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Who's The Boss?

ON THE first day of the new Israeli government, the fog cleared: it's a Lieberman government.

The day started with a celebration at the President's office. All the members of this bloated government - 30 ministers and 8 deputy ministers - were dressed up in their best finery and posed for a group photo. Binyamin Netanyahu read an uninspired speech, which included the worn-out clichés that are necessary to set the world at ease: the government is committed to peace, it will negotiate with the Palestinian Authority, bla-bla-bla.

Avigdor Lieberman hurried from there to the foreign Office, for the ceremonial change of ministers. He, too, made a speech - but it was not a routine speech at all.

"Si vis pacem, para bellum - if you want peace, prepare for war," declared the new Foreign Minister. When a diplomat quotes this ancient Roman saying, the world pays no attention to the first part, but only to the second. Coming from the mouth of the already infamous Lieberman, it was a clear threat: the new government is entering upon a path of war, not of peace.

With this sentence, Lieberman negated Netanyahu's speech and made headlines around the world. He confirmed the worst apprehensions connected with the creation of this government.

Not content with quoting the Romans, he explained specifically why he used this motto. Concessions, he said, do not bring peace, but quite the reverse. The world respected and admired Israel when it won the Six-day war.

Two fallacies in one sentence. Returning occupied territory is not a "concession". When a thief is compelled to return stolen property, or when a squatter vacates an apartment that does not belong to him, that is not a "concession". And the admiration for Israel in 1967 came from a world that saw us as a little, valiant country that had stood up to mighty armies out to destroy us. But today's Israel looks like a brutal Goliath, while the occupied Palestinians are now viewed as a David with his slingshot, fighting for his life.

With this speech, Lieberman succeeded in stirring the world, but even more in humiliating Netanyahu. He exposed the peace declarations of the new Prime Minister as nothing but soap bubbles.

However, the world (as I wrote last week) wants to be deceived. A White House spokesman announced that as far as the American administration is concerned, it is Netanyahu's bla-bla-bla that counts, not Lieberman's straight talking. And Hillary Clinton was not ashamed to call Lieberman and congratulate him on assuming office.

THAT WAS the first test of strength inside the Netanyahu-Lieberman-Barak triangle. Lieberman has demonstrated his contempt for both Netanyahu and Barak.

His political base is secure, because he is the only person who can topple the government at any moment. After the Knesset debate on the new government, only 69 members voted for it. If one adds the five Labor members who "were present but did not participate in the vote" (a voting device that is less negative than abstaining), the government has 74 votes. Meaning: without Lieberman's 15 members, the government does not command a majority.

His speech was intended to underline this political reality. He as much as told Netanyahu: If you intend to shut me up, forget it. In fact, he held a pistol to Netanyahu's head - in this case, it could be a German Luger Parabellum, a pistol whose name derives from the Roman saying.

The full extent of Lieberman's Chutzpah came to the fore only an hour later. From the Foreign Office ceremony he hurried to another ritual ministerial handover, this time at the Ministry for Internal Security (formerly called the Ministry of Police).

What business did he have there? None. It is highly unusual for a minister to attend such a ceremony in another ministry. True, the new Internal Security minister, Yitzhak Aharonovitch, belongs to Lieberman's party, but that is not relevant. After all, he did not attend the similar ceremony at the Immigration Absorption ministry, where another member of his party was installed.

The riddle was solved the next day, when the freshly installed Foreign Minister spent seven hours in a police interrogation room, answering questions about suspected bribery, money laundering and such, in connection with huge sums that were transferred from abroad to a company that belongs to his 23 year old daughter.

That explains his presence at the police ministry ceremony. He was photographed standing next to the chiefs of the criminal investigation department. It would be hard to see his appearance there as anything other than a crude and shameless threat against those who were to interrogate him on the morrow.

His presence at the ceremony declared: I am the man who appointed the minister who is now in charge of each of your careers, for promotion or termination. And the same message went out to the judges: I have appointed the new Justice Minister, and I shall decide upon the promotion of all of you.

IT ALL reminds me of a diplomatic reception at the Egyptian embassy exactly 10 years ago. There I met most of the members of the new government which had just been formed by Ehud Barak. All of them were depressed.

Barak had done something that bordered on sadism: he had appointed every minister to the post most unsuitable for them. The gentle and polite Professor Shlomo Ben-Ami was appointed Minister of Internal Security (where he failed miserably during the October 2000 disturbances, when he failed to prevent his police from killing a dozen Arab citizens.) Yossi Beilin, a diplomat with a very fertile mind, a natural candidate for the Foreign Office, was appointed Justice Minister. And so on. In private conversations, all of them vented their bitterness against Barak.

Now Netanyahu has trumped Barak. The appointment of Lieberman as Foreign Minister borders on the insane. The appointment of Yuval Steinitz, a professor of philosophy and a personal friend of Netanyahu's wife, Sarah, a man devoid of any economic experience whatsoever, as Minister of the Treasury, at the height of the world financial crises, crosses the border of the absurd. The appointment of the No. 2 Likud leader, Silvan Shalom, to two junior ministries has made him into a deadly enemy. The creation of a long list of new and hollow ministries, just to provide jobs to his cronies, has turned the government into a popular joke ("a Minister for Incoming Mail and a Minister for Outgoing Mail").

BUT A government is no joke. And Lieberman is no joke. Far from it.

Already on his first day he made clear that he - he and not Netanyahu or Barak - will set the style of the new government, both because of his strong political position and his massive personal presence and provocative character.

He will maintain this government as long as it suits him and overthrow it the moment he feels that new elections will give him supreme power.

His rude and violent style is both natural and calculated. It is intended to threaten, to appeal to the most primitive types in society, to draw public attention and to assure media coverage. All these are reminiscent of other countries and other regimes. The first one to congratulate him was - not by chance - the ex-fascist Foreign Minister of Italy.

This week, earlier statements by Lieberman were quoted again and again. He once proposed bombing the huge Aswan dam, an act that would have caused a terrible Tsunami-like deluge and killed many millions of Egyptians. Another time he proposed delivering an ultimatum to the Palestinians: At 8 am we shall bomb your commercial centers, at noon your gas stations, at 2 pm your banks, and so on.

He has proposed drowning thousands of Palestinian prisoners, offering to provide the necessary buses to take them to the coast. Another time he proposed deporting 90% of the 1.2 million Arab citizens of Israel. Recently he told the President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, one of the staunchest allies of the Israeli leadership, to "go to hell".

In the recent election campaign his official program included the demand to annul the citizenship of any Arab who did not prove his loyalty to Israel. That was also his main slogan. This, too, is reminiscent of the programs of certain parties in history.

This is coupled with an open hostility to the Israeli "elites" and everything connected with the founders of the State of Israel.

SOME PEOPLE believe that Lieberman is really not a new phenomenon at all and that he simply brings to the surface traits that were there all the time but were buried beneath a thick layer of sanctimonious hypocrisy.

What is his solution to the historic Israeli-Arab conflict? In the past, he spoke about a regime of cantons for the Palestinians. They will live in several enclaves in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which will be disconnected from each other and dominated by Israel. No Palestinian State, of course, no Arab East Jerusalem. He even proposed adding to these cantons some areas of Israel inhabited by a dense Palestinian population, whose Israeli citizenship would be revoked.

This is not so far from the ideas of Sharon, nor from those of Netanyahu, who declares that the Palestinians will "govern themselves" - of course without a state, without a currency, without control of the border crossings, without harbors and airports.

At the Foreign Office ceremony, Lieberman declared that the Annapolis agreement, which was dictated by President Bush, is invalid, and that only the "Road Map" counts. The Foreign Ministry spokesmen hurried to explain that the "Road Map" also speaks about "two states". They forgot to remind the world that the Israeli government had "accepted" the Road Map only with 14 provisos that rob it of any content. For example: that Palestinians must "destroy the terrorist infrastructure" (What is that? Who decides?) before Israel shall make any move, including the freeze of the settlements.

(That may remind one of the rich Jew in the Shtetl, who dictated his Last Will and Testament, dividing his wealth between his relatives and friends and adding: "In case of my death, this Will shall be null and void.")

As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, the controversy between Olmert and Livni on the one side and Netanyahu and Lieberman on the other is about tactics rather than strategy. The strategy of all of them is to prevent the creation of a normal, free and viable Palestinian state. Tzipi Livni was for a tactic of endless negotiations, decorated with pronouncement about peace and "two nation-states". Not for nothing did Netanyahu mock her: You had several years to achieve agreement with the Palestinians. So why didn't you?

This debate is not about peace, but about a "peace process".

But in the meantime Tzipi Livni settles into her new job as the Leader of the Opposition. Her first speeches were vigorous and hard-hitting. We shall soon know if she can fill this job with content. If having to speak about peace will convince her of its value and turn her into a real alternative to the government of Lieberman and Liebermania.