

92. Menachem Begin on Arab Refugees (2 December 1963)

Knesset Debate. Fifth Knesset, Vote by Israel's Delegation to U.N. on Refugee Problem -- Sitting 68, 10 January 1962

Mr. Chairman, "*we shall not always find them supporting our views; but we shall always expect of them to support their own freedom.*" These words were spoken on January 20, 1961 by a young man that pledged allegiance to the Constitution of the United States, and his actions and his life came to a tragic and shocking end.

Based on these words of the late President [J.F. Kennedy] we have to say today to the Government of the U.S. with regards to the problem of the Arab Refugees without fear and recoil: We do not support you on this issue. We reject it and we shall staunchly support our own freedom of opinion.

There is an unyielding tie between these two messages. We reject your view for the sake of our freedom. Loyal to our freedom we decline your view. For us it is a fateful matter. We are dealing here with something similar to an invasion. And as we would have been ready to make any sacrifice in order to ward off an invading army, we shall equally resist any pressure to open the gates of our small home for such an invasion [of refugees] that will endanger the essence of our existence.

In order to clarify this stand I think, Mr. Chairman that the Knesset should at the end of this discussion arrive at a very brief and decisive resolution, based on its decision from November 6, 1961 that says: *The Arab refugees shall not be returned to the territory of Israel; the only solution is to resettle them in Arab countries. The Knesset rejects any recommendation, or negotiations that are intended to allow the return of these refugees to the Israel.*

With the permission of the Chairman I will now relate to the intrinsic aspect of this problem. We condemn the Government that it had sinned not only against its commitment to carry out the decisions of the Knesset in compliance with the Transitory Law, but also against the future of our nation. We blame the Government that it had breached the decision of the Knesset in three aspects: In voting, in announcement and initiative.

The strangest thing in this affair is that the decision of January 6, 1961 was enacted by the Knesset – granted, not with an initial support of the Government – with the full backing of the Government. Plutarch [(46-120 CE), of Greek origin who was a Roman historian] tells us about three Caesars and their distinct attitudes towards the Senate's decisions. One Caesar fulfilled all the decisions. The second carried out only the Senate resolutions that came about as a result of his proposals. The third one rejected all of the Senate laws, even those that were based on his own proposals.

The Knesset enacted laws that were not to your [the Government] liking, for example: The resolution against the re-armament of Germany that you have violated clandestinely and indirectly; there was a Knesset resolution that demanded to abolish the British Mandatory emergency laws of 1945. You did not allow the activation this resolution either.

But you gave your full backing to the resolution from November 6, 1961. So why violate it? Is it based on the third example of that Caesar of Ancient Rome? You violated lawful resolution of the Knesset by taking a vote on it.

Mrs. Foreign Minister [Golda Meir] in an interesting press conference told dispassionately what had happened in the 16th United Nations (UN) General Assembly with regard to the American proposition. She [Mrs. Meir] emphasized that in that proposed resolution the Conciliatory Committee was requested to continue its efforts to implement the infamous

Clause 11. But our Foreign Minister refused for some reason to tell the Knesset how we voted on the American proposition. The truth is that the Government instructed our Mission to the UN to vote for the American proposition that demanded the implementation of Clause 11. [This Clause in UN Resolution 194 that deals with the Arab Refugees states: “...*refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date...*”]

The Foreign Minister says that there was some progress in the 17th General Assembly, namely: The Americans proposed a resolution that mentioned Clause 11 but did not insist on actually executing it. So we abstained on the vote in that General Assembly. We abstained when there was actually some progress. We voted yes when there was a draw back from Israel perspective. We asked the Foreign Minister and the Government why you voted for a resolution that called for the implementation of Clause 11. Though this Clause does not say that all refugees must return to Israel (even those who tend to distort the issue do not claim otherwise) it does refer to part of them.

But the Knesset decided that the only solution to the refugees’ problem is in their resettlement in the Arab countries. How could you, in defiance of this decision vote for a resolution that says among other things that some of the refugees should be allowed to return to Israel’s territory? When we asked all these questions we received an answer: It was **wisdom**. In the 17th General Assembly, as I already said, we abstained. This was most likely **courageous**. In the 18th General Assembly we already voted no. This very likely was **heroism**. But I wish to ask both the Government and the members of the Knesset: Between courage and heroism whatever happened to wisdom. How and why was it crushed? If it was proper to vote for Clause 11 in the 16th General Assembly when the resolution called for its implementation? Why it was necessary to abstain when the resolution mentioned the Clause but did not call for its implementation?

When there was a national interest to vote against a resolution that called for the implementation of Clause 11 in the 18th General Assembly, how could you vote for that same resolution in the 16th General Assembly? Do you really think that our people are illiterate that do not know how to read and write, how to think and how to weigh the issues? Do you wish to blind our people? How could you make such leaps of voting differently on that issue? [Do you think that] All that you do is good?

The Foreign Minister blamed the whole world today. Should you not once search your own ways? Should you not look into your own actions? The American Government made a mistake; the Russian Government is joining the Arab countries; other governments voted for the proposed American resolution. It may be feasible that there is one more government in the world that makes a mistake – possibly a sinful one? After all everything is clear and in the open and can be judged by common sense.

You have breached the Knesset decision with an announcement. Both in the 17th and the 18th General Assemblies our spokespersons said: We never declared that we shall not allow even one refugee [to return to Israel]. And I want to ask: Who asked you to make such an announcement in the UN? Were you pushed against the wall? Did anyone present you with a question? Did you ever say that you would not allow one refugee to enter and that led to your announcement? So what is the meaning of that announcement? It seems like the following fictitious occurrence: Simon is going to sue Reuben for a certain amount of money arguing that Reuben owes this sum. Reuben responds: I don’t recognize this debt, I owe you nothing. So the two are now arguing about the actual existence of a debt. But if Reuben had said: I never said

that I shall pay you even a Penney then he already admits that the debt exists. And the only question that remains is the total sum of the debt.

Judging by common sense, your announcement in the UN that you never declared that we shall not allow even one refugee to return – the meaning is that you are willing to allow the entry of a certain number of refugees. Is it more than one, or maybe two? When MKs of the Mapam [a left leaning political faction] stood on this podium they said: We propose, once there is a peace agreement, to allow the entry of a certain and mutually agreed upon number of refugees you [the Government] responded: This is an opening for extortion; this will invite pressure on us. And I agree with your justified criticism of Mapam's stance. But what have you really been doing? In this Chamber you attack Mapam then you go to the UN and make a similar announcement to that of Mapam, but with a slightly revised version. If someone says: We never declared that we shall not allow the entry of even one refugee, then no one with common sense in the UN or the entire world will not interpret it as our willingness to allow the entry of a certain number of refugees. Once again, how such a miserable declaration does match the Knesset decision.

You have also violated the Knesset decision by assuming an act of initiative. According to our Foreign Minister our Mission to the UN introduced some kind of new jargon. Our talented representatives to the UN call the famous proposal of direct negotiations with the Arab countries: An "initiative". By assuming such initiative you have once again annulled the Knesset decision. Before I clarify this point, Mr. Chairman I would like to relate to the meaning of the political initiative that you took in the 18th General Assembly.

There is some kind of deviation, Mrs. Foreign Minister not with reference to the forgotten announcement of 1953, but from the perspective of the proposals that were made in the last couple of years by those that our Foreign Minister regards to be *mediators, friends*. It was suggested twice by those friends to conduct direct peace negotiations between the State of Israel and the Arab countries with the assumption that the peace agreement will include the solution to the problem of the Arab refugees. The first words of those suggestions were erased and you have agreed and even may have initiated a resolution that will say: To conduct direct negotiations only on the problem of the Arab refugees. This is very grave. The Arab countries maintain a state of war against us and are making preparations to launch a war against us, as their leaders declare so day after day. This kind of a situation has no precedent in the relations among nations. It is obvious that it negates the preamble of the UN scroll that maintains *that all members of the organization take upon themselves to live in peace with one another and maintain good relations with their neighbors*. You have agreed in the 18th General Assembly to erase the words "negotiations for peace agreement" and proposed to conduct negotiations with the Arab countries on a single issue. It is as if Israel is compliant to the situation of a state of war.

We think that the U.S., Russia and the rest of the countries in the world are not only sinning against us but also against themselves and their children if they accept the situation whereby there are member states in the UN who maintain a state of war and declare of their wish to destroy a member state and no one says anything, or protest and there is not even a proposal that says that it contradicts the scroll of the UN.

I shall now return to the Knesset decision from November 6, 1961. If the Government says in the UN that it is ready to conduct direct negotiations with the Arab countries solely on the solution of the refugees' problem, don't you think that those who listen to you in the UN may assume that we bring nothing to the negotiation table? Is that the proper way to approach such a complicated problem? Do you assume that other member nations would support negotiations that a priori may end up in zero result?

I think that that every thinking person in this Chamber, or in the UN or in any diplomatic post will assume that if a country makes a certain proposition that entails quantity and direct negotiations it must have something to offer, namely an agreed upon number [of refugees] to be allowed to return. But the Knesset decided that none should be returned and that their only solution is in the Arab countries. How could you, based on such an explicit background to propose negotiation on that issue and tell the world: We are ready, under certain conditions – though you have no right to do so – allow the entry of a certain number of refugees.

The Foreign Minister maintained that the proposal is not a stratagem, or a tactical maneuver. With due respect I shall tell her the truth that I do not think that one has to be ashamed to employ such tactics in the international arena. In the UN there is no single country that does not employ them.

It is a pity that the Prime Minister now exits the Chamber because I'm about to mention him.

The question is what is a tactical maneuver. The Prime Minister, for instance said a few days ago in a press conference that it is true that we suggested to conduct direct negotiations on the refugees' problem with the Arab countries so that they would be forced to recognize something that Israel does not wish to recognize [Israel]. That is the tendency. If this is correct and it will be of benefit, then there is nothing to be ashamed of. Up to this point everybody understood it and it was also described in the same fashion in a speech by the Foreign Minister. We shall offer to negotiate; we want peace; the Arab countries will reject our proposal and the UN will say that they want [to launch] war. But they rejected it and the world is not shocked and Nasser [Egypt's President] receives assistance from all sides.

Well, the tactical maneuver is actually not working. What is left of it? The honorable Foreign Minister delivered us a message that we shall have a majority vote in a parallel committee for the adoption of this proposal. And you gave up the opportunity to have a vote on it?

We argued two years ago when there was a proposal not as the one above but one that related to a comprehensive peace that would include the refugees' problem that this was an anomaly. Indeed 34 or 35 countries voted for it but it did not have a 2/3 majority and it is a proof of anomaly. The decisive majority of the UN – including the Super Powers – is not ready to support something as simple as direct negotiations for peace agreement. Your response was that we did have some sort of achievement: A significant minority voted for our proposal. But nowadays, even such an achievement is not possible.

The situation is severe because we had a secured majority in the parallel committee and we could have achieved a moral victory, but we gave it up and retreated. Why?

Nothing came out of your proposal. Of that tactical maneuver – that ignored the Knesset resolution – remains one memory that you are willing to consider (and I choose my words very cautiously) the possibility of returning a certain number of refugees. Otherwise how else could you vote for Clause 11? And otherwise you would not declare: *We never said that we shall not allow the return of even one refugee.* As such you would not have proposed to conduct direct negotiation for solving this single problem.

I assume that the Government will ask us the same eternal question: let us assume that we had always voted against any proposition that included Clause 11... Let us assume that we had made this new proposal regarding direct negotiations with the Arab countries on this issue. Would not the Americans better present their own proposal? Would it be incorrect to assume that 82 countries would have backed the Americans? Is it wrong to assume that the Americans would

be able to secure 2/3 majority in the General Assembly? This is the eternal question. You have to prove your assumption that despite the error that you made, the result would not have been different.

According to our assessment you open the door for pressure. The issue of the Arab Refugees is not between us and the Arab countries from a political standpoint. This is because there is no dialogue between us and them. Until this day it was an issue between us and the world; between us and the UN; between us and Washington that ordinarily can mobilize a majority for its proposals. This is where the dialogue should take place. But when a partner to such dialogue can see you raise your hand for Clause 11 and listen to your announcement [we never said that we shall not allow a single refugee to enter] or hear your declarations [we shall have a separate negotiations on that issue] why should this potential partner assume that from our perspective as well Clause 11 is not that terrible? Under such circumstances, why should people not say in their hearts: *The State of Israel by way of announcements, declarations and faulty maneuvers says that under certain conditions it will be ready to allow the entry of a certain number of refugees?*

Therefore, why clause 11 is disqualified? After all it also speaks of partial return and a total one? This is how you opened the door for the exertion of pressure. It is possible that if you shut the door a priori in the 16th General Assembly and kept it shut in the 17th as you tried to do in the 18th and then maybe the American position would have been different. I say maybe because even I do not have a proof. Our main assertion is that you made all the apparent mistakes. If a person drives a car on the wrong side of the road and causes an accident he would not be able to argue that under the circumstances the accident was unavoidable. He will have to bear the consequences and be punished. And you stayed away from the road that was paved by the Knesset and 107 members out of 120 voted for it. You have done so by an announcement, by a vote and by your initiative. Why did you do such a thing? We warned you against it two years ago and last year. Why don't you listen to the warning? Is it possible that the whole world is mistaken and only the Government of Israel will make no error, and will not admit to one? Are the words mistake and failure not included in your dictionary?

And today we were advised that everything went well in the 18th General Assembly. The Arabs proposed to have a representation to the refugees. It was not given to them. Nothing happened, supposedly. But I think that something very serious had happened. The pressure will increase and we will have to ward it off. The Government has to speak in a plain fashion. We demand from the Government to learn from its mistakes and not deviate from the road that was paved here and said that the Government should not vote under any condition and in any General Assembly for a proposal that relates to Clause 11; that the Government under no circumstances convey a message that has been contrary to a decision that has been decided and the Government should not declare an initiative to conduct separate negotiations with the Arab countries solely on the refugees' problem.

We demand of the Government to carry out here and in the UN and in all its appearances the Knesset resolution without the slightest deviation from it.

As for the problem itself, Mr. Chairman we should not show any weakness of the heart. I am ready to repeat: this problem has a humane aspect. Who, like us the Jewish people, understands the fate and the predicament of refugees. But there is a decisive and a fateful humane aspect – and this is the existence of the State of Israel. Not only does our freedom depend on it; the essence of our survival depends on it. The return of refugees in any number,

and exerting pressure to allow the return of refugees under any circumstance means danger to our existence.

The refugees' problem could have been solved a long time ago. And it can be solved humanly in the near future in a similar fashion to more complicated problems that were settled around the world. Millions of refugees came about between India and Pakistan; there were a million and a half refugees between Greece and Turkey and their problems were solved humanly by resettlement.

Actually the initial number that we are referring to is about 400,000 or at most 500,000 refugees. Can we solve this problem in a humane fashion as it has been practiced all over the world? We should not show weakness of the heart and execute zigzag maneuvers such as the Government demonstrated to all in the UN contrary to the Knesset decision.

Let us say to the U.S. that bears most of the responsibility for the proposal that was adopted by the parallel political committee and to all peace and freedom seeking nations that on this issue we shall not give in. This is a crucial matter for us. Our existence and freedom is on a balance here. We, as one of the nations that was liberated from a colonial rule and about whom the late President Kennedy referred to in his inauguration speech, we shall strongly support our freedom.