

THE AVNERI INTERVIEW

URI AVNERI, Israeli publisher and leader of the Shelli party, champions the Palestine cause in Israel and believes a Palestine state is a fundamental element for peace in the Mid-east. He publishes *Ha'olam Hazeh* (This World), a mass-circulation weekly which has become a unique Israeli institution.

In the last two days he discussed why Israeli intelligentsia is losing confidence in Begin's government, and that Arafat has done a remarkable job by creating a Palestine consensus. Today, in the third and concluding article, he discusses U.S. role in the Mid-east peace efforts.

BRUZONSKY: A Palestinian intellectual, Hisham Sharabi, recently discussed favourably the possibility of a two-stage historical compromise but he insisted that the Zionist, racist attitudes in Israel would have to end before full peace is achieved. You're one of the few Israelis famous in the Arab world because your book, *Israel Without Zionists*, is on many Arab bookshelves. What are your feelings about Zionism today?

AVNERI: A lot of nonsense is being talked about Zionism because the term has many emotional overtones both for Zionists and anti-Zionists. The term has lost its exact definition, no one quite knows when one says "I am a Zionist" or "I am an anti-Zionist" what it means.

Whether I'm a Zionist or not very much depends on the definition of Zionism. If Zionism means Israeli patriotism or the belief in the continued existence of Israel I certainly am a Zionist.

● As a Jewish state, a Jewish homeland, with the Law of Return and a special Jewish character?

■ A state which is as Jewish as France is French or Germany is German. Which doesn't mean that the Germans have a particular privilege in that state. Citizens must be equal, whatever their backgrounds. But as a state which more or less allows a nation to express its personality in their own state. I want Israel to exist — thought I advocate many reforms including changes in the relationship between Arabs and

By MARK BRUZONSKY
reporting from Washington

against the British regime in Palestine which kept Jews out.

So when the Jewish state was formed one of the first things done was a great demonstration — instead of making a declaration of intent saying we want every persecuted Jew in the world who wants to come to Israel to find a place here, instead of this they made a law.

It's a peculiar law. It really creates a distinction between somebody called a

The Law of Return ought to be equally applied to the Palestinian Arabs



URI AVNERI with his famous book

● Let me shift to the U.S. How do you assess the Carter Administration's performance since the Sadat initiative?

■ Of course I can't help but being extremely disappointed by the Carter Administration. Either they don't do what should be done or if they decide to do it at long long last they don't do it the way I think it should be done.

Of course one realises the domestic problems of the American administration when one realises the pressures being exerted. Therefore it's easy to understand why they don't do what they should do and why they are doing things which perhaps they should not do.

I believe it was wrong for Carter to celebrate Begin when he came over the first time and therefore Carter gave an enormous push to Begin at a time when the Israeli public was still doubt-

lined in the Brookings Report, advocating a "Palestinian homeland."

■ Same as with Nixon if I may mention the name. Nixon came to power. After a year or so there was the famous Rogers Plan — which was an extremely good plan. And then when there was Jewish and Israeli opposition he just forgot about the whole thing.

Here came Carter. He said for the first time candidly and openly things which had to be said about a Palestinian homeland. And then he said he didn't mean it all, that he meant something quite different.

Uncertain policies

You can't command respect and really compel the Israeli public to treat

who monolithically support — or use to anyway — any Prime Minister. If we had elected a donkey as P.M. of Israel, American Jews would have supported him unconditionally. Now all Arabs and the American administration too see Israel as just the Prime Minister.

But if you believe that a certain policy is good then your policy should be formed in such a way that you encourage the elements in Israel which are working for this kind of solution and discourage the kind of people working against your policies.

What the Americans are doing and our Palestinian friends as well have been doing is exactly the opposite.

We have the same trouble by the way in Israel. People like me say that the Israeli government should announce that it's ready to negotiate with the PLO if the PLO recognises

Now, after a year, the Americans have suddenly become displeased by Begin. But it's too late now.

● What about the role of Ambassador Atherton and Secretary Vance and what is becoming reminiscent of "Shuttle Diplomacy"?

■ I think the whole concept is bad. I don't believe in shuttle diplomacy but rather in direct, face-to-face contact, looking the other fellow in the eye. But you can't be against it if the alternative is complete stagnation. Doing something, even if it's totally useless, looks better.

● Is Atherton the right man for the job?

■ I met him in Cairo and other places. He's a reasonably intelligent person. But I don't think he has any job. I think he knows he hasn't got any job. His job is just to be there and to rush around

PART III

● What has the U.S. done wrong in the last year and a half?

■ I think everything. Absolutely everything.

months after Sadat's Jerusalem visit that "The big question now is: What will Begin do if peace cannot be reconciled with his ideology? The fate of the Mid-east... may well depend on the answer. It is a battle that will have to be fought in the heart and mind of Begin himself.

On the one hand, the temptation to make peace is immense. If he achieves this his name will be inscribed forever in the annals of Jewish history: Ben-Gurion created the State of Israel, Begin gave it peace. But equally great is his loyalty to the Cause, the teachings of Jabotinsky, the Land of Israel."

■ The question has been answered with a final answer. Begin has not been able to change his historical objective for a newer, much more important one. Therefore we must now think how to remove Begin and what to do afterwards.

I'm rather sorry about this. I've always had a certain respect for Begin. But I must draw the conclusion that he's not a big enough personality to adjust himself to a totally new historical situation, which is exactly what

means.

Whether I'm a Zionist or not very much depends on the definition of Zionism. If Zionism means Israeli patriotism or the belief in the continued existence of Israel I certainly am a Zionist.

● As a Jewish state, a Jewish homeland, with the Law of Return and a special Jewish character?
■ A state which is as Jewish as France is French or Germany is German. Which doesn't mean that the Germans have a particular privilege in that state. Citizens must be equal, whatever their backgrounds. But as a state which more or less allows a nation to express its personality in their own state. I want Israel to exist — thought I advocate many reforms including changes in the relationship between Arabs and Jews inside Israel — as a state, the majority of which is Jewish and therefore expresses a Jewish personality. This I am for and if this means Zionist I am a Zionist.

Peculiar legislation

If Zionism means the belief that 15 million Jews will one day gather in Israel, I don't believe in it, I think it's obsolete.

● Well, try a specific. Hisham Sharabi said the Law of Return will have to be altered or eliminated.

■ The Law of Return is a very peculiar piece of legislation which has to be understood by when it was enacted. You didn't need the law at all. You don't need a law to allow people of British descent to get Canada because the government of Canada just let's them in. And the government of Israel, without any law, could just let in whom they wanted.

It was a demonstration in 1950 when it was enacted. It was a reaction to what had happened to the Jews in Europe. The struggle of Zionism was

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against the British regime in Palestine which kept Jews out.

So when the Jewish state was formed one of the first things done was a great demonstration — instead of making a declaration of intent saying we want every persecuted Jew in the world who wants to come to Israel to find a place here, instead of this they made a law.

It's a peculiar law. It really creates a distinction between somebody called a Jew who has certain privileges and others who have not. In this sense it's an unpleasant law.

● You would agree then that it should be altered or repealed?

■ It should perhaps be kept as a symbolic thing. It's content certainly should be altered substantially. Certainly there should be no law which gives a Jew an automatic right to come to this country and not give the same automatic right to an Arab who was born in the country and is now a refugee. It has to be substantially changed. But in essence, not the symbolism of it.

I think the whole question of being a Zionist or not being a Zionist is not really quite relevant. Many of the attitudes of Israel to which the Arabs object are, by themselves, the outcome of the war between Jews and Arabs in this part of the world which is now nearing its hundredth year.

There are many attitudes on both sides which the other side dislikes and which one hopes will disappear once peace is achieved and these two nations live in their own state.

● Let me shift to the U.S. How do you assess the Carter Administration's performance since the Sadat initiative?

■ Of course I can't help but being extremely disappointed by the Carter Administration. Either they don't do what should be done or if they decide to do it at long long last they don't do it the way I think it should be done.

Of course one realizes the domestic problems of the American administration when one realizes the pressures being exerted. Therefore it's easy to understand why they don't do what they should do and why they are doing things which perhaps they should not do.

I believe it was wrong for Carter to celebrate Begin when he came over the first time and therefore Carter gave an enormous push to Begin at a time when the Israeli public was still doubtful about Begin and a little bit afraid that Begin's chauvinistic attitudes were going to cause damage to Israel.

● Not to mention American Jewish attitudes.

American attitude

■ Exactly. When Begin came back as the victor in triumph from America, he got the power base which now enables him to reject American initiatives. I never quite understood why it was done unless they had the most curious misconceptions about Begin.

● What has the U.S. done wrong in the last year and a half?

■ I think everything. Absolutely everything. They should have made it quite clear what the American attitude is. They should have used American influence — and of course America has an enormous influence upon Israel — by keeping a very clear line: we want this, this is how we see the future, this is what American interests require.

● Well, not everything. Carter came into office pursuing the policies out-

lined in the Brookings Report, advocating a "Palestinian homeland."

■ Same as with Nixon if I may mention the name, Nixon came to power. After a year or so there was the famous Rogers Plan — which was an extremely good plan. And then when there was Jewish and Israeli opposition he just forgot about the whole thing.

Here came Carter. He said for the first time candidly and openly things which had to be said about a Palestinian homeland. And then he said he didn't mean it all, that he meant something quite different.

Uncertain policies

You can't command respect and really compel the Israeli public to treat American seriously if the American line changes every two days because some Senator says something.

● What about the Joint Statement with the Soviet Union on October 1? Wasn't that the right thing to do?

■ That was a curiously thing, because, what did they do? They made a statement with the Soviet Union which on the whole was a good statement. Then they immediately retreated by making a joint statement with Israel saying something quite different.

● Well, they say, there was revolt against the U.S.-USSR Joint Statement in the U.S.

■ OK. If you are a politician, either you make an assessment before hand and say that this is a policy I can't conduct and therefore let's not announce it. But if you do announce a policy then you should be ready to sustain it and fight for it.

One thing which the Americans have in common with the Palestinians, with the Arabs, is the tendency to think that Israel is a monolithic thing, acting like one man who happens to be the Prime Minister at any given time.

Perhaps they come to this conviction because they look at American Jews

who monolithically support — or use to anyway — any Prime Minister. If we had elected a donkey as P.M. of Israel, American Jews would have supported him unconditionally. Now all Arabs and the American administration too see Israel as just the Prime Minister.

But if you believe that a certain policy is good then your policy should be formed in such a way that you encourage the elements in Israel which are working for this kind of solution and discourage the kind of people working against your policies.

What the Americans are doing and our Palestinian friends as well have been doing is exactly the opposite.

We have the same trouble by the way in Israel. People like me say that the Israeli government should announce that it's ready to negotiate with the PLO if the PLO recognises Israel, etc., etc.

We say we must conduct a policy in Israel which will encourage the realists and moderates in the PLO and discourage the extremists and the radical elements.

Now the same is true the other way around and most people don't seem to understand. Begin comes to power in an election campaign in which he says to hell with the Americans, they can't do anything to us because we control American Jewry and American Jewry will stop them — this was openly the election platform of Begin.

Then Begin comes to power and was received by the Americans as a long-lost friend, the most wonderful Israeli. So we are left with open mouths looking ridiculous.

Now, after a year, the Americans have suddenly become displeased by Begin. But it's too late now.

● What about the role of Ambassador Atherton and Secretary Vance and what is becoming reminiscent of "Shuttle Diplomacy?"

■ I think the whole concept is bad. I don't believe in shuttle diplomacy but rather in direct, face-to-face contact, looking the other fellow in the eye. But you can't be against it if the alternative is complete stagnation. Doing something, even if it's totally useless, looks better.

● Is Atherton the right man for the job?

■ I met him in Cairo and other places. He's a reasonably intelligent person. But I don't think he has any job. I think he knows he hasn't got any job. His job is just to be there and to rush around and to create the impression that something is going on. I think there's nothing behind it.

Historical objective

Gunnar Jarring did this before, well aware that he was absolutely unable to do anything. It may be important for Sadat though to keep the impression that something is going on, otherwise he might have to do things he doesn't want to do.

This is a stop-gap measure by the Americans and it is only good for buying time. And gaining time is only good if you are going to do something later. Otherwise it's all useless.

● What now in Israel? How do you now view Begin? You wrote a few

On the one hand, the temptation to make peace is immense. If he achieves this his name will be inscribed forever in the annals of Jewish history: Ben-Gurion created the State of Israel, Begin gave it peace. But equally great is his loyalty to the Cause, the teachings of Jabotinsky, the Land of Israel."

■ The question has been answered with a final answer. Begin has not been able to change his historical objective for a newer, much more important one. Therefore we must now think how to remove Begin and what to do afterwards.

I'm rather sorry about this. I've always had a certain respect for Begin. But I must draw the conclusion that he's not a big enough personality to adjust himself to a totally new historical situation, which is exactly what Ezer Weizman has done.

There's absolutely no hope that Begin will change his opinion. He is now the great obstacle to movement towards peace and must be removed.

You quoted me about Begin. I would now change this quotation, enlarge on it. I said at that time that the decisive battle was being fought inside the mind of Menachem Begin. I would say now that the decisive battle is really being fought inside the mind of the Israeli people.

The more that can be done to provide ammunition and reinforcements to the forces inside the Israeli mind willing to take the great leap into peace, into unknown territory, the more chances it will really happen.

Concluded