

## Haaretz20130317 When Obama speaks (and says nothing) By Gideon Levy

There's no other way to understand what Obama said in his interview with Channel 2 on the eve of his visit here.

Barack Obama has decided to punish the Israelis: He is talking to them as if they were ignoramuses. The U.S. president has also decided to punish himself: He is betraying his principles, those that have won him international acclaim and the Nobel Peace Prize.

There's no other way to understand what he said in his interview with Channel 2 on the eve of his visit here. The flattery he heaped on Israel's leader considerably exceeded diplomatic protocol and even phony American manners. His denial of his values deviated even from the opportunism one might expect from a politician. Obama said he wants to "connect to the Israeli people." This he actually did well; he told Israelis what they wanted to hear.

But from Obama we could have expected a lot more. When Obama said he admires Israel's "core values," which values was he talking about? The dehumanization of the Palestinians? The attitude toward African migrants? The arrogance, racism and nationalism? Is this what he admires? Don't separate buses for Palestinians remind him of something? Doesn't two communities living on the same land, one with full rights and the other with no rights, "ring a bell," as they say in America?

To admire "core values" while knowing we're talking about one of the most racist countries there is, with a separation wall and apartheid-like policies, means betraying the core values of the American civil rights movement that made the Obama miracle possible. Too bad he can't fulfill his fantasy of wearing a fake mustache and wandering around to have conversations with Israelis; he would hear how they talk about blacks like him. Too bad he can't sit in a cafe and "just hang out," as he'd like. He'd hear which "core values" really move Israelis.

Obama wants to lower expectations of his visit. Well, they can't get any lower. During his first term they said we'd have to wait until his second. So now it's here, and he says he's only coming "to listen." But his job isn't to listen; everybody has listened far more than enough. Now it's time for action, and it's still being delayed.

But more than that, we must pay attention to his words. He always calls the prime minister "Bibi," while the Palestinian leaders are Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas ) and Salam Fayyad. He always "tells" Abu Mazen but "suggests" to Bibi.

This time around, he referred to "Bibi" many times, but he didn't mention the occupation even once. He spoke about "autonomy" for the Palestinians as if we'd gone back decades, but he didn't say a word about justice, which should be an issue for any person of conscience because of the Israeli occupation. He also spoke about security, which will forever be an Israeli issue, never of concern to the Palestinians, who live in far greater danger.

So it's one of two things: Either we've grossly misjudged him or he's trying to deceive us, though it isn't clear for what. What good is flattering Israel if he isn't making any demands of it? What good is his desire to speak to Israelis if he doesn't plan to say anything to them except hollow, saccharine flattery? What good is this visit if no one seems to want concrete results from it?

Has Obama, who knows a thing or two about rights, deprivation, dispossession, discrimination and occupation, who at the start of his presidency heard plenty about the Palestinian plight from his friend, Prof. Rashid Khalidi, forgotten everything? Can everything about international politics be totally ignored, even by Barack Obama, its most amazing and exciting superstar?

Of course, once again some will say - wait, wait. An interview is just an interview. Then will come the speech at the Jerusalem convention center, and that will be just a speech. The years are passing, the settlements are growing and the occupation is becoming entrenched. Soon, Mr. President, it will be too late - maybe it already is. The core values you so admire are drowning, and there's no one to rescue them.