

Uri Avnery
30.9.06

Because of a Small Nail

HAD HAMLET been a reserve soldier in the Israeli army, he might now declare: "Something is rotten in the State of Israel!"

And indeed, something *is* rotten -

- The President of the State refuses to suspend himself, in face of eight individual accusations of sexual harassment. He whines about a monstrous conspiracy against him and points at Netanyahu's men in the Likud.
- The Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense refuse to resign, in spite of the overwhelming majority of the public's expressed lack of confidence in Ehud Olmert (70%) and Amir Peretz (82%). Instead of agreeing to the establishment of an independent judicial commission of inquiry, they have set up an examining committee that has already lost the confidence of the majority of the public - even before it has started to investigate the events of the Lebanon War.
- The Chief-of-Staff, under attack from retired and serving generals, declares that he "will not take off his uniform until somebody tears it off."
- The chairman of the Knesset Foreign and Military Affairs Committee is indicted for fraud and perjury.
- The Minister of Justice is on trial for pushing his tongue into the mouth of a female soldier.

According to the polls, the overwhelming majority of the population is happy with their personal situation (80%) but depressed about the situation of the state (59%).

So what to do?

Simple: just change the system.

THIS IS a typical Israeli reaction. Perhaps typically human.

When a crisis threatens to upset the foundations of our perceptions, we tend to turn away from the main issue and concentrate all our attention on some detail. Thus we are relieved from questioning our basic beliefs and the world-view we are accustomed to. We take some detail, as small as possible, and put all the blame on it. That's it! Found it! That's the guilty part!

As the old song goes: "All because of a small nail!" So when a major disaster occurs, we find the small nail that caused it, and we need not look further.

For example: the Yom-Kippur war. Why did this bloody war break out at all? Why didn't we accept President Anwar Sadat's earlier offer of peace in exchange for the return of the Sinai? Why did our Ship of Fools blithely sail from the Six-day war to the Yom-Kippur war on a sea of arrogance?

No, such questions were not asked. But what was asked? Things like: Why didn't the army intelligence department warn us that the Egyptians and Syrians were about to attack? Why weren't the reserve units called up in time? Why weren't the "instruments" (tanks and artillery) moved to the canal?

It was called "The Omission". That was the slogan of the mass protest movement that sprang up and swept away Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan.

That's like emptying the ashtray when a car breaks down. Now something similar is happening.

THE POLLS show that the public has no confidence in the leadership. But the public does not say: We voted for these leaders, so we are to blame. That would be an unpleasant admission. What they say is: It's not our fault. So who is to blame? The "system", of course.

That's because our parliamentary democracy does not assure the Prime Minister a full term of four years. He can fall before that. It also compels him to include in his government leaders of the coalition parties, even if they are quite incompetent to direct their ministries. The Prime Minister cannot plan long-term policy, nor put capable experts in charge of the ministries.

That's very bad. Therefore, we must adopt the American system. The people will elect a president, who will serve at least four full years. He will choose a cabinet composed of outstanding personalities, each one an expert in his field. Thus Zion will be redeemed.

THIS IS the purest snake oil - one bottle to cure all illnesses, without pain and without delay.

First of all, one cannot simply transfer a political system from one country to another. Every state has its own tradition, its own specific culture, its own social set-up. A political system must grow from within. It cannot be imposed on another people. When one tries to do that, the society adapts it to its own requirements and changes it beyond recognition. (Japan after World War II springs to mind.) Only out-of-touch professors in ivory towers could imagine that the illnesses of a society can be cured by an ideal political system copied from another country.

That has already been proven in Israel: under the influence of some professors, our "system" was changed some years ago. It was decided that the Prime Minister would be elected directly, separately from the Knesset elections. But soon it became obvious that this system was worse than the one

before it. So the Wise Ones took counsel and changed the whole thing back again.

But there's no need for us to go through that experience ourselves. In order to appreciate the advantages of the presidential system, it's enough to look at the situation in its homeland: the United States.

What has this system achieved there? Indeed, the president has at least four full years, but many would add "alas!" When it is discovered that a complete idiot has been elected and embroils his country in disastrous adventures, he cannot be removed. In our parliamentary system, as in the United Kingdom, a Prime Minister can be removed with comparative ease. Tony Blair will be gone within a year, while George Bush serves out his full term.

Are the American ministers more competent than ours? Is Donald Rumsfeld less of a disaster than Amir Peretz?

Moreover, in order to be elected president, a candidate needs huge sums of money. Such heavy money can come only from interest groups, lobbies and large corporations. The American system is corrupt to the core - a corruption so deep and wide, it makes the sins of Olmert & Co. look innocent.

BUT LOGIC is not the key to this discussion, because the demand for system change is serving as a cover for something much more sinister: the call for a Leader.

Such calls always arise in times of crisis. When there is a feeling of defeat and a climate of distrust of the old leadership, people long for a strong father. Democracy looks weak and rotten, especially faced with the legend that the politicians have "prevented the army from winning." A strong leader solves problems with an iron fist. A policy of dialogue and agreements is something for weaklings.

It must be clear: the proposal to adopt the presidential system is nothing other than a disguised call for an all-powerful leader. One has only to look at those who propose it.

The foremost advocate of "system change" is Avigdor Liberman, the leader of the "Israel Our Home" party, composed mainly of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This is a party of the radical Right - to use an understatement. In other countries, they might be called by another name.

"Israel Our Home" stands for unbridled nationalism and xenophobia. It is more radical than Joerg Haider in Austria and Jean-Marie Le-Pen in France. It calls for all Palestinians to leave the country, including the Arab citizens of Israel proper, who constitute 20% of the population. That does not prevent Ehud Olmert from declaring publicly that he would like to have this party in his government. (When Haider joined the Austrian government, Israel recalled its ambassador from Vienna.)

Lieberman, who wants to be Minister of Defense, has set five conditions for joining the government, headed by the demand for the adoption of the presidential system. It is quite clear who his candidate for president is: Avigdor Lieberman.

The polls say that if elections were held now, Lieberman's party would get 16 seats in the 120-seat Knesset (compared to 11 seats in the present assembly). To this, one must add the nine seats occupied in the present Knesset by the "National Union", whose leader, a knitted-kippa-wearing general, publicly demands the expulsion of all Arabs from the occupied Palestinian territories, and the withdrawal of democratic rights from the Arab citizens of Israel itself. When such parties constitute a fifth of the voting public, there is certainly cause for concern.

I BELIEVE in Israeli democracy. It is an incredible phenomenon, considering where most Israeli citizens or their parents came from: Czarist and Communist Russia, the Poland of Pilsudsky and his heirs, Morocco, Iraq, Iran and Syria - in addition to those born in colonial Palestine under the rule of the British High Commissioner. Like the resurrection of the Hebrew language, which has no parallel in the world, this democracy is a miracle. (This means, of course, democracy in Israel proper. In the occupied territories, a very different situation prevails.)

I don't believe that there is a concrete danger of the rise of fascism at present. But we have to be on our guard, every day and every hour. Several factors may promote fascist tendencies here: the feeling of defeat in war, the legend of the "the stab in the back of the army", lack of confidence in the democratic system, a widening gap between rich and poor, incitement against the national minority described as a Fifth Column.

That is more than a small nail.