

## Simple Slogans Can Simply Kill

Contributed by Moshe Kempinski

We mere mortals are fated to live in a world of complexity and ambiguity. Good and evil are intermeshed and are therefore difficult to sift and winnow. Decisions of great moral intention can at times create situations mired in deep immoral suffering. It is no wonder, then, that we mortals yearn for and seize upon easy solutions. It is not surprising that we become impassioned by simple slogans and pithy statements. These slogans are simply stated and easily understood. They neatly delineate and categorize a confusing reality into nice user friendly chunks.

Yet those simple slogans can also be extremely dangerous. Simple slogans threaten the innocents of this world because the innocents do not live in a simple world. Slogans such as "the survival of the fittest" , "peace in our time" and "Deutschland Uber Alles" have proven to be fatal. As a child of the sixties I am still moved by the phrase " all we are saying is give peace a chance "It was only later that I realized that the slogan is meaningless without the words " a realistic peace" added on , except that it would not fit the melody.

As an Israeli resident of Jerusalem, I did not participate in the last American elections but I am deeply affected by them. John McCain's campaign slogan, "Country First" lost out to President Obama's "Change". As a result we here in the Middle East are bracing for the billowing winds of change. They are coming our way. This would be a positive prospect if there was not that annoying and even frightening sense that the complexity of the Middle East will again be treated with simple slogans and sound bites.

The slogan "land for peace" has already proven to be futile as no one first bothered to determine what peace was actually being discussed. I remember a conversation I once had with one of my Palestinian neighbors in the Old City of Jerusalem. Nabil was describing how he felt the prospects for peace in the Middle East were bleak. I remarked to him that I had never before asked him what he meant by the word "peace." Nabil then explained that peace means that his son could travel from Bethlehem to Ramallah without being stopped at a checkpoint. It meant that he could build additions to his house without needing to get permission from the municipal authorities. It meant that he could govern himself.

I responded that I wondered about "the end of killing and terrorism" as a way to define "peace." He smiled and waved his hand in a deprecatory manner and said, "No no no , that would take generations." I said to him then, that this could be the major source of our problems. We have different understandings of the word "peace." We both speak a language and use the same words but don't mean the same thing. For Nabil and most Palestinians peace means political autonomy, or statehood, while for Israelis it means the end to terrorism and killing. It is not surprising then that the process never seems to get anywhere.

President Obama said in April that he "strengthens our ( America's) hand" by reaching out to enemies of the United States and making sure that the nation is a leader, not a lecturer, of democracy. In March President Obama made an unprecedented video appeal to Iranians on their holiday of Nowruz, directly addressing both Iran's people and its leaders to praise the country's culture, and to declare his commitment to using words and dialogue on issues dividing the two governments. According to reports in the media, President Obama also dispatched his adviser, Robert Malley to Egypt and Syria to outline Obama's policy on the Middle East. Malley reportedly relayed a promise from Obama that the United States would seek to enhance relations with Cairo and reconcile differences with Damascus.

On the other hand, though, the President of Iran, Ahmadinejad and the President of Syria ,Assad have understood the American overtures not as a gesture of strength but rather as a sign of weakness. "Iran and Syria are more powerful than before the (2003 U.S.) invasion of Iraq," the Iranian president said during the Damascus press conference."It is time to

evict the foreign presence, which has caused so many problems for the people, from the region," Ahmadinejad said. "We did not invite them, they are uninvited guests."

In the West the concept of reaching out to one's foe is a sign of strength; In the Middle East it is a sign of weakness.

The current slogan being bandied about is the slogan of the "two State Solution". It sounds logical, rational and just. Regrettably, again, no one has bothered to determine what the quality and tenor of that second state would be. Is the formation of another state in this volatile area and one given into the hands of local warlords a recipe for peace or for disaster?

The experience of the Disengagement from the Gaza strip has proven that this solution is doomed to blow up in every one's face again. Yet the greatest problem remains that western thinking has become obsessed with "solutions" and has forgotten the critical importance of "process". The destination has superseded the journey as the optimum ideal.

Most recently Barak Obama has crafted a well worded and structured speech in Cairo that was replete with simple misleading slogans. As a result we are doomed to deal, again, with simplified solutions that have not been processed, explored or even walked through. The media likes the simple solution and the Politician thrives on it. The people of the Middle East though will suffer the consequences.