

Ari Shavit: Leaving the Zionist Ghetto

Interview with Avraham Burg

“Haaretz”-online 08.06.2007

We met 25 years ago. Exactly 25 years ago. Avraham – Avrum – Burg and I were then part of a small group of reserve soldiers and officers who came out against the First Lebanon War. "Soldiers Against Silence," we were called. Very quickly Avrum was taken from us. In the great demonstration of the 400,000 [the peace rally in Tel Aviv following the September 1982 massacre in the Sabra and Chatilla camps in Beirut], he became a star and immediately turned to politics. At first he was one of Shimon Peres' smart young men. Then he was the great hope of the Labor Party's Young Guard. After that the chairman of the Jewish Agency, Speaker of the Knesset, a candidate for the Labor leadership.

And then, suddenly, three years ago, Burg got up and left. Went to feather his nest. Got entangled in a problematic and failed privatization deal. Was slandered in the papers, scrutinized by the state comptroller, investigated by the police. And all this time he was writing a book.

All this time he was formulating the bold insights of "Defeating Hitler."

Burg will not admit it, but from his point of view the book he is launching now, to coincide with Hebrew Book Week, is a book of prophecy. A book that is intended to vest the kingdom with prophecy. For others, the book will not be easily definable. It contains deep thoughts about Israel and Zionism, a prolonged comparison between Israel and Germany, trenchant criticism of Eichmann's hanging, reflections on Judaism in the age of globalization and memories from his father's house.

Yosef Burg, the refugee from Dresden, accords the book a certain softness that is not to be found in the angry words of his son. True, toward the end the optimist Avrum tries to transform his eulogy into a paean, but the attempt is not entirely convincing. The Israel of "Defeating Hitler" is a very harsh place. Brutal and imperialist, confrontational and insular. A shallow place, thuggish, lacking spiritual inspiration.

I was outraged by the book. I saw it as a turning away of an Israeli colleague from our shared Israeliness. I saw it as a one-dimensional and unempathetic attack on the Israeli experience. Still, the dialogue with Avrum was riveting. We got angry at each other and raised our voices at each other and circled each other warily like two wounded gladiators in the arena. You can't take away from Avrum what he has. You can't take away the education or the articulateness or the ability to touch truly painful places. Maybe that's why he is so infuriating. Friend and predator; brother and deserter.

Avrum Burg, I read your new book, "Defeating Hitler," as a parting from Zionism. Am I wrong? Are you still a Zionist?

"I am a human being, I am a Jew and I am an Israeli. Zionism was an instrument to move me from the Jewish state of being to the Israeli state of being. I think it was Ben-Gurion who said that the Zionist movement was the scaffolding to build the home, and that after the state's establishment it should be dismantled."

So you confirm that you are no longer a Zionist?

"Already at the First Zionist Congress, Herzl's Zionism was victorious over the Zionism of Ahad Ha'am. I think that the 21st century should be the century of Ahad Ha'am. We have to leave Herzl behind and move to Ahad Ha'am."

Does this mean that you no longer find the notion of a Jewish state acceptable?

"It can't work anymore. To define the State of Israel as a Jewish state is the key to its end. A Jewish state is explosive. It's dynamite."

And a Jewish-democratic state?

"People find this very comfortable. It's lovely. It's schmaltzy. It's nostalgic. It's retro. It gives a sense of fullness. But 'Jewish-democratic' is nitroglycerine."

We have to change the national anthem?

"The anthem is a symbol. I would be ready to buy into a reality in which everything is fine and only the anthem is screwed-up."

Do we have to amend the Law of Return?

"We have to open the discussion. The Law of Return is an apologetic law. It is the mirror image of Hitler. I don't want Hitler to define my identity."

Should the Jewish Agency be dismantled?

"Back when I was chairman of the Jewish Agency, I suggested changing its name from the Jewish Agency for the Land of Israel to the Jewish Agency for Israeli Society. There is room for philanthropic tools. But at the center of its experience it have to deal with all of Israel's citizens, including the Arabs."

You write in your book that if Zionism is catastrophic Zionism, then you are not only post-Zionist but anti-Zionist. And I say that since the 1940s, the catastrophic element has been integral to Zionism. It follows that you are anti-Zionist.

"Ahad Ha'am made the charge against Herzl that his whole Zionism had its source in anti-Semitism. He thought of something else, of Israel as a spiritual center – the Ahad Ha'am line has not died, and now its time has come. Our confrontational Zionism vis-a-vis the world is disastrous."

But it's not just the Zionist issue. Your book is anti-Israeli, in the deepest sense. It is a book from which loathing of Israeliness emanates.

"When I was a boy I was a Jew. In the language prevalent here: a Jew-boy. I attended a heder [religious school]. I was taught by former yeshiva students. After that, for most of my life I was an Israeli. Language, signs, smells, tastes, places. Everything. Today that is not enough for me. In my situation today, I am beyond Israeli. Of the three identities that form me – human, Jewish and Israeli – I feel that the Israeli element deprives the other two."

On the face of it, your position is conciliatory and humanistic. But out of that approach you develop a very harsh attitude toward Israeliness and Israelis. You say terrible things about us.

"I think that I have written a book of love. Love hurts. If I were writing about Nicaragua, I wouldn't care. But I am coming from a place of tremendous pain. I

see my love withering before my eyes. I see my society and the place I was raised in and my home being destroyed."

Love? You write that Israelis understand only force. If someone were to write that Arabs understand only force or that the Turkmen understand only force, he would immediately be condemned as a racist. And rightly.

"You can't take one sentence and say that this is the whole book."

It's not just one sentence. It is repeated. You say that we have force, a great deal of force and only force. You say that Israel is a Zionist ghetto, an imperialistic, brutish place that believes only in itself.

"Look at the Lebanon War. The people returned from the field of battle. There were certain achievements, there were certain failures, things were revealed. You would expect people in the mainstream and even on the right to understand that when the IDF is allowed to win, it doesn't win. That force is not a solution. But then comes Gaza, and what is the Gaza discourse? We will smash them, we will erase them. Nothing has sunk in. Nothing. And it's not just between nation and nation. Look at the relations between people. Listen to the personal conversation. The graph of violence on the roads, the discourse of the battered women. Look at the mirror of Israel's face."

What you are saying is that the problem is not just the occupation. In your eyes, Israel as a whole is some sort of horrible mutation.

"The occupation is a very small part of it. Israel is a frightened society. To look for the source of the obsession with force and to uproot it, you have to deal with the fears. And the meta-fear, the primal fear is the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust."

That is the book's thesis. You are not the first to propose it, but you formulate it very acutely. We are psychic cripples, you claim. We are gripped by dread and fear and make use of force because Hitler caused us deep psychic damage.

Yes."

Well, I will counter by saying that your description is distorted. It's not as though we are living in Iceland and imagining that we are surrounded by Nazis who actually disappeared 60 years ago. We are surrounded by genuine threats. We are one of the most threatened countries in the world.

"The true Israeli rift today is between those who believe and those who are afraid. The great victory of the Israeli right in the struggle for the Israeli political soul lies in the way it has imbued it almost totally with absolute paranoia. I accept that there are difficulties. But are they absolute? Is every enemy Auschwitz? Is Hamas a scourge?"

You are patronizing and supercilious, Avrum. You have no empathy for Israelis. You treat the Israeli Jew as a paranoid. But as the cliché goes, some paranoids really are persecuted. On the day we are speaking, Ahmadinejad is saying that our days are numbered. He promises to eradicate us. No, he is not Hitler. But he is also not a mirage. He is a true threat. He is the real world – a world you ignore.

"I say that as of this moment, Israel is a state of trauma in nearly every one of its dimensions. And it's not just a theoretical question. Would our ability to cope

with Iran not be much better if we renewed in Israel the ability to trust the world? Would it not be more right if we didn't deal with the problem on our own, but rather as part of a world alignment beginning with the Christian churches, going on to the governments and finally the armies? Instead, we say we do not trust the world, they will abandon us, and here's Chamberlain returning from Munich with the black umbrella and we will bomb them alone."

In your book we are not only victims of the Nazis. In your book we are almost Judeo-Nazis. You are careful. You do not actually say that Israel is Nazi Germany. But you come very close. You say that Israel is pre-Nazi Germany. Israel is Germany up to the Nazis.

"Yes. I started the book from the saddest place. As mourning, but for the loss of Israel. During most of the writing the book's title was 'Hitler Won.' I was sure it was finished. But slowly I discovered the layer of not everything being lost. And I discovered my father as a representative of German Jewry that was ahead of its time. These two themes nourished the book from beginning to end. In the end I am an optimistic person, and the end of the book is also optimistic."

The end may be optimistic, but throughout its entire course the book repeatedly equates Israel with Germany. Is that really justified? Is there sufficient basis for the Israel-Germany analogy?

"It is not an exact science, but I will describe to you some of the elements that go into the stew: a great sense of national insult; a feeling that the world has rejected us; unexplained losses in wars. And, as a result, the centrality of militarism in our identity. The place of reserve officers in society. The number of armed Israelis in the streets. Where is this swarm of armed people going? The expressions hurled publicly: 'Arabs out.'"

What you are actually claiming is that we have viruses of Nazism within us.

"The term 'Nazism' is extremely charged."

Avrum Burg writes in his new book: "It is sometimes difficult for me to distinguish between the primeval National-Socialism and some national cultural doctrines of the here-and-now."

"There is a difference between saying 'Nazi' and saying 'National-Socialist.' Nazi is an ultimate icon; in us it goes to final and terminal places."

OK, we will leave Nazism. Are you concerned about a fascist debacle in Israel?

"I think it is already here."

Do you really believe that the racist slogans which, appallingly, do indeed appear on the stone walks in Jerusalem are akin to the slogans of the 1930s in Germany?

"I see that we are not weeding out those utterances with all our might. And I hear voices coming out of Sderot We will destroy and kill and expel. And there is a transferist discourse in the government... We have crossed so many red lines in the past few years. And then you ask yourself what the next red lines that we cross will be."

In the book you both ask and answer. "I feel very strongly," you write, "that there is a very good chance that a future Knesset in Israel ... will prohibit sexual

relations with Arabs, use administrative means to prevent Arabs from employing Jewish cleaning ladies and workers ... like the Nuremberg Laws ... All this will happen, and is already happening." Didn't you get carried away, Avrum?

"When I was Speaker of the Knesset [1999– 2001], I heard people talking. I conducted in-depth conversations with members from all parts of the House. I heard people of peace say – I want peace because I hate Arabs and can't stand to look at them and can't tolerate them –, and I heard people on the right use Kahanist language. Kahanism [referring to the ultranational doctrine of Rabbi Meir Kahane] is in the Knesset. It was disqualified as a party, but it constitutes 10 and maybe 15 and maybe even 20 percent of the Jewish discourse in the Knesset. These matters are far from simple. These are roiling waters."

I will tell you frankly. I think we have serious moral and psychological problems. But I think that the comparison with Germany on the eve of the rise of Nazism to power is baseless. One example: There is a problem with the place of the army in our lives and with the place of the generals in our politics and in the relations between the political echelon and the army. But you are likening Israeli militarism to German militarism, and that is a false comparison. You describe Israel as a Prussian Sparta living by the sword, and that is not the Israel I see outside. Certainly not in 2007

"I envy your ability to read the situation as you read it. I very much envy you. But I think we are a society that in its feelings lives by the sword... It is not by chance that I make the comparison with Germany, because our feeling that we are obliged to live by the sword stems from Germany. What they deprived us of in the 12 years of Nazism necessitates a very large sword. Look at the fence. The separation fence is a fence against paranoia. And it was born in my milieu. In my school of thought. With my own Haim Ramon. What is the thinking here? That I will erect a big wall and the problem will be solved because I will not see them. You know, the Labor movement always saw the historical context and represented a culture of dialogue, but here we have terrible pettiness of soul. The fence physically demarcates the end of Europe. It says that this is where Europe ends. It says that you are the forward post of Europe and the fence separates you from the barbarians. Like the Roman Wall. Like the Wall of China. But that is so pathetic. And it is a bill of divorce from the vision of integration. There is something so xenophobic about it. So insane. And it comes just at a time when Europe itself, and the world with it, has made such an impressive advance in internalizing the lessons of the Holocaust and has fomented a great advance in the normative behavior of nations."

The truth is that you are a salient Europist. You live in Nataf but you are all Brussels. The prophet of Brussels.

"Completely. Completely. I see the European Union as a biblical utopia. I don't know how long it will hold together, but it is amazing. It is completely Jewish."

And this admiration you show for Europe is not accidental. Because one of the riveting things in your book is that the sabra Avrum Burg turns his back on being sabra and connects very deeply with some sort of yekke [a reference to Jews of German origin] romanticism. Zionist Israel comes across as a vulgar baron in the book, whereas German Jewry is the ideal and the paragon.

"You are dichotomous, Ari, and I am inclusive. You slice off and I try to contain. Therefore I do not say that I am turning my back on being sabra but that I am turning in a different direction. And that is true. Completely true."

I have a bone to pick with this romanticism. You describe a thousand wonderful years of German Jewry. In large measure you view German Jewry as a model. But it ends in Auschwitz, Avrum. It leads to Auschwitz. Your yekke romanticism is understandable and attractive, but it lies.

"Is there a well-grounded romanticism? Is your Israeli romanticism grounded?"

My Israeliness is not romantic. On the contrary: It is cruel. It stems from understanding necessity. And you blur the necessity. Emotionally, you prefer the move from Dresden to Manhattan over coping with the Jewish-Israeli fate.

"We do not want to accept this, but the existence of the Diaspora dates from the beginnings of our history. Abraham discovers God outside the borders of the Land. Jacob leads tribes to outside the borders. The tribes become a people outside the borders. The Torah is given outside the borders. As Israelis and Zionists, we ignored this completely. We rejected the Diaspora. But I maintain that just as there was something astonishing about German Jewry, in America, too, they also created the potential for something astonishing. They created a situation in which the goy can be my father and my mother and my son and my partner. The goy there is not hostile but embracing. And as a result, what emerges is a Jewish experience of integration, not separation. Not segregation. I find those things lacking here. Here the goy is what he was in the ghetto: confrontational and hostile."

There really is a deep anti-Zionist pattern in you. Emotionally, you are with German Jewry and American Jewry. They excite you, thrill you, and by comparison you find the Zionist option crude and spiritually meager. It broadens neither the heart nor the soul.

"Yes, yes. The Israeli reality is not exciting. People are not willing to admit it, but Israel has reached the wall. Ask your friends if they are certain their children will live here. How many will say yes? At most 50 percent. In other words, the Israeli elite has already parted with this place. And without an elite there is no nation."

You are saying that we are suffocating here for lack of spirit.

"Totally. We are already dead. We haven't received the news yet, but we are dead. It doesn't work anymore. It doesn't work."

And you see in American Jewry the spiritual dimension and the cultural ferment that you don't find here.

"Certainly. There is no important Jewish writing in Israel. There is important Jewish writing in the United States. There is no one to talk to here. The religious community of which I was a part – I feel no sense of belonging to it. The secular community – I am not part of it, either. I have no one to talk to. I am sitting with you and you don't understand me, either. You are stuck at a chauvinist national extremity."

That is not completely accurate. I am aware of the Jewish richness you are talking about. But I am also aware that the basic Zionist analysis was correct. Without Israel there is no future for a non-Orthodox Jewish civilization.

"Take the purest Israeliness there is. Moshe Dayan, for example. And we will shed all the Avrums from him. Totally immaculate Israeliness. No nudniks. No effete types. Nothing. Are you sure that this living-in-order-to-live will endure? Take on the other hand the 'kites' [anti-Semitic insult of Jews]. Martin Buber,

George Steiner. You say that these [ethereal] kites will not get anywhere. But my historical experience tells me that these kites get farther than the troopers."

You are actually preparing tools for exile.

"I have been living with them from the day I was born. What is it when I say in prayer that because of our sins we were exiled from our land? In Jewish history the spiritual existence is eternal and the political existence is temporary."

In this sense, you are essentially non-Zionist. Because the energy needed to establish and maintain this place is tremendous, and you are saying that we must not give our all to this place.

"There is no Israeli whole. There is a Jewish whole. The Israeli is a half-Jew. Judaism always prepared alternatives. The strategic mistake of Zionism was to annul the alternatives. It built an enterprise here whose most important sections are an illusion. Do you really think that some sort of floating secular Tel Aviv-type post-kibbutz entity will [continue to] exist here? Never. Israeliness has only body; it doesn't have soul. At most, remnants of soul. You are already dead spiritually, Ari. You have only an Israeli body. If you go on like this, you will no longer be."

Israeliness is far richer, Avrum. It has energy and vibrancy and diversity and productivity. But you fled from Israeliness. You defected from Israeliness. You were an Israeli. You were more Israeli than I was. But no more.

"No more. I think that the 'non-Israeli' is not an alternative to the whole Jewish existence of two thousand years that I am talking about. That is why I wrote this book. Because I cannot leave this world while lying to myself. I told you: There is no Jewish existence without a narrative. There is no such thing. And here there is certainly no narrative. But what is even graver is that there are no forces that will draw out a narrative from within.

"Accordingly, I am going to the world and to Judaism. Because the Jew is the first postmodernist, the Jew is the first globalist."

You really are a globalist now. You really are going out to the world. You have taken a French passport, and as a French citizen you voted in the French presidential elections.

"I have already declared: I am a citizen of the world. This is my hierarchy of identities: citizen of the world, afterward Jew and only after that Israeli. I feel a weighty responsibility for the peace of the world. And Sarkozy is in my eyes a threat to world peace. That is why I went to vote against him."

Are you French?

"In many senses I am European. And from my point of view, Israel is part of Europe."

But it isn't. Not yet. And you are an Israeli public figure who is taking part in the French presidential elections as a Frenchman. That is a far-reaching act. A pre-Zionist Jewish act. Something that neither an Englishman or a Dutchman would do.

"True. It is completely Jewish. I am moving forward to the Jewish condition."

Do you recommend that every Israeli take out a foreign passport?

"Whoever can."

But in this, in this too, you are dismantling the Israeli mutual surety. You are playing with your multiple passports and your multiple identities, which is a course not available to many others. You are dismantling something very basic.

"Those are your fears, Ari. I suggest that you not be afraid. That is what I say in the book. I propose that we stop being afraid."

But you are not only the book, Avrum. You are also the person outside the book. And there is a contradiction between the purism of the man who wrote the book and the political life you lived here.

"A terrible question. Terrible. And it's true. For some of those years I lived a lie. For many years I was not myself. At the outset of my political path I had the energy of the struggle for religion and state and the struggle for peace. I had the precise wind of [the late Prof. Yeshayahu] Leibowitz in my sails. Those were my years of honesty. That was me. But afterward, for long years I was a Mapainik [Mapai, forerunner of the Labor Party]. I was there just to be. And I was no longer me. I was false to the tenets."

And now that you are free of the limitations of politics, you are going all the way with the Leibowitz in you. You describe the targeted assassinations as acts of murder. You are happy that your mother's grandson is not a fighter pilot who kills innocent people. You describe the occupation as an Israeli Anschluss. An Israeli Anschluss?

"That is what we are doing there. What do you want me to say about what we are doing there? That it's humanism? The Red Cross?"

And the targeted assassinations are murder?

"Some of them, certainly."

We are being dragged into carrying out war crimes?

"I have no other way to see it. Especially if there is no horizon of dialogue. The Israelis are very calm. One more Arab, one less Arab. Ya'allah, it's alright. But in the end, the pile grows high. The number of innocent people is so large that it can no longer be contained. And then our explosion and their explosion and the world's will be infinite. I see it happening before my eyes. I see the pile of Palestinian bodies crossing the wall we erected so as not to see it."

And you are not only Leibowitz. You are also Gandhi. You say that the right reaction to the Holocaust was not Anielewicz [Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising] but Gandhi.

"I believe in the doctrine of nonviolence. I do not think that to believe in nonviolence is to be a patsy. In my eyes, Gandhi is as Jewish as there is. He embodies a very ancient Jewish approach. Like Yochanan ben Zakkai, who asked for Yavneh and its sages. Not Jerusalem, not the Temple, not sovereignty: Yavneh and its sages."

And your Gandhian approach has a political expression: You believe Israel should be relieved of nuclear weapons.

"Of course, of course. The day the Bomb is dismantled will be the most important day in Israel's history. It will be the day on which we get such a good deal with the other side that we will no longer need the Bomb. That has to be our ambition."

Avrum, your book is that of a man of peace. Almost a pacifist. How did it happen that when a man of peace like you left politics you tried to buy from the government a factory that manufactures tank parts?

"I am a businessman. I deal with companies. With bringing them back to health. Privatizations. I like this job and I am also good at it. One of my main projects was Ashot Industries in Ashkelon, 40 percent of which manufactures arms. My intention was to close down that production line and expand Ashot's involvement in the world of civil aviation. I will not be responsible for manufacturing arms for one day. The challenge I saw was to take a place that makes spears and beat them into plowshares."

That deal raised serious questions. It led to an investigation by the state comptroller and by the police. But I don't want to ask about its criminal aspect, because the case was closed and you were exonerated. I want to ask how it can be that the first thing a politician who presented himself as an anti-Thatcherite and as a sworn enemy of privatization did after leaving politics was to try to earn a huge personal profit from privatization.

"I set out to do the most anti-Thatcherite thing. The state sold badly but I wanted to buy well. The state wronged the workers and I wanted to ensure their rights. I wanted to show a different model of partnership between employees and owners. So I think it is unjust that the State of Israel took this deal away from me. When I left politics, the temptations were great. I could have sat on this board or that board. People wanted me to open doors and close doors. But I said no. I went to the old [type of] industry. To the periphery. I am now producing corn in Hatzor Haglilit. Show me another person like me who emerged from politics and is doing work like this. I am not sitting in Kiryat Atidim [a high-tech industrial zone]. I am not sitting in the slick places. I am sweating my guts out every month to pay my 600 employees. Their salary."

It's not exactly right that you decided not to open doors or close doors. In your joint venture with businessman David Appel you were supposed to open doors so he could reincarnate the 'Greek Island' tourist project in southern Italy.

"Nothing came of that project. Not even a business opportunity. But if something had come of it – so what? Because 20 people don't like David he is unacceptable? Because terrible things are said about him in the judicial system but nothing is proved? That is violence I cannot tolerate. It is simply an executioner's approach. Israeliness as executioner, and we really love it – it sells papers."

Are the allegations against you concerning Ashot Industries and David Appel part of an Israeli executioner's approach?

"There is a gallows society here. First we'll hang you and when you breathe your last breath we will clarify why it was your last. How it left your body. We are now living in the equivalent of the 1950s in America. In a McCarthyite era. The assault on corruption is McCarthyism. It is important that we set boundaries. In the past we swiped things from the chicken coop, and today that is impossible. Once we asked girls, When you say no, what do you mean? – and today sexual

harassment is forbidden. But the way it is being done – the style, the vulgarity, the populism, the superficiality. The inability of those who are under attack to fight back properly."

You do know how to fight back. For example, Salai Meridor [former Jewish Agency chairman] decides that there is no justification for him and you to enjoy the baseless privilege of a service car with a chauffeur for life, and you go to court to fight for that privilege with all your might.

"As a former chairman of the Jewish Agency, I have pension rights just as you have pension rights. One day they are suddenly gone. Out of the blue. Think that part of your pension is to receive Haaretz free and one day Amos Schocken [the publisher] suddenly takes it away. Wouldn't you fight? Wouldn't you go to the workers' committee?"

"But every person is allowed to fight when something is taken from him – only Avrum is not allowed. Why? Because this whole thing is such a pittance in money terms that it doesn't even exist. But the level of principle sent me up the wall."

We're talking about NIS 200,000. And about your behavior, which the judge found disgraceful. And about the fact that even though you talk high and mighty about morals, you don't see the moral flaw in the fact that 10 years after leaving the Jewish Agency you are driving on your business trips throughout the country with a Jewish Agency chauffeur driving you everywhere. On top of which, today you are so alienated from everything the Jewish Agency stands for.

"I have something to say about what the judge said. But I will not counterattack. I will not correct violence with violence. We are talking about a person's basic right. About a pension right."

Was it worth it? What will remain engraved in people's memory is that Salai Meridor was fair and modest, and Avrum Burg was a hedonist who coveted benefits.

"What remains of all this is that I am at peace with myself. Everyone who feels good with secret violence or hidden knifing or with being an open or covert Sicarius [name given to Second Temple Jews who used a dagger, sicarius, to dispose of collaborators with Rome] – good luck to him! Well and good. I am not going to educate the world. What's important for me is that I am at harmony with myself."

But there is a question mark here which has accompanied you all along. You speak so impressively. Not only articulately but morally. And now you have written a book that is all morality. But your activity in the world is different. In political life you were sophisticated, cagy and snakelike, and in the business world, too, you are far from being a saint. The disparity between your language and your deeds is disturbing.

"The disparity is in the eye of the beholder. I do not ask myself how Ari Shavit sees me. I am finished with the world in which I care what you think of me. I live in a world in which I care what I think about me. For many years I lived with the Moloch of what people would say. That Moloch led me to wrong places. To places of a very large gap between the inner me and the outer me. Today I live with my truth."

Maybe the things connect. You really are a man of peace who rejects the militarist, nationalist, brute-force Israeli. But when you reconnect to the Jew, you are connecting not only to the spiritual Jew but also to the Jew of money.

"True. Life is not just to be a pioneer with a hoe and a bold fighter at Lion's Gate. Life is also to be a merchant in Warsaw. Unequivocally, that is a richer totality in life."

Still, you haven't given up the political. You are a close friend of Prime Minister Olmert. Do you continue to support him even after the Second Lebanon War?

"The story of Ehud Olmert is a terribly great tragedy. Of everyone in the generation that is slightly older than me, he is the most talented. The most experienced. There is a great fondness between us. I like him very much. He is one of the most humane people and most moral people in regard to relations between people, and in terms of his relations with his family. But his ability to translate into practical terms what he has is impossible because of the declaration of the war. The Bush-like notion that war is the first option is a mistake that colors all of Olmert's other essential qualities. I still pray that he will correct this by means of a great political drama. Hamas or Syria or the Saudi initiative. I tell him not to entrench himself in the mistake. It is still possible for a great healing to come out of the blunder."

Who do you support in the Labor Party primaries?

"Barak."

Why?

"He has already proved once that he is ready to go beyond the Israeli Rubicon. And there will be Rubicons to cross here. His ability to do that is very important to me."

Do you see yourself returning to politics?

"An open question. Only in 2010 will a new political era begin in Israel. After the Olmert-Barak-Bibi [Netanyahu] generation comes to its end, the turn will come of a new generation who will come from the economy, the academy, the arts. Maybe then there will be a place for me."

A place in the Prime Minister's Bureau?

"Once I wanted very much to be prime minister. It burned like fire in my bones. I didn't know what I wanted to do there, but I wanted terribly to be there. Today I say that I have lot of marathons to run before that can happen."

But you are in the marathon?

"All my life."

www.reiner-bernstein.de

www.genfer-initiative.de