

Haaretz- Thursday, May 27, 1999

Meretz's spin is a sin

By Meron Benvenisti

Spin doctors never leave the stage empty, they just take each other's place. The master magician who became totally embroiled in the web he spun for himself has been bundled out of the political circus, and another well-loved master of spin who was being held in the wings is back, bigger than ever. Let's hear it for Yossi "Read my lips" Sarid and the latest slogan of spin: Shas out!. Outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed in his attempt to center the election campaign around the tales he spun, but Sarid has managed to decide the meaning of the results. Judging by the media tizzy he has created, one might think that the elections were not held to remove Netanyahu but rather to punish Shas.

Every successful spin has to touch a raw nerve, and in fact many good folks have been shocked into thinking about a sensitive and emotional subject that touches on so many qualitative issues: relations between ultra-Orthodox and secular; the concepts of Israelness and tribal membership; the value of the rule of law weighed against the value of the right to equal opportunities; ethno-cultural voting patterns and liberal-pluralist political behavior; the legitimacy of eliciting feelings of deprivation, alienation and helplessness from classes that are unable to compete, against the haughtiness of those for whom "the rule of law" enables them to deepen inequality; to use DDT on the mosquitoes or drain the swamps in which they

breed.

And all these qualitative problems and dilemmas are being discussed in the framework of an unimportant short-term piece of manipulation, of spin: Will a medium-sized party manage to place a veto on a larger party and prevent it from joining the government coalition?

A precondition for the success of the spin doctor is self-assurance and an ability to phrase an issue in simple, negative terms: It is always easier to define what you are against than to define what you are about. And when one reads the basic conditions set out by Meretz, one understands why the party needs Shas as a scarecrow.

One also understands why Meretz prefers the Likud to Shas. Ariel Sharon and Tzachi Hanegbi are not purer than the driven snow, but it must not be forgotten that that they are in favor of the "rule of law." Tzachi Hanegbi even took part in the counter-demonstration to support the High Court of Justice.

On the other hand, Aryeh Deri rails against the foundations of democracy, and Shas functionaries plunder the public purse. The monies that Ariel Sharon poured into the settlements were plunder, too, but Sharon is famous for his ability to change his spots: Did he not destroy Yamit with his own two hands? If he wants to join the new regime, he's welcome. Only Shas can have no place there, for Shas is cursed with an original sin for which there can be no atonement.

But the political circus is cruel. Even if your spin actually succeeds, you have to pay a price: If Shas is out, then the Likud is in and a new piece of spin magic is born, which explains that without the Likud there can be no peace. The ideology of greater Israel is dead and buried anyway, and it is

possible to invent joint slogans that will permit "national unity" in the negotiations on the final status agreements.

The coalition arithmetic that forces Meretz to choose between Shas and the Likud (and the accompanying legitimization of Ariel Sharon) is proof of the emptiness of the slogan sanctifying democratic values. This was not an inevitable choice, but one that followed from the fact that Meretz took part in an outstandingly anti-democratic move: It blocked the entry of the Arab parties into the coalition as equal partners. The rejection of Shas has seized the limelight; the rejection of the Arabs is lost in the shadows.

In 1999, as in 1992, the Israeli left has not raised the obvious demand to turn the Palestinian-Israeli collective into a worthy partner in government.

The reverse side of the coin of Shas-rejection is Arab-inclusion; otherwise, the coin is blatantly forged. And anyone who will not raise this democratic demand and carry it forward courageously cannot be relied upon to defend other positions based on underlying principles, such as the settlements and the peace process. Even as far as Shas is concerned, one can expect some kind of compromise when the current spin fuss dies away.

How sad that qualitative topics are doomed to be transformed into a simple slogan, for which a political movement will pay the price of a loss of trust. How sad that the result of the spin will be to legitimize both the inclusion of Ariel Sharon and the exclusion of the Palestinian-Israeli collective in the coalition. But how good it is to know that the reincarnated spin doctor is not creating a true political reality, but merely a virtual one

