

Opinion & Comment

HAARETZ

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This, too, is violence

A common sight at construction sites throughout the country is luxury properties with seductive advertising signs, and piles of construction waste next to them that no one seems to be in a hurry to remove. Instead of trees and green spaces, the new tenants get an empty lot littered with debris that all too often is toxic.

The piles of construction waste reflect disregard for the law. The extent of the phenomenon is manifest in separate studies on the enforcement of environmental legislation that were published recently by the Jerusalem Institute of Israel Studies, Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University. Judging by the findings of the researchers, those who dump construction waste and pollute the country's air and its water sources have little to worry about.

The studies show that the offenders are rarely caught – only 1 out of 1,000 environmental scofflaws is apprehended – and when they are, the punishments meted out are laughable. They are most commonly given small fines, which many offenders don't bother to pay. In the absence of sufficient trained personnel and adequate pollution-monitoring equipments, the worst polluters often escape unpunished.

The Environmental Protection Ministry doesn't have the human resources and the budget to effectively enforce the law, and the enforcement powers given to local authorities are inadequate. This must be changed, but important as heightening enforcement might be it is not enough. Israeli society needs a more profound change, one that will bring about general acknowledgment that damaging the environment is an act of violence against the public and against Israel's landscape and nature in Israel. These deserve protection in their own right, quite apart from their importance to humanity.

Recognition of the gravity of environmental crime must come from the courts, which, according to the studies, rarely sentence offenders to prison and levy fines that are minuscule relative to the range provided by legislation. The lenient sentences are handed out by judges who wax poetic on the importance of the environment and the need to protect the land. It is time to pair these fine speeches with punishments that are sufficiently heavy to serve as a deterrent – so that Israel can indeed be a country that is fit for human habitation.

Ben Simon splits duties



Amos Biderman | amosh@haaretz.co.il

Yoel Marcus

A Nobel too early

David Ben-Gurion was not invited to the White House until the end of his term, and needed various excuses to meet with the presidents in hotels. In Benjamin Netanyahu's case, the fear of not meeting with Barack Obama made him sweat.

On the eve of his trip to the Jewish Federations' General Assembly in Washington, D.C., Netanyahu faced unflattering headlines saying it was not certain whether President Obama would meet him.

There are two likely reasons for the move. One is that Bibi was all-too-confident that the moment his feet hit American soil, the White House doors would open before him – as they did with Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The second possibility is that Netanyahu's excessive confidence angered Obama, who thought he was taking the meeting with him for granted. And so his aides advised him to let Netanyahu sweat.

And sweat he did. The fact that he didn't take his wife Sara with him indicates that the president's advisers didn't want the meeting to look too intimate and informal. In his previous term as prime minister, Netanyahu brought not only his wife but two of his children to Clinton's office. To the embarrassment of those present, the kids started throwing cushions at each other in the Oval Office.

In reality, there is no major difference in the relations between the two states. The Americans have not stopped the aid or the modern weapons supply to Israel. The only thing that can be said is that Bibi and Obama have not developed

a personal, intimate relationship.

The White House and whoever is stirring things up over there has reduced the familiarity level to that of humiliation. For example, they released a photograph of Obama speaking on the phone with Netanyahu with his feet on the desk. This was their way of hinting that Obama is not Bush and does not see the prime minister as the king of Israel.

Just when the polls in Israel are showing that most of the public supports Bibi – who aspires to reach an agreement with the Palestinians – it's unclear why Obama had to kick-start the peace in Cairo with a reconciliation call to Islam. The result has been one big disappointment. Obama has not received from the Muslim world as much as a gesture to advance the Israeli-Palestinian arrangement, while Netanyahu has announced that Israel supports negotiations on the principle of two states for two peoples without any preconditions.

Instead of seizing the bull by the horns and setting about to open the negotiations immediately, Obama hesitated. Then Mahmoud Abbas brought up all kinds of conditions – starting with the demand to stop all the construction in the territories immediately. Olmert and Tzipi Livni held talks with Abbas for two years; not once did he raise the demand that Israel must first stop the construction in the West Bank for natural growth.

It is not clear how one can set about to hold negotiations "without preconditions" when the Palestinians are demanding the cessation of construction in the territories. Israel will have to concede in this area anyway, while conducting a

complicated struggle – perhaps even an internecine war – to achieve peace.

Netanyahu has still made it clear that he is willing to negotiate an agreement with no preconditions. He says the same about a possible agreement with Syria. Once he used those slogans to avoid the issue. Now, in his second term, Netanyahu wants to succeed and he has the parliamentary majority to do so.

But Obama is in trouble at home. Democrats were recently defeated in both Virginia and New Jersey, where Republicans were elected. The defeat does not bode well for the congressional elections due next November. Meanwhile, Obama's great promise, on the issue of health insurance, is moving along slowly.

Apart from his rhetorical skills, Obama has failed to keep a single promise or solve one major problem during his time in office. In this situation he cannot afford to lose the support of the Jews, who are behind 40 percent of the contributions to the Democrats' elections. Meanwhile, the cold shoulder Obama is giving us and the hazing he's put Bibi through have achieved nothing but Abbas' announcement that he would not be running for the next Palestinian Authority elections. Perhaps he will and perhaps he won't.

While Israel is seriously talking about the peace process, Obama has problems at home. His list of disappointments now includes his failure to create a mechanism to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Obama received the Nobel Peace prize too early. I wonder if they have a mechanism in Oslo to take it back.

Eldad Yaniv

When there was a leader here

December 31, 2005, a Saturday, was a pleasant winter day. The short-list of candidates for Kadima's party slate in the upcoming 17th Knesset election came and went at Ariel Sharon's Sycamore Ranch like would-be reality show participants. Who even thought about the catheterization to repair a "heart defect" he was scheduled to undergo the following Thursday?

The whole world was behind us then. No one had heard of Richard Goldstone, and Sharon's son Omri joked with the security guards that if one of the hopefuls were to step out of the line and charge in the direction of his father, armed with a chair, they should refrain from opening fire and understand that it is heated and tense because everyone wants to make the ticket.

And Sharon? "Thanks for taking the trouble to come," he told each of the visitors, "and have a bite to eat on the way out, OK?" And to those who were not too shy to ask the eternal prime minister what he still wished for, he said that as someone who joined the pre-state Haganah underground army at age 17 and fought in the War of Independence, he is allowed to want to come full circle – to win this battle and finally declare Israel's permanent borders. Then we'll take care of education and personal security "so it will be possible to continue to live here. Right?"

The following Wednesday Sharon sold the state's interest in Bank Leumi in the afternoon and returned to the ranch in the evening, where he collapsed. During the ascent to Jerusalem and the hospital, he sank into a coma. And then Ehud Olmert came along, who turned a private joke into a matter of national security and appointed Amir Peretz defense minister. The Second Lebanon War began and the Israeli ship of state lost its bearings. Instead of being victorious, Israel



Archive: Eyal Warshavsky / BauBau

Sharon. Almost completed the job begun by Ben-Gurion and advanced by Rabin.

returned to endless negotiations with the Palestinians.

So what does it matter if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is right? Despite his efforts, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas refuses to extend his hand in peace. So what else is new? Did Abbas really extend his hand to Olmert and close a peace deal? And what about Yasser Arafat vis-a-vis Ehud Barak when the latter was prime minister.

For a few months there were rumors.

Here MK Ahmed Tibi (United Arab List) let slip a half hint to journalist Nahum Barnea; there Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat threw a crumb to news agencies, saying that the Palestinians are abandoning the two-state solution. Perhaps that's because there never was anyone to talk to there, and maybe because suddenly the penny dropped and they realized it was better to wait – in less than 10 years there will be a solid Palestinian majority between the Mediterranean Sea and

the Jordan River, and they can say goodbye to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

If that's the case, what are we waiting for? Until it's clear that Shaul Mofaz's plan also has no partner? Until Netanyahu falls and Tzipi Livni takes his place to again hold talks with Abbas or his successors, and then we will again discover that there is no one to talk to?

The task of our generation is to complete the job of establishing the state that David Ben-Gurion began at 4 P.M. on a Friday. Yitzhak Rabin advanced the process at Oslo, and Sharon almost completed it. The three of them understood that Israel within the borders of the British Mandate had to be partitioned, if possible with the consent of the Palestinians and if not then with the consent of the world.

And when we carry out the partition, will there still be Qassam rockets? It is reasonable to assume that there will be – and from Lebanon as well, from where Katyushas are fired from time to time. But Israel will be saved as a Jewish and democratic state for generations to come and the Israeli army will deal with the rockets from our recognized borders. The world will no longer be dealing with the Palestinian issue and we will be freed to deal with education and with personal security and with saving the Negev and the Galilee, and to address the problems of the towns in the periphery and with establishing an exemplary society.

Those who do not believe in fate can imagine what might have happened to Israel had physicians Dr. Shlomo Segev and Dr. Boleslaw Goldman scheduled Sharon's catheterization for Tuesday. Perhaps Barack Obama would not have won the Nobel Peace Prize, but Israel would definitely have been on the right path. Because Sharon would still be with us.

Nehemia Shtrasler

The way the wind blows

There are many kinds of leadership. There's visionary leadership. There's leadership by personal example. There's leadership characterized by change and courage. But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has developed his own unique style – leadership by the licked finger.

It seems that every morning he opens the window in his office, licks his finger and sticks it outside. That's how he checks which way the wind is blowing. From the moment the direction is clear, he acts accordingly. It doesn't matter what he himself had decided the day before or what the reasons were. Today is a new day and the direction of the wind is always changing.

And in addition to his finger, Netanyahu has a more sophisticated way of gauging the prevailing winds: opinion polls, which he constantly commissions on every possible subject, and based on which he then makes his decisions. That's how his decision to freeze the drought tax came about, despite the fact that he supported it just four months ago when the bill passed the Knesset as part of the Economic Arrangements Bill, which supplements the budget. New polls show the prime minister that the public doesn't like the tax (because who likes taxes?) – but he wants so much for the public to like him, right this very minute.

Netanyahu is not capable of withstanding the pressure and Knesset members know that. Over the past two weeks they initiated a well-orchestrated campaign against the drought tax. Some called for outright defiance of the provision, while others proposed rescinding it. All of them reveled in the broad populist campaign – yet there was not a single Knesset member who would say that the emperor has no clothes.

Of course it is known that the Water Authority didn't impose the tax on a whim. And the forlorn state of the coastal and mountain aquifers is well known, while the level of Lake Kinneret approaches the critical "black line." We are in the midst of a five-year drought without an end in sight. True, there were several rainy days recently, but they in no way alter the general shortfall of water.

Netanyahu knows the drought tax works; it saved 80 million cubic meters of water. But facts make no impression on him. Only populism speaks to him. The same thing happened regarding the proposal to impose value-added tax on fruits and vegetables. Netanyahu correctly decided to broaden VAT provisions to include fruits and vegetables, because there is no difference between

a tomato (on which VAT is not paid) and bread and milk and a computer for a child (on which it is paid). But there was an outcry from Knesset members, special interests fomented a rebellion, the public didn't like the tax and Netanyahu commissioned a poll. The prime minister then responded to "the public's murmurings" and canceled the VAT provision.

When swine flu became a major focus of public attention, Netanyahu wouldn't permit the Health Ministry to solve the problem alone. Instead, he contacted the media with the dramatic declaration that he'd personally decided to buy enough vaccinations for the entire population – whatever the expense – because he is the father of us all, who is taking care of us, so we should like him.

We have received a very different Netanyahu than the one who was finance minister in 2003. Back then he had principles. He was ready to confront public opinion and to do battle with his cabinet colleagues. Back then he showed real leadership. Now, however, he has betrayed all of his principles and shown an impressive ability to capitulate. He gave in to Shas and agreed to raise the child allowances that he himself had cut. He formed a bloated cabinet with 30 ministers and nine deputy ministers, because he understood that this was how he could win the hearts of the politicians. (During his first term as prime minister, by contrast, he formed a lean cabinet with 18 ministers.) This time around he also added funding for yeshivas and yeshiva students to the basic state budget, a move that every previous prime minister had opposed. In addition, he has no intention to cut the yeshiva budget by NIS 314 million, despite a cabinet decision to that effect.

Netanyahu caved in to Ehud Barak and increased the defense budget by NIS 1.5 billion, despite knowing that the fat must be trimmed from the budget. He also gave veto power to Histadrut labor federation chairman Ofer Eini, which will make it impossible to enact important reforms regarding electricity and water production as well as port administration. This is how he has broken the tablets of the commandments that he himself had written.

Leadership involves the ability to make difficult and unpopular decisions that will lead the people forward over the long term. A leader is not supposed to look for the median point of public sentiment. He should instead pave a new path forward and convince the public to take his route toward a better future. That, however, is the opposite of Netanyahu's licked-finger method.

Alexander Yakobson

To keep the bond strong

The Anti-Defamation League recently published a comprehensive survey on American attitudes toward Israel. It turns out that support for Israel is still strong, and has even grown in recent years.

The 2009 Survey of American Attitudes toward Israel, the Palestinians and Prospects for Peace in the Middle East found that 67% of Americans see Israel as a country to be counted on as a strong, loyal U.S. ally, compared to 63% who thought so in 2003. According to the poll, 64% of Americans continue to believe that Israel is serious about reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians. By a 3:1 ratio, the American people express more sympathy with Israel than with the Palestinians: 45% to 15%. This support for Israel has risen 5% since 2003.

A majority of those surveyed, 64%, do believe that support for Israel makes the United States more likely to be targeted for terrorist attacks. However, 61% also maintain that the United States should continue to support Israel in spite of this risk.

There are very few precedents for this in international relations. True, we should not idealize any country, including the United States, but American foreign policy has an idealistic basis and it works in favor of Israel, to the surprise of quite a few people. It would be a mistake to think that such support comes only from evangelical Christians or is the result of pressure from the Jewish lobby. Backing Israel is in fact one of the issues with the broadest support in American foreign policy.

These numbers provide a large part of the answer to the question that pops up quite often in right-wing circles: What has Israel gained, in terms of international support, from its concessions since the Oslo Accords? The answer is it has gained a huge amount. The support of a majority of Americans is still a much more important factor than all the attacks on Israel and the calls for a boycott. The American people would never have awarded such support to a country they viewed as not pursuing peace.

The Oslo Accords, the Camp David Accords, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech agreeing to a Palestinian state are all part of the reason why 64% of Americans believe Israel is serious about seeking peace.

This is an asset of enormous importance, and it should not be wasted on a dispute with the Obama administration over the expansion of the settlements. The settlements are the main cause for questioning Israel's desire for peace and its willingness for a two-state solution. Even among our best friends in the United States and elsewhere, the great majority disagrees with Israel over this issue. They remain friends and supporters nevertheless, but for other reasons: sympathy for the Jewish people and Israeli democracy, an understanding of Israel's position in the region and doubts as to the Palestinians' willingness to accept Israel – as the survey points out.

There is no real gap between the Obama administration's positions on the settlements and those of the Bush administration. The only difference is that Obama has decided to focus public and diplomatic attention on this issue. From the moment this happened it became clear – beyond any ideological or political dispute – that it is an essential Israeli interest to find a way to reach an agreement with the Americans on a formula for a settlement freeze.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent statements reflect progress toward such a formulation, but the public disagreement, in which the Americans state that Israel is not keeping its commitments as set out in the road map, is not over.

Such a prolonged and public dispute with the United States over the settlements harms Israel. It is a battle where even victory would be a serious defeat. Netanyahu understands America well enough to know that. The question is whether such a critical national interest is a good enough reason in his eyes to confront the extremists within his coalition and party.