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The Emperor's New Clothes

By: YOAV SIVAN

Not even Bill Murray's classic movie "Groundhog Day" could have reenacted the scene so impeccably.

At the news conference in which he all but confessed to sex outside his marriage, Eliot Spitzer wore a nearly identical red tie as Jim McGreevey had worn four years earlier. Silda Spitzer wore practically the same Ann Tayloresque blue suit as Dina Matos McGreevey wore - which may now become the modern version of the "Republican cloth coat" that Pat Nixon wore during Richard Nixon's infamous Checkers speech in 1952.

For the Spitzers and McGreeveys, the staging was as similar as the wardrobe: Two northeastern governors standing self-absorbedly beside wives whose eyes had no choice but to drift off to a vacuous zone between the television lights and shell shock.

Finally, the identical plot: the governors resign and each of their political careers comes to an end.

It's not surprising, then, that the mainstream media has lumped the two scandals together. But the scandals are similar not because each involved sex, as the tabloid coverage would suggest, but because each involved abuse of the public trust.

Jim McGreevey did not resign because he had sex with someone who wasn't his wife, even if the lover was a man. Jim McGreevey resigned because he put his Israeli lover on the public payroll in a job for which that man was insanely unqualified - a homeland security job, no less. Take it from this Israeli: we all have to serve in the military. That doesn't make us automatic experts on terrorism any more than going to Dairy Queen makes you an expert on pasteurization.

Eliot Spitzer did not resign because he had sex with someone who wasn't his wife, even if the lover was a prostitute. Eliot Spitzer resigned because he turned out to be a hypocrite of psychotic proportions. The man prosecuted prostitution rings, for heaven's sake. The man based the success of his tenure as attorney general on resuscitating obscure laws to go after seedy people in power - and now turnabout could become fair play.

All of us could imagine that Spitzer would be the first to use the Mann Act of 1910, targeting interstate prostitution but rarely used, to grandstand his way into the headlines as Mr. Clean. Admirable then, repulsive now.

The emperor who went to the Emperor's Club was an emperor who wore no clothes.

If Eliot Spitzer didn't exist, Jim McGreevey would have to invent him. In the media's obsession with asking which man's conduct, which hypocrisy was worse, the answer would be Spitzer hands down. Yes, Jim McGreevey opposed marriage equality while he was governor, and that was inexcusable. McGreevey admits as much in his book.

But Spitzer, as governor, had the audacity to enact legislation that furthered criminalized prostitution. That would be as if McGreevey proposed to make gay sex illegal - notwithstanding the 2003 Supreme Court Lawrence v. Texas ruling - while having sex with men who seem to have included not only Golan Cipel, but apparently McGreevey's own driver.

As in a soap opera that never ends, enter David Paterson, who in his first days as New York governor is compelled to disclose that he and his wife had not been faithful to one another.

But there's a difference: Paterson did not abuse the public trust. He and his wife had ups and downs in their marriage and strayed, perhaps like half the married couples in the world.

The tabloids tried to feed on the Patersons' marital history like they fed on the problems of the McGreeveys and the Spitzers. But, the seemingly unending New York Post efforts to keep some whiff of scandal alive notwithstanding, Paterson will survive - and in a state hungry for stability and healing, he will very likely thrive.

Americans, it seems, can tolerate their politicians being human. They cannot tolerate their politicians being hypocrites.

The country, perhaps, is growing up.

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