

{NOVEMBER 5, 2005}

PERETZ IS NOT PERES

“**T**hus saith the Lord: For three transgressions of the Labor Party, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof...” If the prophet Amos were living today, one of the chapters of his book would probably have begun with these words.

But the transgressions of the party since the 1967 Six Day War are more than three or four. They could fill several chapters of the book of the prophet from Tekoa. Here is a partial list:

- Immediately after the 1967 war, Labor Prime Minister Levy Eshkol missed the historic opportunity to offer the Palestinians the opportunity to establish their state and to make peace for generations to come (as I suggested to him at the time in private conversation and a public letter.) Territory was more important to him than peace.

- In 1974, Shimon Peres set up the first settlement in the heart of the West Bank – Kedumim, which has been terrorizing its Palestinian neighbors to this day.

- In the early 70s, Labor Prime Minister Golda Meir ignored the peace overtures of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. 2000 Israeli youngsters paid for this with their lives, together with thousands of Egyptians. It was she who declared: “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people”.

- In 1982, both Peres and Yitzhak Rabin supported the onslaught of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon on Lebanon, and a year later they supported the stupid decision to set up the “Security Zone”, which prolonged the war for 27 more years. At the same time, the occupation of the Palestinian territories became more brutal and the number of settlements increased, leading to the outbreak of the first intifada.

- After Rabin and Peres at long last drew the conclusion from the intifada, recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization and accepted the 1993 Oslo agreements, they soon violated them by not opening the promised “safe passages” between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and not carrying out the third and main withdrawal. The establishment of new settlements continued.

- In order to assure his election after the murder of Rabin, Peres started a small war

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in Lebanon in 1996, which ended with the slaughter of dozens of refugees at Kana. Also, he approved the killing of the “engineer” Yikhye Ayash. As could have been foreseen, the result was a series of suicide attacks and Peres’ election defeat.

- After Yasser Arafat refused to accept Labor Party Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s ultimatum-like offers at the 2000 Camp David summit, Barak declared that the Palestinians wanted to destroy Israel and that “there is nobody to talk with”. The result was the collapse of the peace camp, the rout of the labor Party and the ascent of Sharon to power.

- All this time, the party conducted an economic policy that widened the abyss between rich and poor, nearly destroyed the Histadrut labor union federation and created a ticking social bomb that may explode at any time.

The main representative of this line was Shimon Peres, whose spirit has been hovering over the party for decades. This week he wants to be reelected chairman of the party. The only real candidate who can prevent this is Histadrut leader Amir Peretz.

ONE of the main advantages of Peretz is the last letter of his name (in Hebrew): Peretz is not Peres.

It is being said that the Labor Party is in a state of stagnation. That is an understatement. It is at an advanced stage of decomposition.

It may well be asked: What has that got to do with a person like me, who has not been – nor ever will be – a member of the Labor Party? It has got a lot to do with me. Because the two big parties – Labor and Likud – are the pillars of our parliamentary-party system, the basis of Israeli democracy. The breakup of one of them, not to mention both, without viable substitutes, undermines the foundations of our democratic existence. It brings back hideous memories from the collapse of the Weimar republic in Germany.

For almost five years now the Labor Party has been the hostage of Shimon Peres. Under his leadership, it has lost any remnant of an independent world view, national or social. When Sharon came to power, Peres became his world-wide spin-doctor and spokesman. Until then, the world associated Sharon with the Kibia massacre of 1953, the 1982 assault on Lebanon and the Sabra-Shatila slaughter. It was Shimon Peres, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who gained him world-wide acceptance as a respectable statesman.

After the half-comic intermezzo of leaving the government for election purposes, Peres delivered his party again to the second Sharon government, where it became the main supporter of the “disengagement”. He did not put up any conditions: neither that

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the withdrawal should be carried out in agreement with the Palestinians, nor that the territory should really be liberated, nor that the withdrawal should lead to negotiations for the withdrawal from the West Bank.

We see the result now: the Gaza Strip has turned into a big prison, the occupation there continues by other means (isolation from the West Bank and the entire world), living conditions there have become even worse (who thought that this was possible?) The result: the bloodshed goes on, and will probably get more terrible.

We see and read every day how the Labor Party enables Sharon to carry out his design – to annex to Israel 58% of the West Bank, turning the rest into enclaves cut off from each other, and the building of the Separation Wall, which was a brainchild of the Labor Party to start with, and which annexes great swathes of the West Bank to Israel. The roadblocks. The enlargement of the settlements at a frantic pace. The dismantling of the “outposts” is not even up for discussion. The assassinations and arrests continue even after the Palestinians have declared a cease-fire, which Sharon refused to join. There is no peace negotiation, and the Minister of Defense has asserted that peace must wait “for the next generation”. Without any political achievements at all, the position of Mahmoud Abbas is undermined, creating again the desired situation where “there is nobody to talk with”.

On the social level, the government, with the support of the Labor Party, is widening the income gap and deepening poverty. Regarding this Thatcherite policy, there is no real difference between Sharon, Netanyahu and Peres, empty slogans notwithstanding.

No wonder that in this situation, the party itself is degenerating. People are fed up not only with Peres, but with the whole bunch of politicians that surround him – indeed with the entire democratic system. There is no life in the party, no debate, no activity at all.

ISRAELI democracy needs an opposition party, with an alternative world view and corresponding policies. The Labor Party will not be such, as long as Peres & Co. are smothering it. Therefore, the removal of Peres from the party leadership is a necessary precondition for any renewal. It seems that in the present circumstances, only Amir Peretz can achieve that.

I don't know Peretz from close up and I cannot judge whether he has the ability to lead the party and the nation. But he has several political advantages which no other party leader possesses: he has a clear social agenda, he has been consistent in his support of peace with the Palestinians, he is an authentic representative of the Oriental Jewish public, without being an “ethnic” politician. He radiates activism, has direct

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contact with the public and has proved his ability as the leader of the Histadrut. Now he must be given a chance to stand the test as a party and national leader. I hope that he will succeed.

But even if he turns out to be disappointing as a Labor leader, a victory for him in the party primaries, this week, would be a blessing. An interim period under Peretz would clear the terrain of the failed old politicians, open the gates for new, young forces and return to the party the ability to act as a fighting opposition.

In Hebrew, Peretz happens to mean “breakthrough”.