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WHAT PEACE

THE debate between the spokesmen of the two major parties, insofar as they have overcome the temptation to concentrate on personal attacks, still makes painful reading. Each of them proclaiming that his party's prime objective is peace, creates the impression, implicitly or explicitly, that the one genuine formula for peace is in his party's exclusive hands; and as these hands are the only competent ones, peace is eminently attainable. Mr Rabin for Labor has even announced an approximate date; he expects to achieve it in six to nine months.

We are a stone's throw from election day, and it is surely proper that both teams should be told now that they are prevaricating, or simply do not know what they are talking about. Their promises are misleading, and the fact that there are some citizens willing to be misled does not mitigate the offense. The word "peace," however much it has been devalued and debased - from the days of Jeremiah down to Chamberlain and our own Peace Now - contains a mesmeric power of attraction.

It is right to remind both parties that their facile promise of peace has no grounding in reality or in truth. The truth is that, as far ahead as can be foreseen, the Arabs will not "grant" Israel the boon of peace, as we understand it (what the Arabs call sulh, meaning reconciliation - as distinct from salaam meaning, approximately, armistice) unless Israel gives up its territory and its national independence. The Palestinian Covenant, the ideological "constitution" of the PLO, a carefully contrived document, lays down, as the simply stated basic principle, the elimination of Israel.

Palestine, it declares, is not the Jewish national homeland. The Jews are not a nation, and have no right to a homeland anyhow; Palestine is part of the homeland of the Arab nation, the "Palestinians" own it and have the right to rule over it. Some naive Jews believe that the PLO represents an "extremist" strain, that the other Arabs are "moderates." A few years ago, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir proclaimed his discovery of the clever trick the Arabs have played on us.

They have turned the historic facts upside down and have depicted tiny Israel as the predatory giant Goliath, and the Arabs as the little David. Mr Shamir was somewhat belated in his discovery. The Arabs themselves boasted about it more than 20 years ago; and the fact that they have succeeded in deluding so many people throughout the world is only further testimony to the failure of Israeli information policy, or, to be accurate, to the absence of any adequate information policy.

Individuals and some pro-Israel groups abroad have toiled to bring home the truth that the aim proclaimed by the PLO is shared by all the Arab states; that the PLO is in fact the thrusting sword of the Arab nation. From time to time this truth finds expression by one or another of its branches. The latest manifestation came from Iraq, where Saddam Hussein threatened to "burn down" half of Israel, and followed up his threat by sending some scores of Scud missiles into Israel as a sideswipe to his invasion of Kuwait and an earnest of his program for Israel.

No less illustrative of the universal Arab purpose - though conveyed in diplomatic, even academic language - have been the formulations of leading Egyptian statesmen.

They are prepared to come to terms with the Jews, but not as a nation. The Jews must give up Zionism, that is the Jewish State, and assimilate in the great Arab homeland.

Thus declared Boutros Ghali (former deputy foreign minister of Egypt, now secretary-general of the United Nations) in 1975. Otherwise, he added, there would not be peace. His scholarly articulation of the PLO Covenant was repeated, after Egypt had signed the peace treaty with Israel, by former prime minister, Mustafa Khalil (in 1982 in a guest lecture at the Tel Aviv University).

NOT surprisingly, the moment Egypt had fulfilled her primary obligation under the peace treaty (to receive the territory of Sinai, appropriately free of Jews); its leading diplomat, Abdel Maguid, announced his government's agenda for Israel. In a speech in Kuwait on April 8, 1982, he laid down afresh all the Arab demands, beginning with the Israeli withdrawal from all the territories including Jerusalem which would become the capital of the Palestinian State, and ending with the implementation of the "right of return" for the refugees to their former homes in Haifa and Jaffa, Ramle and Jerusalem et al. As for the peace treaty itself, and indeed the dozen subsidiary agreements, nearly all their provisions have remained dead letters for lack of Egyptian cooperation, or in direct Egyptian contravention.

Notably, there is no trade nor Egyptian tourism and, what is most significant, the vicious antisemitic propaganda war against Israel in the Egyptian media - controlled by the government - goes on merrily, in style and content reminiscent of German Nazi propaganda. Egypt too remains a full partner in the continuous diplomatic campaign against Israel. It even opposed the cancellation of the UN Zionism is racism decision.

Now it is one of the initiators of the latest drive to promote the "right of return" - the proclaimed prescription first enunciated by Nasser for destroying Israel "from within." Never once have the Arabs diminished their demands. When, after 1967, they have spoken of withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice Lines, they have made clear that this is but the first of two phases. Nor has Israeli official policy encouraged them even to do any rethinking.

On the contrary, the never-ending much publicized search by Israeli governments for concessions to appease them - down to the disastrous Camp David agreement - has taught them merely that if Israel is prepared to retreat part of the way, pressure must be continued for further retreats. This is why they ridicule the idea that for the Israeli concessions so far promised (partial territory by Labor, partial immediate sovereignty by Likud), they should give Israel peace. What is more, they have the support of the US on their central demands: total Israeli withdrawal, with minor modifications, has been preached by Washington since 1968; and now Washington has made public its support for the UN resolution of 1948 for the return of refugees.

Why then should they consider offering "peace" for any lesser terms? Maybe Shamir and Rabin should get together and agree that they should stop making nonsensical pronouncements about the peace they are about to achieve?