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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The Summer of Discontent

We have seen the massive protests in Israel since January, furiously protesting the judicial coup being attempted by the far-right governing coalition. The protests surged in March and April, when it appeared the coalition would force its “reform” bill through the Knesset. However, the temperature subsided somewhat just before Passover when the protests achieved what all recognized was a temporary victory, and the bill was stayed. Prime Minister Netanyahu almost surely hoped against hope for a compromise on the issue, but it was not to be. The coalition radicals, including Itamar Ben Gvir, Bezalel Smotrich, and Yair Levine in the cabinet, and Simcha Rotman as Chair of the Knesset’s Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee, have indicated they are willing to bring down the coalition if they don’t get their “reforms” passed in the current summer session of the Knesset, and Bibi caved. Given that the polls indicate a loss of as many as 14 seats for the coalition parties were new elections to be held, only true ideologues like the aforementioned might really take that chance. The comparison between Bibi and the Speaker of our House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy, vis-à-vis his own far-right radicals is unavoidable – and pathetic.

By law, the Knesset summer session ends on July 30 and the winter session only begins after the fall cycle of Jewish holidays; this year on

Contents

INSIGHTS

- 1 President’s Message - The Summer of Discontent
By Paul Scham
- 4 Israel Gave Us the Finger; We Did Not Turn a Blind Eye
By Avraham Spraragen

KOLOT

- 7 The Aguda – Justice, Equality, and Inclusion for the LGBTQ Community
By Nurit Shein

WORLD ZIONIST ORGANIZATION

- 10 World Union of Meretz Update

BOOK REVIEW

- 12 Barak Ravid, *Trump’s Peace: The Abraham Accords and the Reshaping of the Middle East*, trans. Sahar Zivan (Independently Published, 2023)

Daniel Bar-Tal, *Sinking Into the Honey Pot: The Case of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, trans. Barbara Doron (Washington, DC, 2023)

By Peter Eisenstadt

October 15. By then, two Supreme Court justices will have reached the statutory maximum age of 70 and must retire. The judicial coup, once thought by its advocates to be able to slip through the Knesset virtually unnoticed, is foundering – unless legislation is passed by July 30. That may well happen, unless some of the rumored “moderates” in the coalition parties choose to stand in front of the speeding train - or fall on their swords; choose your metaphor. Possibly they’d be hailed as heroes; more likely they would share the fate of those Republicans who voted for Trump’s second impeachment; i.e., they’d almost certainly end their political careers. A major part of that legislation, of course, would serve to significantly limit the power of the Supreme Court to invalidate legislation passed by the Knesset.

But let’s assume that politics takes its usual course, that of the least resistance, and the legislation passes. It becomes law; there is no second chamber or presidential veto to worry about. BUT – and here we are truly in uncharted waters – the Supreme Court is virtually certain to strike down the legislation limiting its power to strike down legislation.

“A paradox, a paradox, a most ingenious paradox!” W.S. Gilbert wrote in *Pirates of Penzance*. But outside operetta-land, there may not be an equally ingenious solution. When norms break down in real life; it is extremely difficult to reconstruct them. Though the issues are particular to Israel, the larger issue of breaking norms is eerily similar to the US situation. However, for better or worse, there is no Israeli Trump. Bibi, though head of government and under indictment, is not a Trump though, as I noted, he’s being intimidated by a fraction of his own party willing and able to bring

him down, just like Speaker McCarthy.

When I was in law school many years ago, another student presented the professor in an advanced constitutional law course with a similarly convoluted hypothetical in an American context. I’ve managed to forget most of what I learned in law school but I remember the professor’s response almost verbatim: “If things have gotten to that point, it really doesn’t matter what the law says.” Nowadays, unfortunately, I’m sure that a lot of constitutional law professors in the US, Israel, and other countries are not dismissing the question but have to come up with real answers for what to do when populist legislators decide to barrel through norms that have stood for decades, or even centuries.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

What was starting to happen before Bibi backed down in April will probably repeat itself in July. Air Force reservists will not show up for essential stints. Different parts of the state apparatus will have to decide that they will follow either the Court or the

Government, and thus choose which is legitimate. General strikes will break out. The rule of law will start to break down until...?

As noted, those are uncharted waters, so no one can predict with any confidence how far this may go. Both Israelis and Americans have gotten used to crises in recent years, such as those over our perennial increase in the authorization of the national debt being settled at the last minute. Maybe there will be such a last-minute settlement in Israel; maybe not.

No one, however, has the luxury of assuring themselves that their worst crises will happen in isolation. In this

The Summer of Discontent

case, just as the government coalition is forcing through some fundamental and deeply controversial measures in the domestic sphere, it is doing the same with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which most Israelis would much prefer not to think about. While violence has been increasing for over a year, meaning both Palestinian attacks and nightly IDF raids in the West Bank, the increased aggressiveness of both the IDF and of settler vigilantes in the last few months is a direct result of policies championed by Ben-Gvir, Smotrich and their followers. In particular, the two settler pogroms – and I use that word in full awareness of its historical resonance to Jews – at the villages of Hawara and Tumas Ayya while the IDF stood by, signify to many Palestinians that they have nothing to lose. Unlike the domestic issues discussed above, however, we do know where this violence is likely to lead. The two intifadas of 1987-93 and 2000-05 caused thousands of deaths, and the Second helped prevent any progress in ending the Occupation for the last twenty years. The assurances of today's Israeli radicals that Jewish determination will always prevail over Arab resistance are refuted by history.

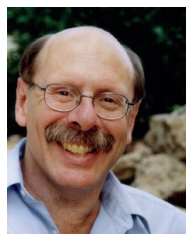
This summer has officially just begun – and the omens are grim. I will be happy at summer's official end – which happens this year to coincide with the Ten Days of Penitence between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – if I can apologize to my readers for having been unnecessarily ominous in my expectations.

Nevertheless, my best wishes for a happy – and peaceful – summer.

Sincerely,

Paul

Paul Scham is President of [Partners for Progressive Israel](#) and Director of the [Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies](#) at the University of Maryland, where he is a Professor of Israel Studies.



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By Avraham Spraragen

#חיי ערבים חשובים

#حياة_العرب_مهمه

American Jewish youth are overwhelmingly progressive in their political orientation, politically conscientious, and committed to universal human rights protections in accordance with their Jewish values. PEP, or “Progressive except for Palestine,” is increasingly becoming anathema to young Jews in the U.S., who refuse to set their progressive social justice principles aside in defense of Israeli Occupation of Palestinians. As the project for maximum Israeli territorial [expansionism](#), “[Judaization](#)” of all the land from the River to the Sea, and total Palestinian erasure becomes *even more* inconsistent with the values of progressive U.S. Jewry, Progressive Israel Network organizations and others have declared loud and clear, “not in our name.”

Neither did progressive American Jewish youth turn a blind eye when Israeli settlers carried out a pogrom in the Palestinian village of Hawara, [praying](#) (an odious cooptation of Jewish prayer) as they watched the

village burn, with the support of Israeli settler minister Bezalel Smotrich who subsequently called for Hawara to be “[wiped out](#).” Furthermore, when a member of the Jerusalem City Council paraded through Palestinian East Jerusalem warning of a “second Nakba” or when Smotrich threatened Palestinians from the Knesset podium with “finishing the job” that David Ben-Gurion started, we young American Jews insisted that these are not our values. Instead, the young American Jewish progressive activists of IfNotNow reclaimed the Jewish prayer from the pogromists at the 2023 Israel Bonds Conference in Washington, DC where Smotrich was a featured speaker:

“The group prayed Ma’ariv in protest, as a reminder of the way the settlers who led a pogrom desecrated the Jewish people by praying as the town burned. In the words of the activists: “Today we mark the distinction not just between day and night, but between right and wrong.” ([IfNotNow](#) 3/13/23)

The reaction of far-right Israeli Jewry and their representatives in Israeli government to the opposition from within the progressive American Jewish community was captured in a viral moment caught on camera at the 2023 Celebrate Israel Parade in New York City. Amichai Chikli, the Israeli Minister of Diaspora Affairs and the Minister for Social Equality, participated in the NYC parade and was photographed giving the middle finger to “pro-democracy” counterprotestors. This offensive gesture by Chikli, whom *Ha’aretz* subsequently [dubbed](#) the Minister of “Offending the Diaspora,” encapsulates Israeli attitudes toward diaspora Jews. The growing public sentiment among Jewish progressives in the United States, especially within my Generation Z, seems to be that Israel looks down upon the diaspora, considers diaspora Jewry to be inferior to Israeli Jewry, and deems life in the diaspora as lesser than, unworthy of preservation, and even heretical to the Jewish national project. It has also become clear to American Jewish progressive youth that their values of equality, justice, and peace are not reflected in Israeli leadership or society. In fact, the alliances forged between Israel and far-right actors worldwide, from Donald Trump in the U.S. to Viktor Orbán in Hungary and beyond, as well as the continued Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights, the Israeli governmental assault on human rights activism and other fundamental freedoms demonstrate that modern Israel, sadly, is not a progressive ally.

With every Israeli forced evacuation, home demolition, construction of settlements, arbitrary Palestinian detention and killing, the trust between Israel and American Jewish progressive youth is further eroded. When commemorations of the Palestinian Nakba are

censored, including the resistance poetry of Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish, the Nakba film *Farha*, and the Joint Palestinian-Israeli Nakba Remembrance Ceremony, Israel is also betraying young progressive American Jews. Every time a Palestinian flag is forcibly removed from a “pro-democracy” protest or the anti-Occupation bloc within the protest movement is otherwise demonized, the gap between Israeli Jews and American Jews widens.

Each of these betrayals of our values is another “middle finger” to the large swaths of young American Jews who are staunchly opposed to the Occupation. The so-called Diaspora Minister of Israel while at a



Photo: Matthew Litman

parade in the Jewish diaspora literally gave us the middle finger, an encapsulation of the state of Israel-diaspora relations. Behind his middle finger is a long [history](#) of espousing offensive views, antithetical to U.S. Jewish progressivism, from Chikli’s public disdain for Reform Jews, the largest denomination in America, to his discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community (Chikli previously described Pride as “disgraceful vulgarity”). This intolerance from Diaspora Minister Chikli prompted three Jewish student leaders from the UK and Ireland, Australia, and South Africa to pen an [op-ed](#) in *Ha’aretz*, “We Jewish Students Reject Israel’s Racist, Bigoted Diaspora Minister.” Representing over 160,000 Jewish students, the authors wrote, “Israel’s minister of Diaspora affairs does not speak for the Diaspora.”

The publication of this op-ed came after a string of discriminatory statements from Minister Chikli, including his likening of Israeli “pro-democracy” protestors to the biblical enemy Amalek, labeling of the

Jewish progressive lobbying group J Street as “hostile,” accusing George Soros of “hating humanity,” and dismissing the eminent American Jewish historian of the Holocaust and Biden antisemitism envoy Deborah Lipstadt as a “leftist.” Had Chikli not made an offensive gesture at us during a parade in New York, these offenses themselves would have sufficed to say: young American Jewish progressives do not matter.

My generation of U.S. Jews have been sending a message in return, by protesting Simcha Rothman (chair of the Knesset’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee), the far-right Knesset figure most identified with the ongoing Israeli judicial coup, during his visit to the United States, and concurrently by organizing solidarity protests in several major U.S. cities to demonstrate American Jewish support for the pro-democracy movement in Israel. Jewish youth in the UK are similarly [up in arms](#) in opposition to mainstream Jewish organizational support of a British Government bill that would prevent them from supporting human rights campaigns around the world.

This increasing rupture in Israel-diaspora relations, characterized by Israeli abandonment of liberal diaspora Jewry in favor of illiberal Christian Zionists, forces to the forefront the question of whether Israel continues to see itself as the state of *all* Jewish people, or as the state of illiberal Jewry and their Christian allies only. The prioritization of Christian loyalists over

Jews perceived variously as traitors, self-hating, and “un-Jewish,” was also on display in Canada during a visit earlier this month by the Israeli Diaspora Minister. Chikli again betrayed the Jewish diaspora by [serving](#) as a keynote speaker at a far-right evangelical college, a breeding ground for religious bigotries, including antisemitism. Despite the real threat posed by the college to diaspora Jews, Chikli accepted this invitation to speak at an evangelical Christian celebration of the 75th Israeli Independence Day, indicating clearly he is more concerned with advancing his far-right Zionist political aims than with protecting the safety of diaspora Jewry. My fellow American Jewish young progressives and I insist that our own safety and the safety of Palestinians under Occupation matter, whether Israel believes it or not. We reject wholesale the chants of “Jews, not Arabs” heard in Jerusalem during the recent far-right Flag March attended by Israeli government officials. The related chant, “Death to Arabs,” echoed throughout Israel today, will also be the death of our Jewish values.

***Avraham Spraragen** is a dual JD-MA Arab Studies degree candidate at Georgetown University. He previously studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.*



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Conversations with Israel and Palestine



June 7, 2023

The Aguda – Justice, Equality, and Inclusion for the LGBTQ Community

By Nurit Shein



This essay, in honor of Pride Month, is the latest in our series of 'Kolot: Voices of Hope' profiles of Israelis and Palestinians furthering the cause of peace and equality. Find all the profiles in this series [here](#).

With Israel having recently celebrated its 75th birthday, the country is facing what well might be its greatest challenge – the definition of its democracy. The demonstrations that fill the streets every week with tens of thousands of blue-and-white flags convey the message of shared concern for the future of the country we all care about. As the Knesset – the Israeli parliament – inches closer to curbing the role of the Supreme Court and redefining the process of appointing judges, the LGBTQ community is extremely concerned about the hard-fought rights it has gained over recent years and highly engaged in the pro-democracy protests.

Israel does not have a constitution to ensure basic civil rights, and religion and state are not fully separated. Many of the rights and freedoms of the LGBTQ community were achieved through the courts and

these might now be repealed. In the absence of judicial oversight, most of the budget money allotted to the organizations serving the community could now be diverted by a simple change in regulations.

Since its establishment in 1975, the Association for LGBTQ Equality in Israel – The Aguda, has been the leading human rights organization in Israel with a mission to achieve justice, equality, and inclusion for the LGBTQ community and to ensure LGBTQ visibility and affirmation. The Aguda has spearheaded large-scale public struggles for the community, and achieved social and legislative changes, both nationally and in local communities across Israel.

As the voice of the LGBTQ community, the Aguda heads a coalition of 18 LGBTQ organizations, strengthening bonds and coordinating shared strategy and action, while providing guidance to alliance members to assist

their capacity-building efforts. One such collaboration is the interagency support between the Aguda and the religious LGBTQ organizations, which work together to combat the issue of so-called “conversion therapy.” The Aguda’s clinic provides mental health support to individuals who have suffered from such therapy, while the legal department helps sister organizations with their public struggle.

Coupled with the organization’s efforts to bring forth social change, the Aguda also provides extensive assistance to individuals and specific community groups. This includes a range of professional services such as mental health support, legal counseling, family mediation, assistance to refugees and immigrants, and support to victims of discrimination or hatred on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.



“Get to know Beit el-Meem – the home of the gay Arab community”

From its inception, the Aguda’s long and impressive list of achievements has been positively impacting the lives of community members. Some of these successes include:

- With the objective of promoting a strong Arab LGBTQ community and providing vital support tailored to its needs, language, and unique

community characteristics, the Aguda operates an Arabic hotline, which provides anonymous support and resources. In addition, it opened the only center, Beit el-Meem, which offers social activities, and provides legal assistance and leadership training in order to bring about policy reform.

- In an effort to create an egalitarian society where everyone belongs, the Aguda engages in lobbying the Knesset, the government, and local authorities, to promote gay rights. Through direct collaboration with elected officials at the national and local levels, the Aguda has been successful in advancing legislation, defining regulations, and securing budget allocations for the community.
- The Aguda has opened the only comprehensive Trans Center in Israel, in collaboration with the Gila Project. The center provides accessibility to social services and combines mentoring and coaching with legal and health assistance, along with social activities.
- The Aguda launched the [Israeli Institute for Gender and LGBTQ Studies](#) – an independent and professional division, providing up-to-date data on core issues affecting the lives of LGBTQ individuals in Israel, while adhering to superior research and academic standards. Among its numerous projects are: Research on promoting social reform for the Arab LGBTQ community in Israel; defining the characteristics and needs of LGBTQ individuals in Israel’s geographic and social periphery; examining anti-LGBTQ conduct; and a national pilot study on the Israeli public’s perceptions of and attitudes towards transgender people.
- The organization has also created a smooth ‘runway’ for individuals seeking to immigrate to Israel: The Department for LGBTQ Immigrants and Diaspora Jewry, in partnership with the Department for Social Activism and Tikkun Olam at the World Zionist Organization, provides information, support, and connections to the local LGBTQ community. Moving to a new country and starting a new life is daunting, all the more so for LGBTQ individuals. By

providing personal guidance and linkage to support networks, this program mitigates much of the anxiety and allows for easier integration for those who choose to become part of our community.



“Need to talk? We’re here to listen. The Aguda’s hotline. There’s someone to turn to.”

Combating homophobia remains one of the central struggles of Israel’s LGBTQ community. So, the Aguda also publishes an annual Current Homophobia Report, which details homophobic incidents across different areas of life —the workplace, accessing healthcare, the legal system, social media, and the public arena.

Most significant has been a 50 percent increase in the number of reported incidents from the trans community in 2021. Like the story of A, a young trans man from Jerusalem, who was humiliated at a well-known clothing store where the sales person would not let him try on clothes in the men’s fitting room, and forced him to leave. Or the story of B, who was told by an examining doctor not to engage in sex with men.

The services provided by the organization also contain the stories of struggle and personal resilience. Such is the story of N, a 25-year-old from Nablus, in the West Bank, who came to Israel when he was 16, but

went back home to help with his ailing father. When his sexual orientation was discovered, he suffered life-threatening abuse and finally fled back to Israel. The Aguda helped him obtain legal permits, housing, and financial and emotional support. Such are the stories of the Aguda’s Asylum Seekers and Refugees department. Its program provides support to LGBTQ members seeking asylum, the vast majority of whom have no legal status in Israel and have fled persecution due to their sexual orientation; most of those turning to this department are Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, who are at a high physical and mental risk.

With the formation of the new government, the LGBTQ community faces fresh challenges. The ultra-religious and ultra-nationalistic parties that are part of the new coalition, with representatives such as Avi Maoz, a self-described “proud homophobe,” and the proposed judicial “reform” all pose a serious threat to individual rights. The Knesset will potentially be able to overturn any ruling by the Supreme Court, such as the ability of same-sex couples to adopt. Against such threats, the Aguda, along with the rest of the LGBTQ organizations, is determined to continue to operate as a cohesive community and, in partnership with Israeli society generally, create a liberal culture, accepting of everyone. Our plan is to augment services, build new mechanisms, and function as a coalition against hatred. The LGBTQ community is at a crossroads: We must fight, and are fighting, for our position in the State of Israel.

To learn more about the Aguda, please visit their English-language [website](#), follow them on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#), and visit their [YouTube](#) channel.



Nurit Shein is a member of the board of the Aguda and its immediate past Chair.

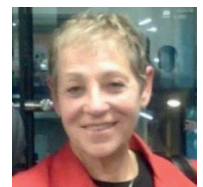




Photo Credit: www.wzo.org.il

We would like to share with you some of the ongoing activities that our World Union of Meretz representatives are working on in the framework of the World Zionist Organization.

Pro-Democracy Activism at the World Zionist Congress

This past April, a special session of the World Zionist Congress (WZC) was held at the Jerusalem International Convention Center to mark the 75th anniversary of Israel's establishment. Thanks to the votes we secured in the 2020 WZC elections (as part of the HaTikvah: Progressive Israel slate), we were able to send a sizeable delegation, which included David Dormont, Gili Getz, Sheila Katz, Jared Jackson, and Arieh Lebowitz. The five were instrumental in

leveraging the session to deliver a clear message of support for Israel's pro-democracy movement.

On the conference floor, delegates marshalled support for a resolution that took direct aim at the Netanyahu government's plan to undermine the judiciary, emphasizing that the Israel-Diaspora relationship would be in peril if the government refuses to back down. The resolution passed by a wide margin of 368 to 262!

Elsewhere, our delegates were part of a loud and highly-publicized protest against far-right Knesset Member Simcha Rothman, one of the key architects of the government's antidemocratic agenda. The protest disrupted Rothman's meeting with his rightwing allies at the WZC, and the MK required a police escort to allow him to leave. Pro-democracy delegates also walked out of Congress deliberations to stage a march

of solidarity to the Israeli Supreme Court building, in cooperation with Israeli protest groups.

World Union of Meretz delegate Sheila Katz, who serves as CEO for the National Council of Jewish Women, had the honor of being the first person to address Israel's central anti-government rally in English. Katz told the tens of thousands assembled in Tel Aviv that the weekly mass protests were an inspiration and had the support of millions in the U.S. and around the world.

While the WZC session was a clear victory for democracy within Israel's sovereign borders, we regret that one item was absent: There was no similar groundswell of support among Congress delegates for occupied Palestinians' right to democracy and equality. This aspect of democratic struggle should never be overlooked, and we must continue to make clear in all Zionist forums that democracy does not truly exist if it maintains an undemocratic occupation alongside it.

LGBTQ+ Equality

In 2019, a World Union of Meretz (WUM) proposal was adopted by the World Zionist Organization (WZO) to create a new unit to promote LGBTQ+ activity and foster equality and inclusion. The unit was attached to the WZO's Department for Social Activism and Tikkun Olam, which is headed by the WUM's senior representative, Dror Morag. At the recent World Zionist Congress special session, Morag spearheaded a resolution to increase support for and deepen the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community within Zionist movement activity. Despite pushback from the rightwing and religious bloc, the measure was approved, with 354 voting in favor vs. 271 opposed.

[Watch](#) Morag rally support for the resolution at the WZC meeting.

Aiding Turkey's Earthquake Victims

The earthquake in Turkey in February 2023 claimed tens of thousands of lives and turned millions into homeless refugees in severe winter weather. Following the incident, the WZO Department for Social Activism

teamed up with Social Delivery, a social/environmental NGO, and the HaShomer HaTza'ir youth movement to collect winter clothing, blankets, and sleeping bags for the survivors, establishing dozens of collection points across the country. The public response was extraordinary.

Click [here](#) to see a short video of the volunteers in action at various locales.

Working for Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice

One of the central projects of the Department for Social Activism is the "Mofet Social Entrepreneurship Accelerator", which supports initiatives promoting social justice and equality. This year, for Mofet's seventh cycle, department head Dror Morag selected 17 entrepreneurs working to combat the climate emergency and its impact on the poor. In the name of "sustainable Zionism", the Department chose individuals who are pioneering concepts for socio-environmental change via recycling, environmental education, and other fields.

Advancing Shared Jewish-Arab Society

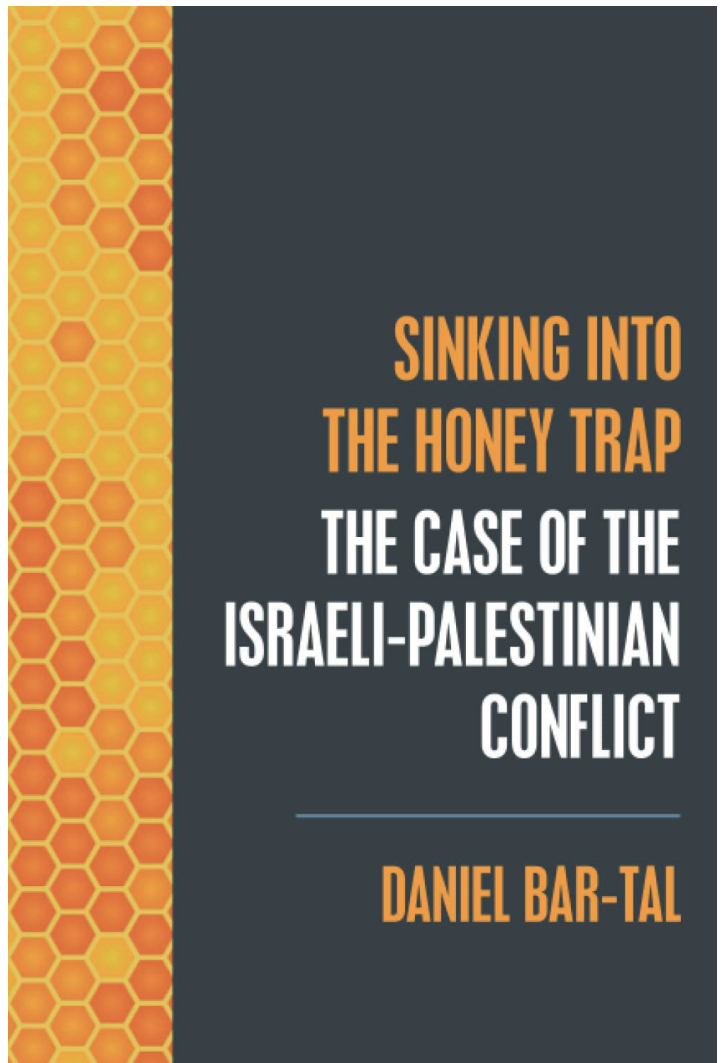
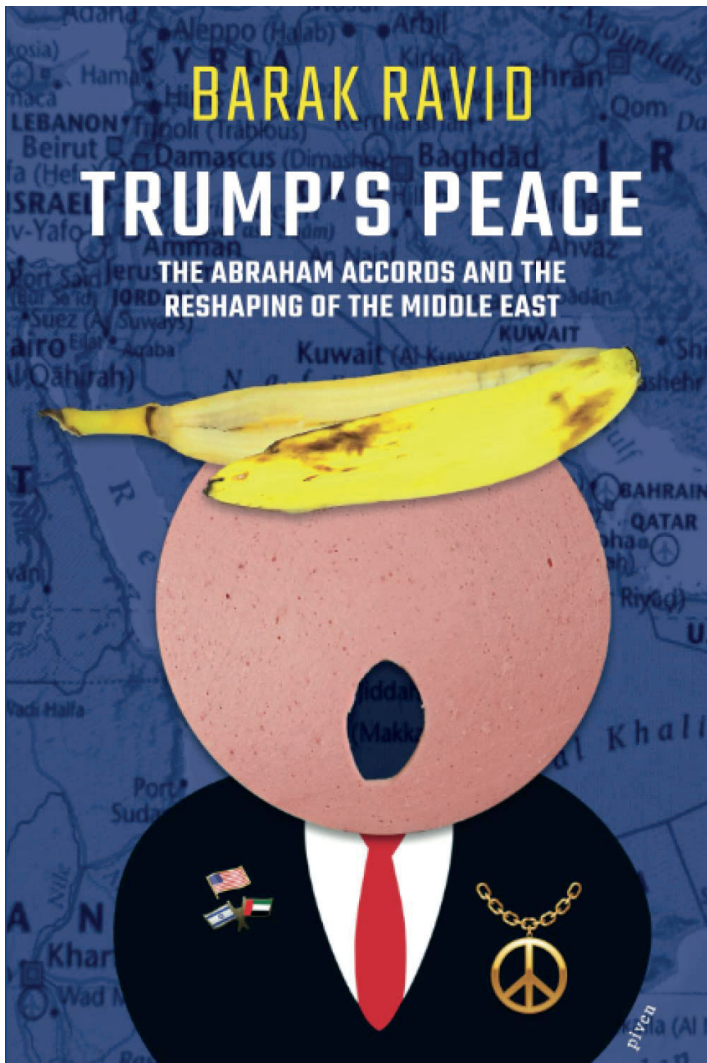
The Department for Social Activism is also partnering with the Ramla Foundation for Education, Culture, and Development on a program to restore the town's social cohesion. Ramla is known as a "mixed city", one of the few locales in Israel with both Jewish and Arab communities. During the Israel-Gaza war of 2021, interethnic violence broke out between them. Last year, a community leadership training program was held in Ramla to produce strong leadership on the neighborhood level, the ultimate aim being to help the two communities forge a shared urban identity and live alongside one another in a spirit of unity, trust, and hope. The cooperation with the Ramla Foundation is continuing this year.

Barak Ravid, *Trump's Peace: The Abraham Accords and the Reshaping of the Middle East*, trans. Sahar Zivan (Independently Published, 2023)

Daniel Bar-Tal, *Sinking Into the Honey Pot: The Case of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, trans. Barbara Doron (Washington, DC, 2023)

BOOK REVIEW

By Peter Eisenstadt



There's *Fraktur*. On 3 January, 1941 the Nazi government banned the use of Fraktur fonts in all publications, calling them Jewish and un-Germanic, though Fraktur seems pretty *echt-deutsch* to me, not that Nazi antisemitism is supposed to make sense. (For the curious, this is Fraktur, like the font used in the *New York Times* logo.) Anyway, since then almost all publications in German have used standard Roman

typesfaces. I mention this because many years ago I read a history of typography that claimed this edict was the only positive achievement of the Nazi government.

And there's the Abraham Accords, the normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. (This is not, let us say, a direct comparison as much as a random juxtaposition.) But many people have argued that the Abraham Accords

were the solitary positive foreign policy achievement of the Trump-Netanyahu years, or even, according to Barak Ravid, “the single biggest breakthrough in the Middle East peace process in over 25 years.” Since the peace process has been moribund for the past quarter century, this is, even if true, an unremarkable claim. And I suppose I feel the same way about the start of the Abraham Accords as about the end of *fraktur* type; not all that much. I guess the Abraham Accords are a positive development, if you can see them for what they actually are apart from the glare of the hype.

Ravid is certainly an Abraham Accords booster, but his careful reportage on them in *Trump’s Peace* is essential reading for anyone interested in their history. Ravid is not exactly a Trump revisionist, but he does argue that “intellectual honesty compels both his supporters and detractors to recognize his failures and successes.” (My first thought—the words “honesty” and “Donald Trump” in the same sentence is a syntactic impossibility.) That said, the Abraham Accords must be accounted for. And Ravid uses Trump to beat up on Netanyahu, which is fine by me, though I would prefer a better cudgel. And it certainly is the case that there is a continuity in US foreign policy towards Israel which remains distressingly bipartisan. Biden has not renounced the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem or the US recognition of Israel’s annexation in the Golan Heights, opened a consulate in East Jerusalem for Palestinians, and has praised and tried to further the Abraham Accords, and is not focused on the big enchilada (or falafel), an Israel-Saudi normalization agreement.

Ravid reminds us that the Abraham Accords were originally part of a Trump administration attempted trifecta; helping Israel to achieve better relations with the Gulf States, strengthening the anti-Iran, anti-Shia alliance and, at the same time, giving an American imprimatur for Israel to formally annex a substantial chunk of Area C of the West Bank—the part already under direct Israeli control; the precise percentage and contours of which to be decided later. Everyone was aware that there had been *sub rosa* Israel-Gulf States contacts for many years, and the shared goal was to bring them

out of the shadows. In June 2019 Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and Middle East plenipotentiary, announced a tentative plan by which the Gulf States would create a \$50 billion fund both to help the Palestinians and to foster closer economic relations between Israel and the participants in the plan. Its political component would be revealed later, which took place in January 2020. Trump, with Netanyahu present, unveiled the plan, which had as its main element a US blessing on Israel annexing up to 30% of Area C in the West Bank, along with, for the Palestinians, the nano-crumbs of a possible settlement freeze if they behaved themselves. Trump called it a “win-win,” albeit threatening the Palestinians that “after 70 years of little progress this could be the last opportunity they will ever have.” Netanyahu called it “the deal of the century.”

But the problem was that Netanyahu did not really care about the deal; all he knew was that he believed the US had greenlighted West Bank annexation, and that the Palestinians would essentially get nothing in return. What Trump wanted, however, was a “deal,” in his words, “the ultimate deal,” the “mother of all deals,” a Nobel Peace Prize level deal. Trump, although, he cared *bupkis* about the Palestinians, knew enough that if there was an American-abetted naked Israeli land-grab, it would be denounced in every Arab capital, and he would not get his deal. So he began to place some pressure on Netanyahu, and the prospects of the annexation began to fall apart. But the Gulf States, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE) still wanted a deal, and came to its rescue by proposing a normalization of ties with Israel. For Netanyahu this was, if not quite a booby prize, far short of what he really wanted, but he made the best of it, especially because for Trump and Kushner, who had placed better US ties with the Gulf states at the center of their Middle East policies, this was the main objective. After intense negotiations, in September 2020 Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, under the aegis of the United States, announced the normalization of their ties and the establishment of diplomatic relations. Further normalization agreements were subsequently announced between Israel and Morocco and Sudan. Saudi Arabia, was supportive of the accords, but did

not sign a normalization agreement with Israel. But for services rendered, six months after Trump and his extended family were pried out of the White House, one of the Saudi sovereign wealth funds announced a \$2 billion investment in Kushner's fledgling private equity firm.

The most entertaining chapter of Ravid's book is undoubtedly his account of his interview with Trump at Mar-a-Largo in April 2021, with Trump cursing Netanyahu for congratulating Biden after his election: "I haven't spoken to him since. Fuck him." According to Ravid, Trump brought up Netanyahu's disloyalty five times in the course of the conversation, especially, since according to his lights "I saved his ass in many ways." (As has been pointed out, if Trump has a single redeeming quality, it is his penchant for turning on his former allies and toadies.) Trump was also annoyed with Netanyahu because, in his opinion, by his obsession with annexation, he blew up the possibility of a peace deal. "In my opinion, Bibi did not want to make a deal. That's why we went four years without a deal. I feel we could have had a deal with the Palestinians."

This is no doubt one of Trump's many delusions, but there are many intelligent observers, like Ravid, who think that the Abraham Accords might indeed be a needed step towards a lasting peace. What can I say? If Israelis want to vacation in Abu Dhabi, if Israeli Palestinians can someday book direct flights from Tel Aviv to Mecca for the hajj, if Israeli companies can peddle their spyware and other products to the Gulf States, and the Gulf States can invest in Israel, okay, that is the way of the world. But it already feels like the last spasm of a dying American Middle East hegemony, a way to try to ward off an uncertain future, in which events such as the Chinese-brokered rapprochement between Iran and the Saudis become the norm. I will grant that increased ties to Arab nations in the last few years complicated and hindered Netanyahu's annexation dreams, and that's a good thing. But it is not the "deal of the century"—the problems between Israel and Palestine won't be resolved in a "deal." It is not a "game-changer" because the problems between Israel and Palestine are not a game

and haven't been changed, even perhaps worsened. The Saudis can buy the PGA tour, but Israel and Palestine are not golf courses. Only Israelis and Palestinians will solve the Israel Palestine problem.

Ravid berates the Biden administrations for, in its early months, referring to the Abraham Accords as mere "normalization agreements." (They later restored the original name.) But the name "Abraham Accords," with its faux sacralization of this gilded bit of *realpolitik*, is one of the aspects of the accords that has always grated. (And why we're on the subject, why does no one call them the Ibrahim Accords?) So what would Abraham do? According to both the Torah and the Quran, he would try to make a sacrifice. Abraham and God made a deal to sacrifice his son, but in the end, only the usual goat was sacrificed. And similarly, in the Abraham Accords, for all the talk of bravely healing old enmities, none of the signatories sacrificed anything. It was, indeed, in Trump's words, a "win-win." But any genuine movement toward serious reconciliation by Israel and Palestine, will, at first, almost certainly be a "lose-lose." Both sides will have to make major sacrifices, with the hope, that, in the end, the sacrifices will be worth it. Israelis will have to give up a good measure of their control over the Palestinian population. Palestinians will no doubt be saddled with a final agreement, that even in the best of circumstances, will fall far short of their demands, or indeed, what they are entitled to. According to Ravid, the initial agreement between Israel and the UAE required 115 drafts before it was satisfactory to both sides. (Israel wanted maximum possible ambiguity as to any commitment to the Palestinians required by the accords; the UAE wanted the opposite.) Diplomatic legerdemain of this sort might save a deal; what it cannot do is really advance peace.

When we turn from Barak Ravid to Daniel Bar-Tal's *Sinking Into the Honey Trap*, we are entering a much less rarified world, the mental spaces and aversions of average Israelis, who today are the inheritors of the rhetoric and reality of a century plus of near continuous confrontation with the Palestinians. Bar-Tal, an emeritus professor of social psychology at Tel Aviv

university, has written a valuable guide to the workings and the interstices of the Israeli political psyche. It isn't pretty. (One question, though. If Bar-Tal is using "honey trap" as a slang term for using sex to lure people into compromising situations, it is not quite clear to me who is seducing whom to do what. But whatever a honey trap is, Israel is no doubt sinking into it.) Bar-Tal is an expert in "intractable conflicts," defined as a violent conflict that has lasted for at least a generation (around 25 years), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at least four times that. Much of the book concentrates on the past two decades, including the snuffing out of any light from the peace process, the reverberations of the Al-Aka intifada and the Gaza disengagement, the interminable rule of Netanyahu, the rise of the fascist religious right, the fall of the secular left, and so on. In 1865, John Stuart Mill wrote of "the impediments opposed to the most salutary public improvements by the ignorance, the indifference, the intractableness, the perverse obstinacy of a people." We have a new name for this sort of intractability. We call it a "[national narrative](#)."

Much of Bar-Tal's book consists of his analysis of the Israeli national narrative, and what he calls the "conflict supporting narrative" that dominate Israeli politics. (He made the wise decision not to extensively compare and contrast it to the Palestinian narrative. It would be a very different book.) He is an excellent guide to the intensification of this narrative in the last quarter century, as all that is hateful in the Zionist legacy has been accentuated and almost all that is worthwhile has been extinguished. Bar-Tal's book is filled with interesting though depressing statistics on the dying of hope. Did you know, for instance, that in March 2019, according to a Ha'aretz poll, that 46% of Labor voters and 14% of Meretz voters, under some circumstances, were not opposed to annexing Area C in the West Bank? He argues that Ehud Barak, likely to be remembered as Israel's last Prime Minister from the Labor Party, "dealt a lethal blow to the left" with his failures in the 2000 Camp David conference, and blaming all of them on the Palestinians. His diagnosis is bleak. "The left today is split into dozens of peace and

human rights organizations," often with conflicting agendas, dismissed as Arab lovers, idle dreamers, fifth columnists, and as having largely lost control of Israel's center. Perhaps the recent months of demonstrations against the neutering of the Supreme Court and other "reforms" has somewhat brightened Bar-Tel's outlook. Or perhaps not.

We live, as Peter Brook complained in a recent book, *Seduced by Story*, in an age of narrative, in which he argues there has been a "storification of reality," in which narration has supplanted analysis. Whatever one makes of Brook's argument, one problem with narratives, especially national narratives, is that they tend to be indifferent to facts, or rather we fit facts into our existing narratives, rather than adjusting our narratives to fit the facts. And national narratives, certainly the Israeli narrative Bar-Tel describes, are defensive, uncritical, and avoid complexities, ambiguities, and self-doubts. The comfortable stories we want to tell about ourselves keep us from listening to the hard truths we need to hear.

Bar-Tel has many acute and astute observations on the nature of the Israeli conflict-supporting narrative, but like the rest of us, he finds diagnosis much easier than suggesting a cure, and has no obvious way to convince Israelis to abandon their epistemic honey traps. I only have one addition to his analysis. All national narratives provide a defense of the reasonableness of national fears and a justification for remaining fearful. And few national narratives, for obvious reasons, are as fear-wracked as Israel's, a narrative in which Jews remain perpetual victims. The asymmetry of power between Israel and Palestine fuels a symmetry of fears, the fears of one side strengthening the fears of the other in a perpetual gyre.

The situation reminds me of what the great African American religious thinker [Howard Thurman](#) wrote about growing up in Jim Crow Florida in the early years of the twentieth century. There was, between whites and Blacks, what he called a fundamental "amorality." Blacks and whites had numerous interactions, and not

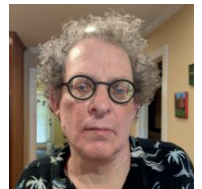
all of them were hostile, but for Thurman, whites were in “another universe of discourse.” They existed, but their emotional realities didn’t count or matter. Across the racial barrier, both whites and Blacks thought they understood one another, but with a “cold, hard, minute, and devastating understanding of the other;” the “kind of understanding one gives an enemy.”

Thurman was one of the first African American advocates of radical nonviolence, and a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr. The goal of radical nonviolence is often described as “loving one’s enemy” and if this sounds too Christian for you, let me suggest another way of thinking about it. It is about overcoming fear—the second stanza of the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome” begins “We are not afraid.” But the goal of nonviolence is not only for the oppressed to overcome their fears, but to do so in such a way as the oppressors can loosen their grip on their own fears as well. Or as Bar-Tel might say, it is learning to step outside of your narrative, and view the other without its protection. And perhaps the most important

step on this extraordinarily difficult path is the first one, the decision not to give up before you even try, because you think the task is impossible.

And I suppose, we need to credit the Abraham Accords, despite their Trumpian and Bibian auspices, despite their evident lack of impact on dire Israeli-Palestinian realities, as perhaps showing a way forward. They are, among many other things, a victory of hope over fear, of positive change over a cynical, enervating, and deadly status quo. And perhaps Israelis and Palestinians can take from them inspiration to take the necessary first steps to live with each other as equals, without fear, and realize that there are possibilities yet undreamt of outside of their narrow philosophies and narratives.

Peter Eisenstadt is a member of the board of Partners for Progressive Israel and the author of Against the Hounds of Hell: A Biography of Howard Thurman (University of Virginia, 2021).



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