achieved in face of Israel's colossal material superiority in all fields, the hostility of the Arab governments and the world-wide sympathy for Israel as the state of the Holocaust survivors.

And no less important: for decades he has kept the Palestinians together, in spite of huge internal differences. The Palestinian movement has had almost none of the kind of bloody internal confrontations that have been typical of most liberation movements.

During its first few years, the movement had to function in Arab countries that were afraid of it and tried to suppress it. All its leaders, Arafat included, have been held at one stage or another in Arab prisons. Every one of the Arab regimes has tried to use the Palestinian cause for its own advantage. Arafat needed all the stratagems that have since become his trade-mark. As a Palestinian diplomat once explained to me: "For the movement to survive and advance, Arafat had to use all tricks and ploys, use double-talk and half-truths, play one Arab leader against the other, all this in rapidly changing situations. He always had several balls in the air, never letting one fall to the ground. This way he led our movement forward and brought us to where we are."

Like every leader of a national liberation movement, he had to make the most of the few means at his disposal – shrewdness, violence, diplomacy, propaganda. His steps can be foreseen, if one enters his head and understands the constraints he is working under and the aims he has set himself. In the last 30 years I have not once been taken

AVNERY | THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IRRELEVANT

by surprise, not when he went to Oslo nor when he took charge of the intifada. If Israeli intelligence has so often been caught unawares, it is because they don't understand Palestinian reality. "They know everything and understand nothing," as Boutros Boutros-Ghali once said about Israeli Arabists.

For 45 years now, Arafat has lived in the shadow of death. There was not a moment when a plot to kill him was not being hatched somewhere or other. When I met him in 1982 in besieged Beirut, nobody believed he would get out alive. Since then, Ariel Sharon has been trying to kill him. Half a dozen secret services have been after him. Arafat has an uncanny ability to confound them. He believes that he lives under the protection of Allah. Proof? When his aircraft made a hard crash-landing in the Libyan desert and his bodyguards lost their lives, he walked out almost unscratched.

Once he was asked in my presence if he expected to see the day peace comes. "Both I and Uri Avnery will see this day in our lifetime," he promised. For the sake of Israel's future, I wish him a full recovery.