

{AUGUST 13, 2005}

A MIRACLE OF RARE DEVICE

A picture engraved in memory: Ariel Sharon in the Knesset. Around him the storm is raging. The Members rush about, shouts ring out from all sides. The Member on the podium waves his arms, denounces and curses him. Sharon sitting at the government table. Alone. Immovable. Massive and passive. No muscle in his face is moving. Not even the nervous tic of his nose, that was once his trade-mark (and that many people considered a kind of lie-detector). A rock in the raging sea.

This is the man who decided alone to withdraw from Gaza and dismantle the settlements. The man who is implementing this practically alone. The man who will stand this coming week facing a hurricane that has no equal in the history of Israel.

A believer in God might say: this is a miracle from heaven. Mysterious are the ways of the Almighty. The patron of the settlements, the man who planned most of them, put them where they are and helped them to strike root and expand – he is the man who is now setting the fateful precedent of dismantling settlements in this country.

The dimensions of the “miracle” can be grasped only by posing some hypothetical questions: What would be happening if the Labor Party were in power, if Shimon Peres were in charge, if Ariel Sharon were leading the opposition and commanding the orange-shirts? The very thought is a nightmare.

If this were the only miracle that is happening to us – that would be plenty. But it is accompanied by a second miracle: the Israeli army is conducting the fight against the settlers. That is a miracle so wondrous that it could make the most secular pork-eater run to his rabbi.

For 37 years, the Israeli army has been the Settlers Defense Army. It has planned, openly and in secret, the placement of the settlements, including the “illegal” settlement outposts all over the West Bank. It has devoted most of its forces and resources to their defense. That has reached grotesque dimensions: for example, the Netzarim settlement, in the middle of the Gaza Strip, was defended by three whole battalions. Seventeen male and female soldiers lost their lives in the defense of

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Netzarim, about which Ariel Sharon said some years ago: “Netzarim’s fate is the same as Tel-Aviv’s!” The story about the settlers’ children going to music classes escorted by armored troop carriers has become a part of Israeli folklore.

Between the army and the settlers, a real symbiosis has come into being. The boundary between them is now blurred: many settlers are army officers, the army has heavily armed the settlements in the guise of “territorial defense”. In recent years, a sustained effort has been made by the national-religious camp to infiltrate the junior, middle and senior ranks of the officers’ corps, and fill the gap left by the kibbutzniks, who have all but disappeared from the ranks. The creation of the “arrangement yeshivot”, homogeneous units who obey their national-religious rabbis, was a betrayal of the core values of the national army – even more than the release from compulsory army duty of tens of thousands of Orthodox seminar pupils.

In hundreds of demonstrations of peace activists against the establishment of settlements, they were faced by soldiers who lobbed tear gas grenades at them and shot rubber-coated bullets, and sometimes live ammunition. When the settlers drove Palestinian villagers from their olive groves, stole their olives and uprooted their trees, the soldiers generally defended the robbers and evicted the robbed.

And lo and behold, the same officers and soldiers are about to uproot settlements and evict settlers, to defend the Israeli democracy and fight its enemies. Well, with kid gloves and sweet talk, but still.

We must not be deterred from calling things by their names: the present struggle is a kind of civil war, even if – miraculously, again – no blood will be spilled. The Yesha people are a revolutionary movement. Their real aim is to overturn the democratic system and impose the reign of their rabbis. Anyone who has studied the history of revolutions knows that the role of the army is the decisive factor. As long as the army stands united behind the regime, the revolution is condemned to failure. Only when the army is disintegrating or joins the rebels, the revolution can win. Therefore, the settlers cannot win this battle.

Thirty two years ago, the senior army officers blocked General Sharon’s path to the Chief-of-Staff’s office. Now they stand united behind Prime Minister Sharon. If that is not a miracle, what is?

Of course, all these only look like miracles. They have quite natural causes.

The foreign journalists who are besieging Gaza at this moment are asking again and again: Why did he do it? What caused him to devise the disengagement plan?

This question has several answers. Like every historic event, the withdrawal has more than one motive.

The plan was not the result of consultations. Prior to it, there was no orderly staff-

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work, neither military nor civil. Sharon just drew it from his sleeve, so to speak, when he threw it into the air a year and a half ago. It answered several immediate requirements.

When he was one of the prominent army generals, Sharon was known as a “tactical” general, in the style of Erwin Rommel and George Patton, rather than a “strategic” general, like Dwight Eisenhower and Georgi Zhukov. He had an intuitive grasp of the battlefield, but not the ability to think several moves ahead. He brought with him the same attributes to political life. This explains the circumstances of the birth of the “disengagement”.

As will be remembered, the Americans demanded that he come up with some peace initiative. President Bush needed this in order to demonstrate his promotion of peace and democracy in the Middle East. For Sharon, the American connection in general, and the Bush connection in particular, is a central pillar of our national security. The unilateral disengagement plan looks somewhat like a peace plan, and therefore it delivers the goods. Yesterday Sharon reiterated in a press interview: “I prefer to reach an agreement with the Americans rather than to reach an agreement with the Arabs.”

He also wanted to preempt other peace plans that were hovering around. The “Geneva Initiative” was gathering momentum throughout the world, foreign dignitaries were lending it their support. Sharon’s Disengagement Plan swept it from the table. Later, it did the same for the Road Map, which required Sharon to freeze the settlements and remove the “outposts”. When the disengagement started on its road, the Road Map became an empty vessel. The Americans pay it, for the time being, only lip service. (That may change after the disengagement, as President Bush hinted this week in a special interview with Israeli TV).

Of course, Sharon did not remotely expect a life-and-death struggle with the settlers, his protégées and house-guests. He was sure that he would be able to convince them that his was a wise and farsighted move.

Then there were the mortar shells and Qassam missiles, which played an important role. The Israeli army had no ready answer to these weapons, and the price of holding the Gaza Strip was becoming too great a strain on the army’s resources.

The enemies of the disengagement are (literally) shouting from the roof-tops that Sharon’s real motive was to divert attention from the corruption affairs in which he and his two sons are involved. That is certainly a wild exaggeration. If this had been the only reason, another initiative could have been started, such as a little war. But it may have been a contributory factor.

However, behind all these motives there stand, more importantly, the personality and world-view of Sharon himself.

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More than once it has been said that he is a megalomaniac, a man of brute force, a man who despises everybody, a man who steamrolls over any opposition. All this is true, but there is more to it than that.

Already dozens of years ago, Sharon reached the conclusion that he was the only person capable of leading the nation. That fate chose him to save the people of Israel and set their course for the coming generations. That all the other people around, politicians and generals, are midgets whose coming to power would bring untold disaster on Israel. The conclusion: anyone who blocks his way is committing a crime against the state and the people. That is, of course, true also for anyone who hinders the disengagement, which is – for him – the first chapter of his Grand Design.

Sharon's world-view is simple, not to say primitive. The vision of Vladimir Jabotinsky, the ideologue-poet from Odessa (and spiritual father of the present-day Likud), is quite foreign to the boy born in the cooperative village of Kfar Malal. Menachem Begin, with his Polish ideas of honor, was also foreign to him, and in his heart he despised him. His real mentor was David Ben-Gurion.

Sharon's is a classic Zionist ideology, consistent and pragmatic: to enlarge the borders of the Jewish State as much as possible, in a continuing process, without including in it a non-Jewish population. To settle everywhere possible, using every possible trick. To do much and talk little about it. To make declarations about the desire for peace, but not to make a peace that would hinder expansion and settlement.

Moshe Dayan, another pupil of Ben-Gurion's, in one of his more revealing speeches, preached to the country's youth that this is a continuous enterprise. "You have not started it, and you will not finish it!" he said. In another important speech, Dayan said that the Arabs are looking on while we turn the land of their forefathers into our land, and they will never reconcile themselves to that. The conflict is a permanent situation.

That is also Sharon's outlook. He wants to expand Israel's borders as much as possible, and minimize the number of Arabs within them. Therefore it makes sense to him to give up the tiny Gaza strip with the million and half Palestinians living there, and also the centers of Palestinian population in the West Bank. He wants to annex the settlement blocs and the sparsely populated areas, where new settlement blocs can be set up. He is content to leave to future generations the problem of the Palestinian enclaves.

Ben-Gurion laid down a basic principle: the State of Israel has no borders. Borders freeze the existing situation, and to this Israel cannot agree. Therefore, all his successors, including Yitzhak Rabin, were ready to reach interim agreements, but never a final agreement that would fix permanent borders. That's why Sharon insists that all his steps are unilateral, and that, after the disengagement, new interim

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agreements may be reached – but under no circumstances a final peace agreement.

This approach may necessitate the dismantling of more settlements in the West Bank – small, isolated settlements in areas where no new settlement blocs can be established because of the density of the Palestinian population. This idea makes it practically certain that there will be more clashes with the settlers, whose hard core did not grow up on the teachings of Ben-Gurion but on the vision of the messianic rabbis, who think about the border of the Land Promised by God. Sharon's pragmatism does not impress them.

In order to put the state firmly on his tracks and to make sure that it will move forward on them for the coming decades, Sharon needs another term of office. Binyamin Netanyahu, whom Sharon considers a little politician with a big mouth, is endangering his design. For him, that is a crime against Israel.

Many oppose the disengagement because of Sharon's long-term intentions.

But history shows that intentions are not necessarily important. Those who set in motion historical processes do not control the results. What counts are the results, not the intentions. The fathers of the French Revolution did not intend to give birth to Napoleon, Karl Marx certainly did not intend to set up Stalin's Gulag-empire.

This week, a great event will take place: for the first time, settlements in Palestine are being removed. The Settlement enterprise, which has always moved forward, is for the first time moving backwards.

And that is more important than the intentions – good or bad – of Ariel Sharon.