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BY LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

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Thomas Friedman and the Myth of Liberal Israel

Israel is in the process of putting together an aggressively racist rightwing government under the leadership of the unprincipled Benjamin Netanyahu. This is not the first such repugnant government Israelis have elected. Indeed, at least three prior times in its short history, the Israeli Jewish electorate has chosen ideologically committed fanatics (in those cases, having the additional allure of terrorist pasts), as their leaders: Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon, and Menachem Begin. Nor were these judgments of the electorate exceptions that were somehow contrary to Israel's national character. They were all, as is now also the case, logical outcomes of a national point of view—represented by Israel's Zionist state ideology—which has always been fundamentally racist, and which, on frequent occasions, raises to frenzied heights often in reaction to the legal resistance of its Palestinian victims.

However, diaspora supporters of Israel often disregard these historical facts. That they do so is testimony to the power of the propaganda-generated myth of a liberal, democratic Israel—the idealized Israel that so many just know in their hearts, could be and should be the real Israel. One of those who seems to mistake the ideal for the real is Thomas Friedman, columnist for the New York Times, who often writes about Israel.

In a recent column entitled *The Israel We Knew is Gone*, Friedman writes as if the imminent Netanyahu government will be unique: “a rowdy alliance of ultra-Orthodox leaders and ultranationalist politicians, including some outright racist, anti-Arab Jewish extremists once deemed completely outside the norms and boundaries of Israeli politics.” Friedman mentions “Itamar Ben-Gvir, who was convicted by an Israeli court in 2007 of incitement to racism and supporting a Jewish terrorist organization” as well as “Bezalel

Smotrich, the leader of the Religious Zionism party, who has long advocated outright Israeli annexation of the West Bank” and defended settler violence against Palestinians.

Friedman does not believe that these personages, or the parties they lead, are representative of the Israel he is familiar with. However, their outlooks and aims are little different than a Shamir, Sharon or Begin. What is different, or as Friedman puts it, “outside the norms and boundaries of Israeli politics,” is the diplomatically embarrassing, public indiscretion of men such as Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, combined with Netanyahu’s willingness to sacrifice the myth of liberal Israel to retain power. All of this is a shock to Friedman and his preferred vision of the Jewish state. It constitutes a “previously unthinkable reality.” Netanyahu is taking Israel where no Israeli politician “has gone before,” etc. So Friedman concludes that “the Israel we knew is gone.”

Apartheid Is What Is Real

To demonstrate just how superficial Friedman’s analysis is, consider the following. In 2021, three established human rights organizations with reputations for reliable findings, produced fact-based public reports demonstrating that Israel, in both culture and governmental policies, is a practicing apartheid state. (Apartheid, “an institutionalized system of segregation and discrimination on grounds of race,” has been declared a crime against humanity under international law.) B’tselem, Israel’s own human rights organization, produced its report in January of 2021. Amnesty International followed in February and Human Rights Watch in April. In October of 2022, the United Nations put out a report describing Israel’s behavior in its Occupied Territories as “settler-colonialism.”

Apartheid is not something the Israeli Jews just woke up to one morning. It is their historical choice—one that Thomas Friedman seems to have given little consideration. Thus, when describing the present situation, he does not mention that Zionism’s goal has always been acquisition of all of Palestine with as few Palestinians in residence as possible. Rather he points to a separate group of Israelis “who have always hated the Arabs,” and their growth due to “a dramatic upsurge in violence—stabblings, shootings, gang warfare and organized crime—by Israeli Arabs ... against Israeli Jews, particularly in mixed communities.”

For followers of the rightwing Likud, the religious parties, and the settler movement, this violence is happening not because Israel is an apartheid state, but because Israel has been, in their eyes, too liberal toward the Palestinians. And now it is time to end that alleged

tolerant orientation. One of the more successful of Netanyahu's political campaign mottos was: "That's it. We've had enough."

Racism Erodes All Humanistic Impulses

Netanyahu's success in mobilizing a multifaceted rightwing that has always been active, if not politically united, finally has Thomas Friedman afraid. He is alarmed that Israel is in the grip of a "general ultranationalist" fervor. Quoting Moshe Halbertal, the Hebrew University Jewish philosopher, "What we are seeing is a shift in the hawkish right from a political identity built on focusing on the 'enemy outside'— the Palestinians—to the 'enemy inside'—Israeli Arab." The problem with Halbertal's analysis is that it is based on a false dichotomy. Zionism has never made a serious distinction between inside and outside Palestinians. For many Zionists, they all are Arabs who should be pressured to emigrate to neighboring Arab lands. Zionism has made this attitude inevitable by creating, from the beginning, an expansionist, discriminatory society defined by religion with an inference of race. The search for compromises based on the "peace process," or a "two state solution," now appear as long-running confidence tricks that served to distract the world's attention from Israel's real goal. When it comes to "historic Israel," a maximalist program of occupation and settlement has always been the only acceptable outcome for those Zionists in power.

There is one other way in which the present circumstances scare Friedman. He tells us that "Netanyahu's coalition has also attacked the vital independent institutions that underpin Israel's democracy and are responsible for, among other things, protecting minority rights." Institutions such as the lower court system, the media and the Supreme Court have to be disciplined by being "brought under the political control of the right." However, this effort to control social institutions is not primarily about Palestinians. It reflects the rightwing's hatred (and just as in the U.S., hatred seems to be the operable word) of the left and center Zionists' attitudes on questions that impact Israeli Jews: Who is a Jew? "minority rights" for same sex couples, L.G.B.T.Q. folks, women's issues, Reform Jews and the like. Friedman seems unable to grasp the fact that the racism at the heart of Israeli culture and politics has to undermine any humanistic impulses within that society, even those impacting fellow Jews.

Finally, Friedman is concerned "about the future of Judaism in Israel" and well he might be. Going back to Halbertal, he notes that "the Torah stands for the equality of all people and the notion that we are all created in God's image. Israelis of all people need to respect minority rights because we, as Jews, know what it is to be a minority. This is a deep

Jewish ethos.” So, why is this essence of Jewish teaching so weak within Zionist Israel? Neither Friedman or Halbertal grasp the root cause—the historically racist, indeed apartheid nature of Zionist Israel. They don’t get it because they are blinded by the myth of liberal Israel, which is now at risk supposedly because of the resistance of the Palestinians. He quotes Halbertal as complaining, “When you have these visceral security threats in the street every day, it becomes much easier for these ugly ideologies to anchor themselves.”

Thomas Friedman’s assertion that “the Israel we knew is gone” is largely an illusion. In good part, his Israel was never there. Certainly there was, and for the moment still is, a facade of pseudo-democracy—something like “democracy” in Alabama, U.S.A., in the 1950s. Things are now evolving further along fascist lines. Bezael Smotrich, one of Friedman’s *bête noire*, has proclaimed that human rights and the institutions that support such rights are “existential threats” to Israel. Most Zionists will go along with this assertion, at least as it refers to Palestinians, because it historically fits Israeli sensitivities. After all, the occupation has been going on in all its immoral glory for half a century without significant objection from most Israeli Jews and their diaspora supporters.

What you now see so publicly demonstrated is, and always has been, Zionist Israel’s true culture and character—a state designed for one group alone and built on the conquest and dispossession of others. To deny this is to deny the history and the logic of Zionist ideology. And the cost? It is to be understood not only in terms of Palestinian rights, but also the very essence of Judaism, both of which are being destroyed simultaneously. All of this should keep Thomas Friedman, and other devotees of the myth of liberal Israel, up at night with recurring nightmares.

Lawrence Davidson is a retired professor of history at West Chester University in West Chester, PA.

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