

The Tone & the Music by Uri Avnery

One man spoke to the world, and the world listened. He walked onto the stage in Cairo, alone, without hosts and without aides, and delivered a sermon to an audience of billions.

Egyptians and Americans, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites, Copts and Maronites – and they all listened attentively.

He unfolded before them the map of a new world, a different world, whose values and laws he spelled out in simple and clear language - a mixture of idealism and practical politics, vision and pragmatism.

Barack Hussein Obama – as he took pains to call himself – is the most powerful man on earth. Every word he utters is a political fact.

“A historic speech,” pronounced commentators in a hundred languages. I prefer another adjective:

The speech was right.

Every word was in its place, every sentence precise, every tone in harmony. The masterpiece of a man bringing a new message to the world.

From the very first word, every listener in the hall and in the world felt the honesty of the man, that his heart and his tongue were in harmony, that this is not a politician of the old familiar sort – hypocritical, sanctimonious, calculating. His body language was speaking, and so were his facial expressions

That’s why the speech was so important. The new moral integrity and the sense of honesty increased the impact of the revolutionary content.

And a revolutionary speech it certainly was.

In 55 minutes, it not only wiped away the eight years of George W. Bush, but also much of the preceding decades, from World War II on.

The American ship has turned – not with the sluggishness everyone would have expected, but with the agility of a speedboat.

That is much more than a political change. It touches the roots of the American national consciousness. The President spoke to hundreds of million US citizens no less than to a billion Muslims.

The American culture is based on the myth of the Wild West, with its Good Guys and Bad Guys, violent justice, dueling under the midday sun. Since the American nation is composed of immigrants from all over the world, its unity seems to require a threatening, world-encompassing evil enemy, like the Nazis and the Japs, or the Commies. After the collapse of the Soviet empire, this role was taken over by Islam.

Cruel, fanatical, bloodthirsty Islam; Islam as the religion of murder and destruction; an Islam lusting for the blood of women and children. This enemy captured the imagination of the masses and supplied material for television and cinema. It provided lecture topics for learned professors and fresh inspiration for popular writers. The White House was occupied by a moron who declared a world-wide "War on Terrorism";

When Obama is now uprooting this myth, he is revolutionizing American culture. He wipes away the picture of one enemy, without painting another in its place. He preaches against the violent, adversary attitude itself, and starts to work to replace it with a culture of partnership between nations, civilizations and religions.

I see Obama as the first great messenger of the 21st century. He is the son of a new era, where the economy is global and the whole of humanity faces the danger to the very existence of life on the planet Earth. An era where the Internet connects a boy in New Zealand with a girl in Namibia in real time, where a disease in a small Mexican village spreads all over the globe within days.

This world needs a world law, a world order, a world democracy. That's why this speech really was historic: Obama outlined the basic contours of a world constitution.

While Obama proclaims the 21st century, the government of Israel is returning to the 19th.

That was the century when a narrow, egocentric, aggressive nationalism took root in many countries. A century that sanctified the belligerent nation which oppresses minorities and subdues neighbors. The century that gave birth to modern anti-Semitism and to its response — modern Zionism.

Obama's vision is not anti-national. He spoke with pride about the American nation. But his nationalism is of another sort: an inclusive, multi-cultural and non-sexist nationalism, which includes all the citizens of a country and respects other nations.

This is the nationalism of the 21st century, which is inexorably striving towards supranational, regional and world-wide structures.

Compared to this, how miserable is the mental world of the Israeli Right! How miserable is the violent, fanatical-religious world of the settlers, the chauvinist ghetto of Netanyahu, Lieberman and Barak, the racist-fascist closed-in world of their Kahanist allies!

One has to understand this moral and spiritual dimension of Obama's speech before considering its political implications. Not only in the political sphere are Obama and Netanyahu on a collision course. The underlying collision is

between two mental worlds which are as distinct from each other as the sun and the moon.

In Obama's mental world, there is no place for the Israeli Right or its equivalents elsewhere. Not for their terminology, not for their 'values', and still less for their actions.

In the political sphere, too, a huge gap has opened up between the governments of Israel and the USA.

During the last few years, successive Israeli governments have ridden the wave of Islamophobia that has spread throughout the West. The Islamic world was considered the deadly enemy, America was galloping grimly towards the Clash of Civilizations, every Muslim was a potential terrorist.

Israel's right-wing leaders could rejoice. After all, the Palestinians are Arabs, the Arabs are Muslims, the Muslims are Terrorists – so that Israel was assured a central place in the war of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness.

That was a Garden of Eden for racist demagogues. Avigdor Lieberman could advocate the expulsion of the Arabs from Israel, Ellie Yishai could enact laws for the revocation of the citizenship of non-Jews. Obscure Members of the Knesset could grab headlines with bills that might have been conceived in Nuremberg.

This Garden of Eden is no more. Whether the implications will become clear quickly or slowly - the direction is obvious. If we continue on our path, we will become a leper colony.

The tone makes the music – and this applies also to the President's words on Israel and Palestine. He spoke at length about the Holocaust – honest and courageous words, full of empathy and compassion, which were received by the Egyptians in silence but with respect. He stressed Israel's right to exist. And without pausing, he spoke about the suffering of the Palestinian refugees, the intolerable situation of the Palestinians in Gaza, Palestinian aspirations for a state of their own.

He spoke respectfully about Hamas. Not anymore as a 'terrorist organization', but as a part of the Palestinian people. He demanded that they recognize Israel and stop violence, but also hinted that he would welcome a Palestinian unity government.

The political message was clear and unequivocal: the Two-State Solution will be put into practice. He himself will see to that. Settlement activity must cease. Unlike his predecessors, he did not stop at speaking about 'Palestinians', but uttered the decisive word: 'Palestine' – the name of a state and a territory.

And no less important: the Iran war has been struck from the agenda. The dialogue with Tehran, as a part of the new world, is not limited in time. As from now, no one can even dream about an American OK for an Israeli attack.

How did official Israel respond? The first reaction was denial. "An unimportant speech". "There was nothing new". The establishment commentators picked out a few pro-Israeli sentences from the text and ignored all the others. And after all, "these are just words. So he talked. Nothing will come out of it."

That is nonsense. The words of the President of the United States are more than just words. They are political facts. They change the perceptions of hundreds of millions. The Muslim public listened. The American public listened. It may take some time for the message to sink in. But after this speech, the pro-Israel lobby will never be the same as it was before. The era of "foile shtik" (Yiddish for sneaky tricks) is over. The sly dishonesty of a Shimon Peres, the guileful deceits of an Ehud Olmert, the sweet talking of a Bibi Netanyahu — all these belong to the past.

The Israeli people must now decide: whether to follow the right-wing government towards an inevitable collision with Washington, as the Jews did 1940 years ago when they followed the Zealots into a suicidal war on Rome — or to join Obama's march towards a new world.

Uri Avnery is the sage of Israel. The founder of the Israeli peace movement, Gush Shalom, Avnery calls for the reinvigoration of the peace movement by direct engagement with politics as well as the emergence of an Israeli Obama, presumably, a leader of dual descent delivering a message of hope driven by a new language of peace.