

Uri Avnery - 18.4.09

A Little Red Light

PERHAPS Avigdor Lieberman is only a passing episode in the annals of the State of Israel. Perhaps the fire he is trying to ignite will flicker briefly and go out by itself. Or perhaps the police investigations into the grave corruption affair of which he is suspected will lead to his removal from the public sphere.

But the opposite is also possible. Last week he promised his acolytes that the next elections would bring him to power.

Perhaps Lieberman will prove to be an "Israbluft" (a term he himself likes to use), and be revealed, behind the frightful façade, as nothing more than a run of the mill impostor.

Perhaps this Lieberman will indeed disappear, to be replaced by another, even worse Lieberman.

Either way, we should candidly confront the phenomenon he represents. If one believes that his utterances sound fascist, one has to ask oneself: is there a possibility that a fascist regime might come to power in Israel?

THE INITIAL gut-feeling is a resounding NO. In Israel? In the Jewish State? After the Holocaust which Nazi fascism brought upon us? Can one even imagine that Israelis would become something like the Nazis?

When Yeshayahu Leibowitz coined, many years ago, the term "Judeo-Nazis", the entire country blew up. Even many of his admirers thought that this time the turbulent professor had gone too far.

But Lieberman's slogans do justify him in retrospect.

Some would dismiss Lieberman's achievement in the recent elections. After all, his "Israel is Our Home" party is not the first one to appear from nowhere and win an impressive 15 seats. Exactly the same number that was won by the Dash party of General Yigael Yadin in 1977 and the Shinui party of Tommy Lapid in 2003 – and both disappeared soon after without leaving a trace.

But Lieberman's voters are not like those of Yadin and Lapid, who were ordinary citizens fed up with some particular aspects of Israeli life. Many of his voters are immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who look upon their "Ivett", an immigrant from the ex-Soviet land of Moldova, as a representative of their "sector". Although many of them brought with them from their former homeland a right-wing, anti-democratic and even racist world view, they do not pose by themselves a danger to Israeli democracy.

But the additional power that turned Lieberman's party into the third-largest faction in the new Knesset came from another sort of voter: Israeli-born youngsters, many of whom had recently taken part in the Gaza War. They voted for him because they believed that he would kick the Arab citizens out of Israel, and the Palestinians out of the entire historical country.

These are not marginal people, fanatical or underprivileged, but normal youngsters who finished high-school and served in the army, who dance in the discotheques and intend to found families. If such people are voting en masse for a declared racist with a pungent fascist odor, the phenomenon cannot be ignored.

FIFTY YEARS ago I wrote a book called "The Swastika", in which I described how the Nazis took over Germany. I was helped by my childhood memories. I was 9 years old when the Nazis came

to power. I witnessed the agonies of German democracy and the first steps of the new regime before my parents, in their infinite wisdom, decided to escape and settle in Palestine.

I wrote the book on the eve of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, after realizing that the young generation in Israel knew a lot about the Holocaust but next to nothing about the people who brought it about. What occupied me more than anything else was the question: how could such a monstrous party succeed in coming to power democratically in one of the most civilized countries in the world?

The last chapter of my book was called "It Can Happen Here". That was a paraphrase of the title of a book by the American writer Sinclair Lewis, "It Can't Happen Here", in which he described precisely how it could happen in the United States.

I argued in the book that Nazism was not a specifically German disease, that in certain circumstances any country in the world could be infected by this virus – including our own state. In order to avoid this danger, one had to understand the underlying causes for the development of the disease.

To the assertion that I am "obsessed" by this matter, that I see this danger lurking in every corner, I answer: not true. For years I have avoided dealing with this subject. But it is true that I carry in my head a little red light that comes on when I sense the danger.

This light is now blinking.

WHAT CAUSED the Nazi disease to break out in the past? Why did it break out at a certain time and not at another? Why in Germany and not in another country suffering from similar problems?

The answer is that fascism is a special phenomenon, unlike any other. It is not an "extreme Right", an extension of "nationalist" or "conservative" attitudes. Fascism is the opposite of conservatism in many ways, even though it may appear in a conservative disguise. Also, it is not a radicalization of ordinary, normal nationalism, which exists in every nation.

Fascism is a unique phenomenon and has unique traits: the notion of being a "superior nation", the denial of the humanity of other nations and national minorities, a cult of the leader, a cult of violence, disdain for democracy, an adoration of war, contempt for accepted morality. All these attributes together create the phenomenon, which has no agreed scientific definition.

How did this happen?

Hundreds of books have been written about it, dozens of theories have been put forward, and none of them is satisfying. In all humility I propose a theory of my own, without claiming more validity than any of the others.

According to my perception, a fascist revolution breaks out when a very special personality meets with a very special national situation.

ON THE personality of Adolf Hitler, too, innumerable books have been written. Every phase in his life has been examined under the microscope, each of his actions has been debated relentlessly. There are no secrets about Hitler, yet Hitler has remained an enigma.

One of his most obvious traits was his pathological anti-Semitism, which went far beyond any logic. It remained with him to the very last hour of his life, when he dictated his testament and committed suicide. At the most desperate moments of his war, when his soldiers at the front were crying out for reinforcements and supplies, precious trains were diverted to transport Jews to the

death camps. When the Wehrmacht was suffering from a grievous lack of practically everything, Jewish workers were taken from essential factories to be sent to their death.

Many explanations for this pathological anti-Semitism have been suggested, and all of them have been debunked. Did Hitler want to take revenge on a Jew who was suspected of being his real grandfather? Did he hate the Jewish doctor who treated his beloved mother before she died? Was it a punishment for the Jewish director of the Art school who failed to recognize his genius? Did he hate the poor Jews he came across when he was homeless in Vienna? All of this has been examined and found lacking. The enigma remains.

The same is true for his other personal views and attributes. How did he attain the power to hypnotize the masses? What did he have that made so many people, from all walks of life, identify with him? Whence sprang his unbridled lust for power?

We don't know. There is no full and satisfying explanation. We only know that from among the millions of Germans and Austrians who were living at that time, and the thousands who grew up in similar circumstances, there was (as far as we know) only one Hitler, a unique person. To borrow a term from biology: he was a one-time mutation.

But the unique Hitler would not have become a historic personality if he had not met with Germany in unique circumstances.

GERMANY AT the end of the Weimar republic has also been the subject of many books. What made the German people adopt Nazism? Historical causes, rooted in the terrible catastrophe of the Thirty-year War or even earlier events? The sense of humiliation after the defeat in World War I? The anger at the victors, who ground Germany into the dust and imposed huge indemnities? The terrible inflation of 1923, which wiped out the savings of entire classes? The Great Depression of 1929, which threw millions of decent and diligent Germans into the street?

This question, too, has found no satisfying answer. Other people have also been humiliated. Other people have lost wars. The Great Depression hit dozens of countries. In the US and the UK, too, millions were laid off. Why did fascism not seize power in those countries (except in Italy, of course)?

In my opinion, the fatal spark was ignited at a fateful moment when a people ready for fascism met the man with the attributes of a fascist leader.

What would have happened if Adolf Hitler had been killed in a road accident in the autumn of 1932? Perhaps another Nazi leader would have come to power – but the Holocaust would not have happened, and neither, probably, World War II. His likely replacements – Gregor Strasser, who was No. 2, or Hermann Goering, the flying ace with a morphine addiction – were indeed Nazis, but neither of them was a second Hitler. They lacked his demonic personality.

And what would have happened if Germany had not fallen into the depth of despair? The Western powers could have sensed the danger in time and helped in the reconstruction of the German economy and the reduction of unemployment. They could have abrogated the infamous Versailles Treaty, imposed by the victors after World War I, and allowed Germans to regain their self-respect. The German republic could have been saved, the moral leaders, of which Germany had plenty, could have regained their leadership role.

What would have happened then? Adolf Hitler, whom the widely adored President of the Reich, a Field Marshall, had contemptuously called “the Bohemian lance-corporal”, would have remained a little demagogue on the lunatic fringe. The 20th century would have looked quite different. Tens of millions of casualties of war and six million Jews would have remained alive, without ever knowing what could have happened.

But Hitler did not die early and the German people were not saved from their fate. At the crucial moment they met, and a spark was struck, lighting the fuse that led to the historic explosion.

SUCH A fateful meeting is not, of course, limited to fascism. It has occurred in history in other circumstances and to other persons.

Winston Churchill, for example. His statues dot the British landscape, and he is considered one of the greatest British leaders of all times.

Yet until the late 1930s, Churchill was a political failure. Few admired him, and even fewer liked him. Many of his colleagues detested him with all their hearts. He was considered an egomaniac, an arrogant demagogue, an erratic drunk. But in a moment of existential danger, Britons found in him their mouthpiece and the leader who took their destiny in his hands. It seemed as if during all the first 65 years of his life, Churchill had been preparing for this one moment, and as if Britain had been waiting for precisely this one man.

Would history have looked different if Churchill had died the previous year of coronary thrombosis, lung cancer or cirrhosis of the liver, and Neville Chamberlain had remained in power? We now know that he and his colleagues, including the influential foreign minister, Lord Halifax, seriously considered accepting Hitler's 1940 peace offer, based on the partition of the world between the German and the British empires.

Or Lenin. If the imperial German general staff had not provided the famous sealed train to take him from Zurich to Sweden, from where he proceeded to St. Petersburg, would the Bolshevik revolution, which changed the face of the 20th century, have taken place at all? True, Trotsky was in town before him, and so was Stalin. But neither of the two was a Lenin, and without Lenin it would quite possibly not have happened, and certainly not the way it did.

Perhaps one could add to this list Barack Obama. A very special person, of unique origin and character, who had a fateful meeting with the American people at an important moment of their destiny, when they were suffering from two crises at once – the economic and the political one – which cast their shadow on the entire world.

BACK TO US. Is the State of Israel approaching an existential crisis – moral, political, economic – that could leave it an endangered nation? Can Lieberman, or someone who could take his place, turn out to be a demonic personality like Hitler, or at least Mussolini?

In our present situation there are some dangerous indications. The last war showed a further decline in our moral standards. The hatred towards Israel's Arab minority is on the rise, and so is the hatred towards the occupied Palestinian people who are suffering a slow strangulation. In some circles, the cult of brute force is gaining strength. The democratic regime is in a never-ending crisis. The economic situation may descend into chaos, so that the masses will long for a "strongman". And the belief that we are a "chosen people" is already deeply rooted.

These indications may not necessarily lead to disaster. Absolutely not. History is full of nations in crisis that recovered and returned to normalcy. Besides the real Hitler, who rose to historic heights, there were probably hundreds of other Hitlers, no less crazy and no less talented, who ended their life as bank tellers or frustrated writers, because they did not meet a historic opportunity.

I have a strong faith in the resilience of Israeli society and Israeli democracy. I believe that we have hidden strengths that will come to the fore in an hour of need. Nothing "must" happen. But anything "can" happen. And the little red light won't stop blinking.