



On The Wrong Side

By Uri Avnery

January 26, 2009 "Gush Shalom" -- OF ALL the beautiful phrases in Barack Obama's inauguration speech, these are the words that stuck in my mind: "You are on the wrong side of history."

He was talking about the tyrannical regimes of the world. But we, too, should ponder these words

In the last few days I have heard a lot of declarations from Ehud Barak, Tzipi Livni, Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Olmert. And every time, these eight words came back to haunt me: "You are on the wrong side of history!"

Obama was speaking as a man of the 21st century. Our leaders speak the language of the 19th century. They resemble the dinosaurs which once terrorized their neighborhood and were quite unaware of the fact that their time had already passed.

DURING THE rousing celebrations, again and again the multicolored patchwork of the new president's family was mentioned.

All the preceding 43 presidents were white Protestants, except John Kennedy, who was a white Catholic. 38 of them were the descendants of immigrants from the British isles. Of the other five, three were of Dutch ancestry (Theodor and Franklin D. Roosevelt, as well as Martin van Buren) and two of German descent (Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower.)

The face of Obama's family is quite different. The extended family includes whites and the descendants of black slaves, Africans from Kenya, Indonesians, Chinese from Canada, Christians, Muslims and even one Jew (a converted African-American). The two first names of the president himself, Barack Hussein, are Arabic.

This is the face of the new American nation – a mixture of races, religions, countries of origin and skin-colors, an open and diverse society, all of whose members are supposed to be equal and to identify themselves with the "founding fathers". The American Barack Hussein Obama, whose father was born in a Kenyan village, can speak with pride of "George Washington, the father of our nation", of the "American Revolution" (the war of independence against the British), and hold up the example of "our ancestors", who include both the white pioneers and the black slaves who "endured the lash of the whip". That is the perception of a modern nation, multi-cultural and multi-racial: a person joins it by acquiring citizenship, and from this moment on is the heir to all its history.

Israel is the product of the narrow nationalism of the 19th century, a nationalism that was closed and exclusive, based on race and ethnic origin, blood and earth. Israel is a "Jewish State", and a Jew is a person born Jewish or converted according to Jewish religious law (Halakha). Like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it is a state whose mental world is to a large extent conditioned by religion, race and ethnic origin.

When Ehud Barak speaks about the future, he speaks the language of past centuries, in terms of brute force and brutal threats, with armies providing the solution to all problems. That was also the language of George W. Bush who last week slinked out of Washington, a language that already sounds to the Western ear like an echo from the distant past.

The words of the new president are ringing in the air: "Our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please." The key words were "humility and restraint".

Our leaders are now boasting about their part in the Gaza War, in which unbridled military force was unleashed intentionally against a civilian population, men, women and children, with the declared aim of "creating deterrence". In the era that began last Tuesday, such expressions can only arouse shudders.

BETWEEN Israel and the United States a gap has opened this week, a narrow gap, almost invisible – but it may widen into an abyss.

The first signs are small. In his inaugural speech, Obama proclaimed that "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and nonbelievers." Since when? Since when do the Muslims precede the Jews? What has happened to the "Judeo-Christian Heritage"? (A completely false term to start with, since Judaism is much closer to Islam than to Christianity. For example: neither Judaism nor Islam supports the separation of religion and state.)

The very next morning, Obama phoned a number of Middle East leaders. He decided to make a quite unique gesture: placing the first call to Mahmoud Abbas, and only the next to Olmert. The Israeli media could not stomach that. Haaretz, for example, consciously falsified the record by writing - not once but twice in the same issue - that Obama had called "Olmert, Abbas, Mubarak and King Abdallah" (in that order).

Instead of the group of American Jews who had been in charge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during both the Clinton and Bush administrations, Obama, on his very first day in office, appointed an Arab-American, George Mitchell, whose mother had come to America from Lebanon at age 18, and who himself, orphaned from his Irish father, was brought up in a Maronite Christian Lebanese family.

These are not good tidings for the Israeli leaders. For the last 42 years, they have pursued a policy of expansion, occupation and settlements in close cooperation with Washington. They have relied on unlimited American support, from the massive supply of money and arms to the use of the veto in the Security Council. This support was essential to their policy. This support may now be reaching its limits.

It will happen, of course, gradually. The pro-Israel lobby in Washington will continue to put the fear of God into Congress. A huge ship like the United States can change course only very slowly, in a gentle curve. But the turn-around started already on the first day of the Obama administration.

This could not have happened, if America itself had not changed. That is not a political change alone. It is a change in the world-view, in mental outlook, in values. A certain American myth, which is very similar to the Zionist myth, has been replaced by another American myth. Not by accident did Obama devote to this so large a part of his speech (in which, by the way, there was not a single word about the extermination of the Native Americans).

The Gaza War, during which tens of millions of Americans saw the horrible carnage in the Strip (even if rigorous self-censorship cut out all but a tiny part), has hastened the process of drifting apart. Israel, the brave little sister, the loyal ally in Bush's "War on Terror", has turned into the violent Israel, the mad monster, which has no compassion for women and children, the wounded and the sick. And when winds like these are blowing, the Lobby loses height.

The leaders of official Israel do not notice it. They do not feel, as Obama put it in another context, that "the ground has shifted beneath them". They

think that this is no more than a temporary political problem that can be set right with the help of the Lobby and the servile members of Congress.

Our leaders are still intoxicated with war and drunk with violence. They have re-phrased the famous saying of the Prussian general, Carl von Clausewitz into: "War is but a continuation of an election campaign by other means." They compete with each other with vainglorious swagger for their share of the "credit". Tzipi Livni, who cannot compete with the men for the crown of warlord, tries to outdo them in toughness, in bellicosity, in hard-heartedness.

The most brutal is Ehud Barak. Once I called him a "peace criminal", because he brought about the failure of the 2000 Camp David conference and shattered the Israeli peace camp. Now I must call him a "war criminal", as the person who planned the Gaza War knowing that it would murder masses of civilians.

In his own eyes, and in the eyes of a large section of the public, this is a military operation which deserves all praise. His advisors also thought that it would bring him success in the elections. The Labor party, which had been the largest party in the Knesset for decades, had shrunk in the polls to 12, even 9 seats out of 120. With the help of the Gaza atrocity it has now gone up to 16 or so. That's not a landslide, and there's no guarantee that it will not sink again.

What was Barak's mistake? Very simply: every war helps the Right. War, by its very nature, arouses in the population the most primitive emotions – hate and fear, fear and hate. These are the emotions on which the Right has been riding for centuries. Even when it's the "Left" that starts a war, it's still the Right that profits from it. In a state of war, the population prefers an honest-to-goodness Rightist to a phony Leftist.

This is happening to Barak for the second time. When, in 2000, he spread the mantra "I have turned every stone on the way to peace, / I have made the Palestinians unprecedented offers, / They have rejected everything, / There is no one to talk with" - he succeeded not only in blowing the Left to smithereens, but also in paving the way for the ascent of Ariel Sharon in the 2001 elections. Now he is paving the way for Binyamin Netanyahu (hoping, quite openly, to become his minister of defense).

And not only for him. The real victor of the war is a man who had no part in it at all: Avigdor Liberman. His party, which in any normal country would be called fascist, is steadily rising in the polls. Why? Liberman looks and sounds like an Israeli Mussolini, he is an unbridled Arab-hater, a man of the most brutal force. Compared to him, even Netanyahu looks like a softie. A large part of the young generation, nurtured on years of

occupation, killing and destruction, after two atrocious wars, considers him a worthy leader.

WHILE THE US has made a giant jump to the left, Israel is about to jump even further to the right.

Anyone who saw the millions milling around Washington on inauguration day knows that Obama was not speaking only for himself. He was expressing the aspirations of his people, the Zeitgeist.

Between the mental world of Obama and the mental world of Liberman and Netanyahu there is no bridge. Between Obama and Barak and Livni, too, there yawns an abyss. Post-election Israel may find itself on a collision course with post-election America.

Where are the American Jews? The overwhelming majority of them voted for Obama. They will be between the hammer and the anvil – between their government and their natural adherence to Israel. It is reasonable to assume that this will exert pressure from below on the “leaders” of American Jewry, who have incidentally never been elected by anyone, and on organizations like AIPAC. The sturdy stick, on which Israeli leaders are used to lean in times of trouble, may prove to be a broken reed.

Europe, too, is not untouched by the new winds. True, at the end of the war we saw the leaders of Europe – Sarkozy, Merkel, Browne and Zapatero – sitting like schoolchildren behind a desk in class, respectfully listening to the most loathsome arrogant posturing from Ehud Olmert, reciting his text after him. They seemed to approve the atrocities of the war, speaking of the Qassams and forgetting about the occupation, the blockade and the settlements. Probably they will not hang this picture on their office walls.

But during this war masses of Europeans poured into the streets to demonstrate against the horrible events. The same masses saluted Obama on the day of his inauguration.

This is the new world. Perhaps our leaders are now dreaming of the slogan: “Stop the world, I want to get off!” But there is no other world.

YES, WE ARE NOW on the wrong side of history.

Fortunately, there is also another Israel. It is not in the limelight, and its voice is heard only by those who listen out for it. This is a sane, rational Israel, with its face to the future, to progress and peace. In these coming elections, its voice will barely be heard, because all the old parties are standing with their two feet squarely in the world of yesterday.

But what has happened in the United States will have a profound influence on what happens in Israel. The huge majority of Israelis know that we cannot exist without close ties with the US. Obama is now the leader of the world, and we live in this world. When he promises to work “aggressively” for peace between us and the Palestinians, that is a marching order for us.

We want to be on the right side of history. That will take months or years, but I am sure that we shall get there. The time to start is now.