

September 4, 1992

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, MR. RABIN?

COMMENTING on an interview by Prime Minister Rabin in Ha'aretz (August 28), the BBC suggested that Rabin was hoping to attract right-wing oppositionists into his coalition. Whether this assessment is correct or not, Rabin's quoted words raise questions of immediate significance. He affirmed that Jews have a right to settle everywhere in Eretz Yisrael.

This is a fact which, however, carries with it certain obligations toward the Jews. In his day, prime minister Begin, pressed by President Carter in July 1977 to "freeze" settlements, replied that no Israeli government had the right to prevent Jews from settling in any part of Eretz Yisrael - just as he, Carter, could not prevent Americans from settling in any part of the US. True, it is the right of the government to refrain from investing public money in establishing new communities.

This right Rabin and his colleagues are exercising to the full. If, however, he believes in what he was saying and is not merely playing at tactics (as suggested by the BBC), how is it that his subordinates are working hard at hampering, hindering and blocking citizens - or Zionists from abroad - who wish to build a home, or a business, in Judea, Samaria and Gaza? Why do these subordinates pretend they have a right to do so? For example, one official was quoted this week as saying that private building was to be subjected to the same rules as public building - that only structures which have reached a certain stage of construction will be completed. Such spiteful statements are obviously designed to intimidate: some weaker or ill-informed spirits may be scared off.

The people directly concerned with the strengthening of the Jewish presence in Western Palestine, as well as the parliamentary opposition parties, should act to put a stop to this chicanery. They should publish a declaration both in Israel and abroad, making clear that that right, now reaffirmed by the prime minister, is irreversible, and calling on Jews all over the world to "build a home" in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Indeed, Mr Rabin, as the prime minister of Israel who feels morally accountable to Jews everywhere for his stewardship over the Jewish national home, should issue a statement assuring the Jewish people that his government will not prevent or impede the exercise of the right of private building in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

He should also issue a stiff instruction to his ministers and bureaucracy to behave accordingly. This applies with equal force to Jerusalem. Somehow, people in authority in the capital have been trying, by word and deed, to inject into the public mind the notion that a Jew's right to live where he pleases in Jerusalem is subject to veto - by the mayor, police or government.

This is dangerous nonsense. Moreover, as long as residence does not infringe the law, the householder is entitled to the protection of the state and the municipality. If the law is broken, the lawbreaker should be punished in due process.

In the special circumstances of the Israeli experience, it is stupid, as well as scandalous, for Jews to be warned against living wherever in Jerusalem on the ground that it is unsafe, or is a "provocation." What could be a clearer invitation to Arab violence? THAT Rabin would like to broaden the base of his government is no secret.

His haredi partner, Shas, may well turn out to be a wobbly ally; and without Shas, his majority is sustained only by an Arab five-man swing vote, against a Jewish majority of three. He must realize that it is not only these figures that demonstrate the absence of a majority in the people in favor of his policy in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

It is universally accepted that the Likud lost the election not because it encouraged and helped Jews to go and live there, but because of a host of moral and functional blunders and backsliding. If all Labor's anti-Likud election propaganda on this score, backed by the promise of the loan of billions of dollars which Rabin would get through Bush (in exchange for a mere slice of sovereignty) - if that whole campaign was able to muster no more, and evidently even less, than 50 percent of the votes, then clearly a straight contest on the subject of settlements would most likely have brought forth a handy majority against the policy of "freezing." Constitutionally, if not morally, Rabin is free to pursue his policy. But he surely can't expect to attract aid or comfort from the mass of Jews who believe that Eretz Yisrael is the Jewish national heritage and not merely the site of a collection of "security" outposts and bunkers.

Indeed, Rabin's troubles have hardly begun. Like his predecessors, he continues to ignore the central fact in the historic dispute with the Arabs: that they are not interested in any compromise, that their sole objective, even if still remote, but constant as the guide and yardstick of all their actions and rhetoric, is the disappearance of the State of Israel. In their printed maps, there is no small Israel, nor larger Israel, there is no Israel at all.

Israel's most egregious blunder in the negotiations with the Arabs has been the absence of any historical or political perspective, of any substantive demands to balance or counter the demands of the Arabs (with their existing 22 sovereignties and 14 million square miles of territory). Consequently, any "progress" made means progress toward fulfillment of Arab demands. Thus every substantive concession by Israel will be rejected by the Arab negotiators as "inadequate" or "not enough." No peace treaty will ever be signed except, as in the case of Egypt, when Israel gives in totally to the Arab demands - "to," as Sadat put it, "the last grain of sand." Now, at this very hour, the Rabin government, panting for progress, has offered the Palestinian Arabs - prior even to any negotiations - partial sovereignty, with the rest to be negotiated later.

The Arabs, pocketing the offer, demand that that "later" be now. That Rabin inherited this scenario from Begin and Shamir does not lessen his responsibility and, presumably, his dilemma. That dilemma and responsibility are enhanced - if Rabin meant what he said - by another statement he made in his Ha'aretz interview: "I shall not deal with interpretations, but with principles.

One of these principles is that we are not evacuating the 'territories.' "Is Rabin serious? If he is, the moment is approaching when, with pressure from "within" to give the Arabs more, and with Washington (Democratic or Republican) breathing down his neck, Rabin - like Golda Meir in 1970, like Begin after he gave away Sinai, like Shamir after he said "yes" to Baker - will surely be proclaimed intransigent.