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THE WORLD IS FULL OF EMPTY PROMISES

LAST November, President Mitterrand announced his intention of placing a wreath on the grave of Marshal Petain, who presided over the government of Vichy France, which deported thousands of Jews to German death camps. Widespread protests did not deter him, though the French government later designated July 16 as a day commemorating Vichy's oppressive policy toward the Jews.

Last week, the Holocaust Memorial Museum was opened in Washington by President Clinton. Though literature at the site is said to refer to negative American policies of the time, Clinton made no reference to it. These two events should recall another aspect of the Holocaust - the encouragement given Hitler by non-German governments to launch his "Final Solution," and the rejection by the great powers of every opportunity to mitigate its impact.

Overshadowed by the indescribable reality of the Holocaust has been its gruesome prewar prelude. While many hundreds of thousands sought to flee, and thousands crossed seas and oceans, the gates of Palestine, where Britain ruled, were locked. Locked also were the doors of practically every other country.

That was the time of an organized international hypocrisy called the Evian Conference, at which every delegate bemoaned the Jewish plight and urged that safe haven be found for the refugees - but not in his own country. What greater boost could be given to Hitler's plans? Indeed, toward the end of that period, the British and American governments provided him with conclusive vindication of his self-confidence. In February 1939, Lord Halifax, the British foreign secretary, instructed Ambassador Henderson in Berlin to ask the German government to be so good as to prevent Jews who planned to leave Germany from traveling on German ships.

He added that an American diplomat would join in the demarche, because the US government was afraid that the fleeing Jews might try to seek refuge in America. Enough has been written of the failure of the British and Americans to bomb Auschwitz, and of their refusal to accept offers by Nazi officials to spirit groups of Jews (in one case 4,000 children) away from the murder machine. The British in many cases displayed notable honesty in their excuses: the officials involved explained that many of these Jews, if saved, would want to go to Palestine.

CAN there be any doubt about the crucial lessons the Jewish people should have learned? We have time and again been given sharp reminders. Not three years passed after the full extent of the Nazi operation became known when the nascent Jewish State was subjected (1948) to an attack whose success would have meant (as the Arab aggressors proclaimed) genocide and utter destruction. Britain, true to its Mandatory past, armed and egged on the Arabs, while the US declared an embargo "on both sides." In June 1967, when the neighboring Arab states prepared for their again-advertised plan of genocide against the still tiny and vulnerable Israel, the British government was again on the Arabs' side, the Russians who had armed them were egging them on, and US president Johnson could not find the 1957 document which recorded a pledge to aid Israel if Egypt closed the Tiran Straits, which it had done on May 23.

The Israeli victory was followed by a period which has lasted to this day, in which Israel is called on to return to the Armistice lines of 1949 (which had lasted till June 4, 1967). That, broadly speaking, has been the agenda laid down for Israel by the successors of the Holocaust governments. A famous "moderate" - Abba Eban, former foreign minister - has described those Armistice lines to which Israel is now told to return as a death-trap.

He once explained - to the German journal *Der Spiegel* (No. 5, 1969): "We have often said that the map will never again be as it was on June 4, 1967. For us this is a matter of security and principle. The June map is for us identical with insecurity and danger. I do not exaggerate when I say that it has for us something of a memory of Auschwitz." The geography has not changed. The only coherent excuse offered for the Rabin-Aloni government's headlong drive to return to those borders is that the Arabs have "changed," and so Israel must "take risks for peace." This is nonsense.

The Arabs have decidedly not changed. Not by one iota have they modified their demands on Israel, nor their concept of exclusively Arab domination of Palestine as part of the "Arab world." They realize they are unable to defeat Israel in its present boundaries, and press all the more for its reduction to boundaries in which they believe they would be able to win. To that end they are prepared - understandably - even to use the word "peace." To this unassailable logic, too, Mr Rabin and his apologists have a reply: "America will give us guarantees." On the strength of American "guarantees" they are prepared to risk a war the Arabs will certainly wage in a third attempt to achieve their final solution.

In her day, prime minister Golda Meir said (in reply to the suggestion of guarantees by an American diplomat): "Guarantees? You speak of guarantees? By the time you got here, we wouldn't be here." Does Rabin really intend to surrender our territory, threatening Israel's national existence, without first asking for a mandate from the people? Not even if he had a massive parliamentary majority could he claim such a mandate. In fact, his flimsy majority in the election of June 1992 was not backed by a popular majority. It is the duty of every member of our people to insist on a new general election - now, without delay.