A Matter of Timing

By Uri Avnery – Israel

Some weeks the news is dominated by a single word. This week’s word was ‘timing’.

It’s all a matter of timing. The Government of Israel has insulted the Vice President of the United States, Joe Biden, one of the greatest “friends” of Israel (meaning: somebody totally subservient to AIPAC) and spat in the face of President Barack Obama. So what? It’s all a matter of timing.

If the government had announced the building of 1600 new housing units in East Jerusalem a day earlier, it would have been OK. If it had announced it three days later, it would have been wonderful. But doing it exactly when Joe Biden was about to have dinner with Bibi and Sarah’le – that was really bad timing.

The matter itself is not important. Another thousand housing units in East Jerusalem, or 10 thousand, or 100 thousand – what different does it make? The only thing that matters is the timing.

As the Frenchman said: It’s worse than criminal, it’s stupid.

The word “stupid” also figured prominently this week, second only to “timing”.

Stupidity is an accepted phenomenon in politics. I would almost say: to succeed in politics, one needs a measure of stupidity. Voters don’t like politicians who are too intelligent. They make them feel inferior. A foolish politician, on the other hand, appears to be “one of the folks”.
History is full of acts of folly by politicians. Many books have been written about this. To my mind, the epitome of foolishness was achieved by the events that led to World War I, with its millions of victims, which broke out because of the accumulated stupidity of (in ascending order) Austrian, Russian, German, French and British politicians.

But even stupidity in politics has its limits. I have pondered this question for decades, and who knows, one day, when I grow up, I might write a doctoral thesis about it.

My thesis goes like this: In politics (as in other fields) foolish things happen regularly. But some of them are stopped in time, before they can lead to disaster, while others are not. Is this accidental, or is there a rule?

My answer is: there certainly is a rule. It works like this: when somebody sets in motion an act of folly that runs counter to the spirit of the regime, it is stopped in its tracks. While it moves from one bureaucrat to another, somebody starts to wonder. Just a moment, this cannot be right! It is referred to higher authority, and soon enough somebody decides that it is a mistake.

On the other hand, when the act of folly is in line with the spirit of the regime, there are no brakes. When it moves from one bureaucrat to the next, it looks quite natural to both. No red light. No alarm bell. And so the folly rolls on to the bitter end.

I remember how this rule came to my mind the first time. In 1965, Habib Bourguiba, the president of Tunisia, took a bold step: he made a speech in the biggest refugee camp in Jericho, then under Jordanian rule, and called upon the Arabs to recognize Israel. This caused a huge scandal all over the Arab world.

Some time later, the correspondent of an Israeli paper reported that in a press conference at the UN headquarters,
Bourguiba had called for the destruction of Israel. This sounded strange to me. I made inquiries, checked the protocol and found out that the opposite was true: the reporter had mistakenly turned a no into a yes.

How did this happen? If the journalist had erred in the opposite direction and reported, for example, that Gamal Abdel-Nasser had called for the acceptance of Israel into the Arab League, the news would have been stopped at once. Every red light would have lit up. Someone would have called out: Hey, something strange here! Check again! But in the Bourguiba case nobody noticed the mistake, for what is more natural than an Arab leader calling for the destruction of Israel? No verification needed.

That’s what happened this week in Jerusalem. Every government official knows that the nationalist Prime Minister is pushing for the Judaization of East Jerusalem, that the extreme nationalist Minister of the Interior is even more eager, and that the super-nationalist Mayor of Jerusalem practically salivates when he imagines a Jewish quarter on the Temple Mount. So why should a bureaucrat postpone the confirmation of a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem? Just because of the visit of some American windbag?

Therefore, the timing is not important. It’s the matter itself that’s important.

During his last days in office, President Bill Clinton published a peace plan, in which he tried to make up for eight years of failure in this region and kowtowing to successive Israeli governments. The plan was comparatively reasonable, but included a ticking bomb.

About East Jerusalem, Clinton proposed that what is Jewish should be joined to the State of Israel and what is Arab should be joined to the state of Palestine. He assumed (rightly, I believe) that Yasser Arafat was ready for such a
compromise, which would have joined some new Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem to Israel. But Clinton was not wise enough to foresee the consequences of his proposal.

In practice, it was an open invitation to the Israeli government to speed up the establishment of new settlements in East Jerusalem, expecting them to become part of Israel. And indeed, since then successive Israeli governments have invested all available resources in this endeavor. Since money has no smell, every Jewish casino-owner in America and every Jewish brothel-keeper in Europe was invited to join the effort. The Biblical injunction – “Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God, for any vow; for even both these are abomination unto the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 23:18) – was suspended for this holy cause.

Now the pace is speeded up even more. Because there is no more effective means of obstructing peace than building new settlements in East Jerusalem.

That is clear to anyone who has dealings with this region. No peace without an independent Palestinian state, no Palestinian state without East Jerusalem. About this there is total unanimity among all Palestinians, from Fatah to Hamas, and between all Arabs, from Morocco to Iraq, and between all Muslims, from Nigeria to Iran.

There will be no peace without the Palestinian flag waving above the Haram al-Sharif, the holy shrines of Islam which we call the Temple Mount. That is an iron-clad rule. Arabs can compromise about the refugee problem, painful as it may be, and about the borders, also with much pain, and about security matters. But they cannot compromise about East Jerusalem becoming the capital of Palestine. All national and religious passions converge here.

Anyone who wants to wreck any chance for peace – it is here
that he has to act. The settlers and their supporters, who know that any peace agreement would include the elimination of (at least) most settlements, have planned in the past (and probably are planning now) to blow up the mosques on the Temple Mount, hoping that this would cause a worldwide conflagration which would reduce to ashes the chances of peace once and for all.

Less extreme people dream about the creeping ethnic cleansing of East Jerusalem by administrative chicanery, demolition of houses, denying means of livelihood and just making life in general miserable for Arabs. Moderate rightists just want to cover every empty square inch in East Jerusalem with Jewish neighborhoods. The aim is always the same.

The reality is, of course, well known to Obama and his advisors. In the beginning they believed, in their innocence, that they could sweet talk Netanyahu and Co. into stopping the building activity to facilitate the start of negotiations for the two-state solution. Very soon they learned that this was impossible without exerting massive pressure — and they were not prepared to do that.

After putting up a short and pitiful struggle, Obama gave in. He agreed to the deception of a “settlement freeze” in the West Bank. Now building is going on there with great enthusiasm, and the settlers are satisfied. They have completely stopped their demonstrations.

In Jerusalem there was not even a farcical attempt — Netanyahu just told Obama that he would go on building there (“as in Tel Aviv”), and Obama bowed his head. When Israeli officials announced a grandiose plan for building in “Ramat Shlomo” this week, they did not violate any undertaking. Only the matter of “timing” remained.

For Joe Biden, it was a matter of honor. For Mahmoud Abbas, it is a matter of survival.
Under intense pressure from the Americans and their agents, the rulers of the Arab countries, Abbas was obliged to agree to negotiations with the Netanyahu government – though only “proximity talks”, a euphemism for “distance talks”.

Clearly, nothing will come out of these talks except more humiliation for the Palestinians. Quite simply: anyone building in East Jerusalem and the West Bank is announcing in advance that there is no chance for an agreement. After all, no sane Israeli would invest billions in a territory he intends to turn over to the Palestinian state. A person who is eating a pizza is not negotiating about it in good faith.

Even at this late stage, Abbas and his people still hope that something good will come out of all this: the US will acknowledge that they are right and exert, at long last, real pressure on Israel to implement the two-state solution.

But Biden and Obama did not give much cause for hope. They wiped the spit off their faces and smiled politely.

As the saying goes: when you spit in the face of a weakling, he pretends that it is raining. Does this apply to the president of the most powerful country in the world?

– Uri Averny is an Israeli writer and founder of the Gush Shalom peace movement. He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com.