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OMENS AND SIGNS IN READING THE POLITICAL MAP

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Rumors are rife and speculation is contagious. Newspapers and airwaves are filled with reports indicating a momentary breakthrough in the peace process. Responses and denials, confirmation and equivocation emanate from official and unofficial sources. Political commentators, foreign correspondents and unnamed senior officials report that Prime Minister Netanyahu intends to reach an agreement with the Palestinians within a matter of days or, at most, several weeks.

The truth of the matter is that Netanyahu is playing it very close to his chest. His cabinet has been left in the dark without any real sense of where the negotiations are going. Even his inner "kitchen cabinet," composed of Minister of Defense Yitzhak Mordechai, Minister of Infrastructure Ariel Sharon and Minister of Trade and Industry Natan Sharansky, is supposedly not fully briefed or aware of the latest wrinkles.

Reduced to reading signs, omens and entrails, the collective political wisdom of intent observers and acute listeners is that the time has come. Supposedly, Netanyahu senses that the situation is ripe. The public is tired of the issue; the right is depressed and frustrated; the left is in disarray. It

is time.

Signs of the Times

The signs are all there: The talk of a national unity government to stymie any defection by Netanyahu's right-wing coalition partners. The recent moves to bring David Levy back into the cabinet and the coalition and thereby shore up the moderate element in the government. Arik Sharon's biting criticism of the prime minister's secretive handling of the negotiations, thereby absolving himself of responsibility for the planned pullback. A burst of near frenzied activity by the right wing to delay, if not prevent, the redeployment. MK Michael Kleiner, who heads the Land of Israel Front in the Knesset, is calling for a plebescite, a referendum, or early elections to determine the will of the people before any pullback is implemented. Meanwhile, the Council of Jewish Settlements in Judea, Samaria and Gaza conducted its first fly-over. As part of its public relations campaign to warn of the danger settlements will face if any further withdrawal takes

place, central committee members of the Likud and the National Religious Party are taking to the skies in chartered flights to see for themselves how much nine percent, eleven percent, or thirteen percent means on the ground. At an estimated cost in excess of one million shekels, this campaign intends to mobilize opposition to the implementation of Netanyahu's perceived imminent decision to withdraw from additional territories.

Full page ads in Israeli newspapers by a coalition of nine right-wing movements warn the prime minister that any decision by the government to withdraw from additional territory of the Land of Israel will trigger a concerted attempt to bring down his government. The sponsoring organizations include the Council of Settlements, Women in Green, and some 300 Orthodox rab-bis who have issued a *halakhic* ban on surrendering any parts of the Land of Israel.

The Timing is Right

Not only is it time, but also the timing is right. Netanyahu has delayed and procrastinated and equivocated as much as he could. Supposedly even he realizes that the Palestinians and the Americans, the Arab world and the European Union, the Israeli public and the political moderates both within his government as well as in opposition, cannot be put off any longer.

In that sense, the time has come to decide. It would also seem that the timing is right. According to the tea leaves, Netanyahu will move on redeployment before the end of the Knesset's summer session at the end of July. By doing so, he will avoid the avalanche of no-confidence motions which would be sure to come in the wake of the redeployment. Meanwhile, leading up to that Knesset recess, the Israeli public, weary of the games politicians play, are caught up with the rest of the world (except perhaps for the United States) in following the Mondial C the World Cup soccer games.

The Mondial for much of the world is like the Superbowl and World Series wrapped into one. The Israel Broadcasting Authority will be televising the World Cup games in their entirety. For an entire month, from June 12 through July 12, soccer will almost totally dominate Channel One's programming every day, from 3:00 pm till after midnight. All the talk shows and entertainment programs will be on a month-long vacation. What better timing for the government to announce its controversial decision on the second withdrawal from the territories.

In reading the tea leaves there are also signs that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has decided not

to do battle against the American initiative with its insistence on a thirteen percent withdrawal as part of the second redeployment scheme. If the Israeli leader intended to seek confrontation with the administration in Washington and oppose their recommendations, it is hardly likely that Netanyahu would antagonize his closest allies and friends in the United States. If Netanyahu intended to fight President Bill Clinton about the redeployment, then it does not make sense that he would alienate the American Jewish community and the Christian fundamentalist evangelical community, both of whom have been Israel's staunchest supporters.

Alienating Israel's Friends

Netanyahu's decision to support the legislative initiative of Shas MK Rafael Pinhasi to prevent missionaries from operating in Israel is of far greater interest to his good friend Jerry Falwell than the question of a few percentage points more or less in the territorial concessions Israel is being pressed to make by President Clinton to the Palestinians. This anti-missionary bill passed its first reading in the Knesset two weeks ago. It has already evoked bitter reactions among Christian evangelical groups in Norway, Sweden, Germany, as well as in the United States. A letter sent to the Israeli embassy in Oslo by the Norwegian Church for Israel protested the proposed law, saying that it opposes the principles of democracy, the covenant of the United Nations, and the concept of freedom of religion.

In similar fashion, it does not make sense that Netanyahu would alienate American Jewry by supporting the controversial conversion bill if he intended to fight Washington over the second redeployment. As one Israeli columnist wrote, "An Israeli leader who, on the eve of a confrontation with the United States, declares war on eighty percent of American Jewry, is like a general who on the eve of a war orders pay cuts for all military personnel. The conversion law should be one of the last things that Netanyahu would want to have hanging around his neck as he marches into battle against the American initiative."

Netanyahu, in supporting the anti-missionary law and the conversion bill, may be signalling that he will not need the propaganda arsenal of Christian evangelists or the political clout of the American Jewish community. This could mean that Netanyahu is gearing up to go along with the American initiative.

By supporting these two odious bills he is looking to curry political support for the second redeployment

from his ultra- Orthodox coalition partners, who regard the Christian missionaries and Conservative and Reform rabbis as more dangerous than Arafat, the PLO, and Hamas.

The Conversion Crisis Erupts Again

Even if Netanyahu may not need the political support of the American Jewish community at this particular juncture, it is difficult to fathom why he and his representatives would so alienate Reform and Conservative religious leaders. The politics of religion might require his reluctant support for the proposed legislation in the Knesset, but it does not justify or explain his confrontation with and alienation of the non-Orthodox Jewish religious movements. The prime minister and his government officials accused the Conservative and Reform leadership of not having dealt fairly and honestly in trying to find an acceptable compromise. The prime minister was quoted as saying, "We had an agreement with the Reform and Conservative movements that they would withdraw the lawsuits and we would stop the legislation. They have now renewed their lawsuits and, therefore, we are forced to return to the legislative process." The Foreign Ministry and the prime minister's office have joined together in trying to blame the Conservative and Reform movements for the breakdown in the effort to reach a compromise in the battle over religious pluralism in Israel. In turn, the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel sent a letter to the prime minister accusing him and the government of presenting a distorted picture of what is behind the present crisis.

Sadly, American Jewish leaders have now shifted their enemy target from the Chief Rabbinate to the prime minister and the Israeli government. They are angry with the prime minister and his government, threatening to "react negatively and with hostility." They are no longer at odds only with an intransigent and petrified rabbinate, but with a dishonest and opportunistic Israeli leadership. "The government of Israel has chosen to blame us and besmirch our name....Gov-ernment spokesmen are playing fast and loose with the facts."

The year-long effort to forge a compromise over the ongoing conversion controversy exploded when the Conservative movement returned to the High Court of Justice, Israel's Supreme Court, petitioning for recognition by the State of Israel of its conversions of adopted children. This case had been frozen for about a year while a government-appointed committee chaired by Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman tried to

hammer out a compromise.

Background to the Conversion Crisis

The core of the controversy is whether the State of Israel recognizes Reform and Conservative rabbis and their conversions performed in Israel. In the 1980s, Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the Interior Ministry must recognize such conversions performed abroad. The current confrontation is over state recognition of non-Orthodox conversions conducted in Israel. After months of meetings, the Ne'eman commission, in January 1998, recommended establishing a joint inter- denominational conversion institute under the auspices of the Jewish Agency. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis would participate in teaching the potential converts, but the actual conversion process would be under the control of the Chief Rabbinate. Israel's Conservative and Reform movements accepted the compromise in principle, but demanded that Israel's Chief Rabbis endorse the recommendations. Not only did the Chief Rabbis not endorse the Ne'eman commission recommendations, but they lashed out at "those who are trying to shake the foundations of the Jewish people. The sages of Israel forbid any cooperation with them and with their methods."

Without the cooperation and agreement of the Chief Rabbinate, the Ne'eman commission recommendations were never endorsed by any of the participating members of the commission, neither on the Orthodox side nor on the non-Orthodox side. The Ne'eman report was never signed, and as such was never formally submitted to the prime minister's office. However, the report was adopted as a Knesset resolution supported by some eighty MKs. The government and the Jewish Agency decided to go it alone and to set up the joint conversion institute, even without the cooperation and involvement of the Chief Rabbinate. The government urged the Reform and Conservative movements to call a two-year truce and give this "historic compromise" a chance. True, there was no guarantee that the Chief Rabbinate would accept graduates of the conversion institute, but in so doing, it would become abundantly clear that then the blame would lie with the intransigent Orthodox rabbinate.

However, both the Conservative and Reform move-ments decided that without the rabbinate's en-

dorsement of the Ne'eman report they were now free to renew their lawsuits to the High Court of Justice. Breaking the freeze on court proceedings triggered legislative activity in the Knesset. If the issue were to go before Israel's Supreme Court, most people would expect the court to rule in favor of recognizing non-Orthodox conversions conducted in the State of Israel. The only way for the Orthodox to thwart this would be to pass legislation granting the Chief Rabbinate exclusive control over conversion. The proposed conversion bill, submitted by the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party, stipulates that only the president of the High Rabbinical Court of Appeals can approve conversions performed in Israel.

This bill passed its preliminary reading with the support of the Netanyahu government a year ago, and since then has been stalled in the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee awaiting the compromise hammered out by the Ne'eman commission.

When the Conservative movement renewed their appeal to Israel's High Court of Justice, Prime Minister Netanyahu initially supported the Haredi legislation. The Reform and Conservative's claim that their suspension of legal initiative had been limited in time went virtually unheard. The government and the public saw their action as breaking the truce and destroying chances for a compromise solution.

This bill has virtually no chance of passage. Three factions within the government coalition C Natan Sharansky's Yisrael B'Aliya, the Third Way, and Tsomet C have all announced that they will vote against it. However, a second legislative initiative would attempt to enshrine in law the recommendations

of the Ne'eman commission. Nonetheless, the Reform and Conservative movements insist that there is little difference between the conversion bill and the Ne'eman legislative initiative. Both would grant the Chief Rabbinate sole authority over conversions in Israel. And even under the Ne'eman proposal, there is no guarantee that the Chief Rabbinate would agree to convert graduates of the proposed joint conversion institute. The conversion crisis may well preoccupy both American Jewish leaders and Haredi legislators to the exclusion of less weighty issues, such as the peace process and the second redeployment. Indeed, the Netanyahu government could fall over this issue of conversion rather than his decision to go ahead with the second redeployment.

Little wonder that both Netanyahu and Ne'eman are now calling for all sides to return to the table for dialogue. "Let us resolve these issues ourselves without a solution imposed upon us by the courts, and without legislation."

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