



No. 5, Shvat 15, 5738/January 23, 1978

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The breakdown of the political negotiations between Israel and Egypt this past week came with the same dramatic suddenness as Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. Perhaps this suddenness characterizes Sadat's personality but perhaps it also arises from the desire evinced by Sadat to bring an end to the war which has lasted thirty years, in one dramatic blow. Whatever it be, the breakdown of the talks has produced both shock and sorrow among Israelis. The reactions reflect two basic themes: 1) Recriminations concerning Sadat. 2) Recriminations concerning the behavior of our leadership.

Over the past several days, there has been a general broadside attack on Sadat, his intentions and methods. There has been a real questioning as to what his original motives were as well as his expectations. A summary of press comment would go something as follows: Sadat apparently thought that his dramatic move would produce all of the following in a very short time or even immediately:

1. Israeli commitment to complete withdrawal of its forces from all those territories occupied in 1967, including the Sinai, the Golan, the West Bank and even Jerusalem.
2. A similar Israeli commitment to the right of Palestinian self-determination.
3. That 1. and 2. would produce a response in the entire Arab world which would hail him as a leader.

As a result of these unrealistic expectations Sadat broke off the talks because he saw all of the events which have transpired in recent weeks as blackmail, delay, and exploitation. As Ma'ariv pointed out on Friday in a column by Shmuel Schnitzer, the key to Sadat's behavior is to be found in the following statement that he made: "We will not agree to any haggling or wasting of time on negotiation." That is to say that Sadat's basic concept did not include any real negotiation; according to his understanding there is no place for negotiation or the attempt to find a compromise between the opposing points of view. Actually, the Egyptian leader is in a position where he feels that he has made his compromise a priori in having recognized Israel and now it is Israel's task to meet all the conditions which he has laid down. This picture reflects the bitterness in the Israeli press that Sadat is simply not playing by the rules of the game of international diplomacy. The press has once again begun to speak of "the Arab mentality," "the Arab market-place" or "the Persian bazaar." By "the Arab mentality" they mean that Arabs are not attuned to the Western method of doing business and attempting to find a middle-ground through the diplomatic

process. On the other hand the press uses the terms Arab market-place or Persian bazaar to suggest that what has happened is merely an Arab posture whereby Egypt is setting a high price as a tactic to create pressure on Israel. This suggests that Sadat, in calling back the Mission is simply employing a tactic to get Israel to raise the ante.

The press recriminations against Sadat depict him as being unrealistic in terms of his demands. This strain of thinking is to blame Egypt for what has happened. At the other end of the spectrum is the self-recrimination which one hears in conversations, more so than in the press. The press generally has tended to attack Sadat and the Egyptians for the break-off of the talks and to examine the Israeli mistakes and false expectations in a limited way only.

Foreign Office officials indicate that Dayan is aware of several errors that were either committed unilaterally by Israel or jointly with the Egyptians. The atmosphere which was allowed to be created by the media is seen as one basic error. Too much was allowed to be conducted in the public arena, in the intense spotlight of media coverage. Perhaps it could not have been prevented what with both Sadat and Begin being consummate actors demanding the spotlight for their pronouncements and postures. It has even been suggested that Sadat actually planned this theatrical and dramatic cessation of talks much earlier and if so there is no sense in seeking any rhyme or reason on our part for their break-off. We were caught on the horns of a dilemma because the media coverage was an essential tool in getting these negotiations under way but at the same time they were destructive to the very process which they initiated. Television diplomacy was able to create the drama which allowed Sadat to tear down the "seventy per cent psychological barrier" of which he spoke and was also able to overcome some of the seeming differences in terms of committees and agendas. The media was able to create the sense of drama and thereby generate momentum but at the very same time masked the problems and differences which could not be hidden from the eyes of the camera for a very long period of time.

Although the press reports concerning the reasons for the breakdown of the talks seem to concentrate on Sadat and his reasons, the conversations included sharp criticism of Begin, his statements and his handling of the problem this past week. There was serious criticism of the posture taken by him and some of the other Israeli leadership in denigrating Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. Begin's speech before a French group of the U.J.A. was seen as unnecessarily insensitive. In that speech Begin sarcastically criticized Sadat for claiming major concession to Israel by his coming to Jerusalem and recognizing Israel's right to exist. The Prime Minister suggested that this concession was meaningless because Israel determines its own existence and does not need Sadat's recognition of its right to exist. Similarly, Begin was criticized for his remarks to the Foreign Minister of Egypt at the dinner for the Egyptian delegation where he referred to Kamal as "a young man." It would seem that there had been an agreement before the dinner that there would be no political statements or remarks but rather that it would be a social evening. As such, Begin's inability to refrain from making political remarks was seen to be in very poor taste. While Begin probably used the term in the positive Yiddish sense of a "sheine yunge man" (a nice young fellow), it was translated into Arabic as "gibril" which means effectively "a wild young jackass."

All of this would tend to give a reasonable explanation to some of the anger and negative reaction of the Egyptian leadership.

Israeli television reported that a delegation from the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee which included Yitzhak Navon, Shmuel Toledano and Yigal Allon met with Begin and criticized him for lack of sensitivity to Arab usage in talking with the Egyptians. Begin's response is reported to have been "when the people chose a Prime Minister, they did not look for an Arabist but for a Jewish leader." Something similar happened at the Begin-Vance Press Conference which took place the day after the delegation from Egypt departed from Jerusalem. A foreign correspondent asked Begin, "Mr. Prime Minister, when you spoke before the French group at the Knesset this afternoon, did you for a moment consider that your speech would be seen on television by Mr. Sadat in Cairo and what his reactions might be?" Begin responded, "To tell you the truth, when I give a speech I think about what I am saying and not about who will hear it." Both of these reactions by Begin aroused criticism locally.

Since he came to the fore as Prime Minister last spring, Begin has generally handled himself and the affairs of state with great deftness and aplomb. Now it seems that Begin has finally reached that point where we can expect negative criticism and reaction by certain segments of the Israeli population which hitherto had been pleasantly surprised and responsive to his leadership and seeming ability to rise to the occasion. In sharp contrast to the very real national consensus which exists about the West Bank and the question of a Palestinian state, there is a greater division of opinion among Israelis regarding the Sinai settlements. Many Israelis just do not understand why we have made such an issue of the Rafiah salient. In speaking about our security needs in Sinai, there is a lack of clarity as to why Begin chose to make the stand on the settlements rather than the airfields. There are those who believe that Israel could have made a much better case of retention of the airfields in Sinai for security reasons than it was able to do about the settlements.

Begin has achieved considerable stature in the past weeks and months and retains broad-based popular support. While there is no immediate likelihood of its erosion, he may be in for some rougher times in coming weeks. He is certainly under attack from the right and there are already the beginnings of a division within his party spearheaded by Geula Cohen and Moshe Shamir. They have, in fact formed a new group which will oppose the entire peace program which they have now termed "the retreat program." Begin's initial response to Sadat garnered him wide support from the left but if the rumblings now emerging on the left continue, he will be under fire from both directions.

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