

Abba Eban's contribution to the study of diplomacy

By Dr. Emmanuel Navon

Tel-Aviv University, 25 November 2003

Madame Eban,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is now a year since Abba Eban departed from us, and by honoring his memory we are also keeping the Jewish tradition of recalling the words and deeds of those who are not more –especially those, like Abba Eban, to whom we owe so much.

Shortly after Abba Eban passed away, his friend Bernard Lewis told the story of a meeting that took place between himself and Abba Eban in Jerusalem in 1945. Eban wanted his friend's advice on the three career options that were presented to him: 1) To become a fellow at Cambridge University, 2) To run for a constituency at the House of Commons on a Labour ticket, 3) To join the Jewish Agency.

When Eban asked Lewis if he thought he'd be suited for the House of Commons, Lewis replied: "Actually, I think you'd be more suited to the House of Lords." Regarding the third option (joining the Jewish Agency), Lewis said: "Aubrey, if you do that, you'll never be heard of again."

However, Aubrey did that, and not only was he heard of again, but he was heard of as one of the greatest orators of History; as the voice of Israel; as the passionate, brilliant, international advocate of Jewish freedom, independence, and statehood.

But Abba Eban was also a thinker and a writer. Among his many books, *The New Diplomacy* has become standard reading in diplomatic studies. *The New Diplomacy* is a very learned analysis of the Cold War international system. It also contains insightful teachings for both the student and practitioner of diplomacy.

If I had to summarize in one word the central teaching of this book, I would say: humility. Abba Eban tells students to be aware of the limits of their knowledge, and he tells diplomats to be aware of the limits of their power.

Students of diplomacy should be aware of the limits of their knowledge because no theory of international relations can fully explain what they try to understand. The reason for this is that: "*International relations, like fingerprints, are marked by particularity, not similarity. 'History,' as Paul Valéry reminds us, 'is the science of things that do not repeat themselves'*" (p. 379) and that "*All evidence indicates that most international situations really are unique. Since they deal with contingency and purpose, they cannot be traced by rigorous formulas*" (p. 383).

Eban also warns against the excessive use of historical analogy. The fact that the Munich Agreements were a disaster does not mean that compromise should always be

avoided, and the fact that the Vietnam War did not achieve its goals does not mean that the use of force should always be ruled out: *"If compromise and resistance are both excluded from the repertoire of diplomacy, there is precious little left"* (p. 381).

And finally, a last hint to International Relations students –a hint which I guess I should not mention here but will mention anyways: always listen to your professors with a skeptical ear. Why? Because *"It is hard to imagine a professor of surgery who has never performed a single operation, but there are many professors of international relations who have never negotiated an agreement or argued a case in an international forum"* (p. 384).

But diplomats should also be humble, because their power over reality is limited. If they want to advance their interests and ideals in reality, they should start by looking at reality as it is. In other words, if they want to serve their ideals, they should be realistic. For instance, it is often argued that if nationalism did not exist, then international and inter-ethnic conflicts would not exist either. Which is true, except that nationalism does exist and that you do not make it disappear by proclaiming its disappearance: *"There is a great deal of literature about the need for renunciation of the nation-state system as a means of ensuring world peace. While these statements are couched in utopian rhetoric, they are in fact a source of pessimism. To make survival depend on conditions that have no realistic prospect of coming into existence is a counsel of despair. The task of statesmen is to understand what is real and concrete in the international environment and to seek the maximal chance of peace within that context"* (p. 400).

And so, how can the diplomat *"seek the maximal chance for peace"* in our imperfect and un-ideal world? By adapting his good intentions to that world.

As we know, and as we Israelis have experienced for the past three years, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And it is time we start realizing what cannot be achieved in the real world. So here is another hint from Abba Eban: *"Problems of international rivalry may never be 'solved,' but there is a rational hope that they can be kept in restraint. War prevented is a kind of peace, perhaps the only kind of peace that nations will ever know"* (p. 401).

May we enjoy the absence of war, and may we learn from Abba Eban's wisdom.