

ISRAEL'S OWN TYRANNY OF CLICHES

by Daphne Netanyahu

(Daphne Netanahu is editor in chief of the Israeli on-line Hebrew weekly Maraah Magazine <http://www.maraah-magazine.co.il>).

It turns out that Israel and America share something in common, beyond moral values, strategic interests, and way of life. It's a tyranny of clichés, which with regards to America Jonah Goldberg describes in his recent book of that name.

In Israel, as in the United States, important segments of the news media and the thinking "elite" seek to direct public discourse by imposing glib concepts through constant repetition, turning them into accepted truisms. It's a type of thought control which typifies the essential lack of free market of ideas in Israel, especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

One of the labels that our home-grown moderators of public discourse frequently attach to their opponents' positions is "extremism." The opposite of extremism is of course "moderation", which in turn brings on such wonderful things as "reasonableness" and "evenhandedness." All are worthy of entry into the Israeli Hall of Fame of tyrannical clichés. They all sound nice and good, yet in the political context, what do they really mean? More often than not, they are simply a front for radical ideologies.

In Israel, political views, in particular those labeled "extreme," are not examined in relation to real world situations and problems. Similarly, solutions being proposed are not seriously examined with regard to their quality and effectiveness. Instead, all are discussed in accordance to a seemingly arbitrary scale of "values" which exist in the market of ideas at any given time. The spectrum of such values extends from the "right wing" ("extreme" right wing is the proper connotation), through "moderate positions" to the "left" (absent, of course, the title "extreme"). But the distinction of what is politically on the "right" versus what is "moderate" is not made according to examination of actual facts and actual problems, and thus such titles are left without any inherent value.

What is so "reasonable" about such positions?

Immediately after the 1967 war, then-defense minister Moshe Dayan announced that he would be willing to give to the Arabs the Judea and Samaria territories (relabelled the West Bank) in return for a negotiated peace. Since then, our accumulated experience of 45 years has shown that this idea has no basis in reality. Not only do the two parties not share a common goal, they in fact have opposite ones: Whereas Israel seeks to live and thrive, the Arabs want it to be

annihilated, preferably disappearing along with its Jewish inhabitants . Nevertheless, for the last four and a half decades, the ideas of "land for peace" and later, "a Palestinian state for the sake of peace," are widely called "reasonable" and their promoters "flexible." In fact, the degree of praise for this "flexibility" rises in direct proportion to the percentage of land one is willing to surrender.

If this were only a question of a kind of twisted branding of political views, no great harm done. But in a world of tyrannical clichés, "flexibility" – especially when it comes to negotiating with the Palestinians – has become king. Before Israel's currency of clichés took hold, there were very few Israelis, in the days following the Six-Day War, who were willing to give the Arabs the entire West Bank for peace. Moreover, those who were willing to include Jerusalem in this transaction could be counted on the fingers of one hand; they were considered to be almost delusional. Yet, not so long ago – despite all that the Palestinians have shown us about their real intentions through violence, public praise of slaughtering of Jews, and their non-stop hate-indoctrination – this same deal was offered to the Arabs by two Israeli prime ministers who belong to what is now often described as the political center: Ehud Olmert and Ehud Barak.

When the mistakes made by the neighborhood grocer always turn out in his favor, it's not too farfetched to assume that they are not accidental. The same can be said about the so-called "flexibility" that for years has been taking over the Israeli marketplace of ideas. For it is always heading in one direction, towards demanding more and more concessions from Israel, never mind even recent developments such as the "Arab Spring," Hamas's control over Gaza, or Hezbollah's domination of Lebanon. Since the demand for flexibility always aims to bring about a leftward shift of public opinion, one could easily conclude that this demand is no mere accident, but is deliberate and the result of someone's doing.

According to the evolved labeling principle, yesterday's radical views are now granted the status of "moderation" held by the "political center," thus allowing room for more radical views in the left. But in truth, it is unclear what is so moderate about the idea of "two states for two peoples" in the very narrow strip of land west of the Jordan River. Not is it clear what is so reasonable about giving a state to a terrorist authority which not only declares suicide bombers to be national martyrs, but also denies the very existence of a Jewish people, not to mention their right to statehood.

There is no point in trying to pinpoint the reasons why such views are considered "moderate." But there is a certain logic in the methods and goals of those promoting them . By using tyrannical clichés, they exploit the natural desire of human beings to be considered "moderate" and "reasonable." Such desire stems not only from the generally positive connotation that the word "moderate"

has in non-political daily use, but also from a simple human need to be comfortably surrounded on all sides by others, or in other words to be in the “center.”

This kind of “moderation” in stance can be achieved more easily when the facts themselves become irrelevant as a yardstick by which people measure their political views, when their position relative to others becomes their only guideline. Meanwhile, their position from the edge of the body politic prevents them from noticing that the entire body – like a swarm of bees – is shifting steadily to the left. Those “centrists” may not notice the swarm’s movement, and they certainly don’t admit that behind the scenes there may have been someone who has maneuvered them leftwards.

How good to be in the “center”

In Israeli politics, when the absence of ideology and a stated worldview is merged with a desire to be “moderate,” two things result. The first is the convergence towards the center by parties that were once identified with clear and differing positions, such as Likud and Labor. The second is the creation of a “centrist” party prior to each election for the last 35 years – whether Shinui (Change), The Democratic Movement for Change, The Center Party, Kadima (Forward), or the current Yesh Atid (There’s a Future), to name a few. Such “centrist” parties often win quite a large number of seats, usually giving them the balance of power in any coalition, only to fade away before the next election.

Those promoting the political “center” usually boast that their moderate positions are in alignment with the principles of the “rule of law.” But in truth, the rule of law is the exact opposite of a pragmatic centrism. For the law does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the majority of the population, even though it was voted upon by a majority of representatives. Rather, it is often the outcome of a thoughtful deliberation, of accumulative experience and of contributions by experts. As such, it is not influenced by fleeting popularity of issues, but addresses the problems at hand. Thus, the law also serves to protect the citizens of the state from the vagaries and, often, the stupidity of its leaders.

The same is true about party platforms and the subjugation of their leaders to them. Their ostensible purpose is that the leader will abide by the spirit of the party and will represent the will and intentions of its constituency. The party platform, too, is the result of thought and experience, and its purpose is to minimize the chance that the party leaders will make grossly wrong decisions.

But the necessity of a guiding platform is exactly what the “centrist” parties reject. They take pride in the fact that their leaders aren’t bound by ideology, and that based on their past performance – whether in the military, academy or media – they should be allowed to act according to what common sense tells them about oncoming events. These parties in fact consider it a form of great wisdom in not having a specific agenda in place. Thus, the platform of such centrist

parties is phrased in general terms, making it almost impossible to bind the leader to any specific guidelines, unless doing “good” (or bringing “hope” or a “better future”) is considered a guideline and platform.

In this way, the voters of the centrist party actually put the country’s future in the hands of someone who will navigate the ship without having committed himself to any specific course or to avoiding crossing any red lines. Voting for such a leader practically means giving him unlimited power of attorney to do whatever he likes, provided he cloaks his actions in a semblance of legality. In Israel, unfortunately, we have already experienced the undesirable results of this kind of leadership, which in the absence of clear ideology has succumbed to the pressure imposed on it by the left-leaning media and the slew of others who dominate the public debate.

There is, of course, a limit to the extent to which the Israeli public can be manipulated, which is why virtually all of these centrist parties exist for only one term. It is simply that reality, i.e., actual events, bring forth issues and problems which demand real answers and solutions – and those that have been offered by the “centrists” have clearly been shown to have failed.

All leaders need guidelines which will enable them to see the trail in the dense forest called the state. But the meager tools that are available to the heads of the centrist parties, together with constant pressure for “centrist” and “moderate” positions, virtually guarantee the failure of these elite-led “leaders”. This is all the more so because these positions are in fact not “moderate” at all, when taking into account reality. In fact, one can say that they are “extreme” in the degree of harm they do. For in fact, these centrist party heads are led in their thinking not by some imaginary “center,” but by a focused and determined minority who exploit the pro-“centrist” atmosphere which they themselves create. It is thus that they promote their radical ideas, always wrapped in terms such as pragmatism, flexibility, social justice, democracy, and the rule of law. They all promise not only improvement in Israel’s international standing, but also peace, equality and justice. Too bad (for them, and for us) that things haven’t quite turned out that way.

In light of the repeated failures of the centrist parties and the policies they promote, the Israeli public should have long ago done some soul-searching about them. Yet true soul searching is impossible as long as there is no recognition that the public discourse is led by a biased ideological minority. But this minority – which due to its public positions controls much of public debate – allows discussion of issues only along the lines set by the tyrannical clichés which it has established for us. Their terminology sanctifies obscurity, pragmatism, and non-commitment to any policy or to the setting of real national goals – unless those goals are those of “peace” and “social justice”.

In praising a lack of commitment to ideology, the radical minority (which in fact

does have an ideology of its own) orchestrates a new worldview, by which the course that the elected leader may have initially committed himself to becomes irrelevant. In the name of a false loyalty to supposed “democracy” and the “rule of law,” they get us used to berating any ideology other than theirs. This not only stifles the political discourse; it pollutes it. With regards to Israel, when the political debate is thus contaminated and disconnected from reality, such pollution can result in disaster.