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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Abyss Advice

On March 1, the New York Times published a [Guest Essay](#), by David Grossman, Israel's greatest living writer, entitled "Israel Is Falling Into an Abyss". For those who may not have access to the link above, Grossman, after depicting the horrors of October 7 and the nearly unanimous wave of solidarity by Israelis in response, noted that they "will always have to stand guard over this penetrable, fragile home"; and he asked why, "Only when it comes to Israel is it acceptable to publicly demand the elimination of a state"? He continues with a meditation on what the war might do to Israel, including, almost incidentally, that "the recognition that this war cannot be won and, furthermore, that we cannot sustain the occupation indefinitely, will force both sides to accept a two-state solution." He concludes on a note of "exhaustion and despair".

I admire and agree with the essay and recognize that we, American Jews (and others) who care deeply about Israel but are geographically and culturally distant (to varying degrees), must seize on reports and essays such as Grossman's in order to better understand why this war drags on, soon to mark its six-month anniversary. The palpable sense of perennial and existential danger that Israelis live with must be taken into account when we try to understand that although 85% of Israelis

Contents

INSIGHTS

- 1 President's Message: Abyss Advice
By Paul Scham
- 3 "Shooting and Crying" vs. Mutual Accountability
By Margo Hughes-Robinson
- 6 Can a Labor-Meretz Merger Reinvalidate the Israeli Left?
By Ron Skolnik

KOLOT: VOICES OF HOPE

- 10 Post October 7 Series -
Women Wage Peace

SYMPOSIUM

- 11 Israel-Palestine Virtual Symposium -
Spring 2024

BOOK REVIEW

- 12 Dahlia Scheindlin, *The Crooked Timber of Israeli Democracy*, 2023
Review by Peter Eisenstadt

want Bibi Netanyahu gone as Prime Minister, a majority nevertheless continues to support the war. As noted, Grossman himself believes the war cannot be won; obviously that view is by no means the majority opinion.

What I do not understand, having followed Grossman's views and the principled stands he has taken for decades (and the loss of his son in the Second Lebanon War), is why he did not include a paragraph something like the following, which I take the liberty of composing:

Since we cannot destroy Hamas, no matter how many of its fighters we kill, we must recognize that every day that the war goes on and hundreds more 'uninvolved' Palestinians are killed, we are digging ourselves yet further into the ditch that Hamas invited us to jump into. Israelis need to accept that a bilateral ceasefire that frees our hostages and necessarily includes releasing many hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons must be the overarching and immediate priority of Israeli policy, belated as it may be. Only with that first step concluded will it be possible for us and the Palestinians to begin to pick up the shattered pieces of our individual and national lives. Every day without it plunges us yet deeper into the abyss.

It goes without saying that it is impossible to believe that a government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu would conclude such an agreement. Nevertheless, such a call, coming from a writer with Grossman's prestige and gravitas, might have some effect in slowing Israel's precipitous and accelerating slide towards the bleak future he evokes.

It appears that something has changed in the Israeli "moderate left" (once known as the "peace camp") that we at Partners – and presumably our readers and supporters – continue to identify with. If we care about Israel, we have to take into account what interpreters like David Grossman are saying to us. While, as a historian and political analyst, I do not see Israel in a situation of "existential danger," I am not there on the ground. I continue to believe that Israel must end the assault on Gaza now; that continuing it places Israel in more danger than ending it would. It is not simply bowing to foreign pressure; Israel needs the rest of the world and, unfortunately, has trouble accepting that opposition to its actions does not automatically imply hostility. However we – and Senator Schumer – are in complete agreement that Bibi Netanyahu as Prime Minister, with his multiple conflicts of interest, has helped intensify the conflict to an unbearable degree.

Sincerely,



Paul

Paul Scham is President of [Partners for Progressive Israel](#) and a Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, where he teaches courses on the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Changes at Partners

Partners is changing the guard; or at least part of it! We are welcoming our new Executive Director, Rabbi Margo Hughes-Robinson, who will begin work on April 1 (not a joke). Margo is coming to us from T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, where she has been the New York Rabbinic Organizer. You can see her remarkable bio [here](#). She has an article in this issue of Israel Horizons – and you'll be hearing a lot more from her.

At the same time, we are bidding farewell to our current Executive Director, Dr. Dinesh Sharma, who has been with us for 7 years. Dinesh has done great – and badly needed – work in reorganizing our operations and keeping us moving ahead during the difficult transition following the death in 2017 of our founder and benefactor, Harold Shapiro z"l. Dinesh has been with us through emergencies, long meetings, and various crises; always remaining unflappable and ready to work at odd hours. We wish him well and will miss him.

We appreciate your support as well – and your comments, which are always welcome. They can be posted on our [website](#).

"Shooting and Crying" vs. Mutual Accountability

INSIGHTS

By Margo Hughes-Robinson



Photo: Lizzy Shaanan via Wikimedia Commons

As an undergraduate on a campus that typified the polarization that has become endemic to American universities (a Jewish student union which at the time offered a kind of right wing Zionism; bagel brunch, and Taglit trips more than deep engagement with Jewish tradition; an active SJP chapter that built a mock “apartheid wall” across the quad each year; student leaders discouraged from meeting across lines of disagreement by Hillel staff), an introduction to S. Yizhar’s “*Khirbet Khizeh*,” was revelatory. The professor who assigned the novella was a visiting Israeli academic, who laid mimeographed slides on the ancient projector by way of introducing the book.

“These are copies of maps that my father-in-law kept

from 1948,” he explained. He showed us, laying one map over the other, the names of Palestinian villages that had been liquidated or abandoned, renamed and resettled in Hebrew by the nascent Israeli state. As a twenty-year old, this was nothing short of revelatory: here was an Israeli intellectual, someone brought in by my campus to be an authority on history and literature, speaking calmly about the realities of 1948, both as it was experienced by the citizens of the fledgling state and by Palestinians who lived through the Nakba. Although the text was a fictionalized account of the war, I was opened up to a much more nuanced understanding of Israel that was tied not only to *hasbara*, but to history.

It was only several years later, living in Jerusalem and

more deeply steeped in Israeli literature and culture, that I learned how "Khirbet Khizeh" functioned as a foundation stone of the "shooting and crying," genre of Israeli literature, a dynamic described by scholar Gil Hochberg as one of "remorse and hesitation" in the psyche of both the IDF soldier and the nation at large, that evolved over decades to one that included, "self-justification," and ["a way of maintaining the nation's self-image as youthful and innocent, along with its sense of vocation against the reality of war, growing military violence, occupation, invasion, and an overall sense that things were going wrong."](#) It was commonly used in mockery of the anguished Israeli liberal during the First Intifada.

[As Israel has reeled from the shock of Hamas-perpetrated terror on October 7th and the subsequent hostage crisis – and blown headlong into an assault on Gaza that has included mass civilian death, growing starvation, and apparent abdication of the responsibilities that the Israeli Supreme Court has concluded Israeli bears towards Palestinians living in Gaza](#) – it appears that more and more American Jews have taken up the mantle of "shooting and crying." As the war continues, I see many of my colleagues clinging to a model of self reflection and hand-wringing only to the point that it enables our own passivity – or even permissiveness – in the face of Israeli war crimes. This is a master story that allows the American center-Zionist camp to busy themselves not with the graphic realities of conflict in Gaza or the West Bank, but instead with an internal wrestling: the tension of one's self-image as a "liberal" in the classical sense juxtaposed with an apathetic resignation to military domination as the only assurance of Jewish safety between the river and the sea.

To express deep pain at the rising death toll, starvation, and violence in Gaza while wringing our hands and asking a version of "but what can be done?!", or to pray for peace without taking material steps to call for an end to this war, is to ultimately engage in a kind of closed psychological loop. [A generative conversation happens between Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora about grief, the uses and abuses of military and state power, the waste of civilian life, and even the](#)

[political narcissism at the helm of Israel's government](#) – *but it remains a Jewish conversation.* Engaging in the emotional maelstrom of shooting and crying from across oceans allows American Jews to express nuanced empathy and solidarity with Jewish Israelis, but the end result is that of a continued conversation that ignores the voices – the reality – of half of the people engaged in this war; of Palestinians.

[As many Palestinian and Israeli activists remind us: no one is going anywhere.](#) Regardless of the shape of any future political arrangement, the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean sea is home to Israeli Jews, Palestinians, Druzim, Bedouin communities, and more, all with deep ties to the Land and its history. What could be possible, then, if American Jews saw our role not only to be in conversation with our Israeli family and coreligionists, but with all those who call it home?

What may be most needed in this moment is not only a political shift but a spiritual and psycho-social transformation. What steps might be possible to take under the mantle of "no one is going anywhere?" What kind of shared society – not normalization of a "status quo" built on human rights violations or euphemistic military exercises of ["mowing the grass"](#) – but instead rooted in the acknowledgement that Palestinians and Israelis must be free and enjoying equal rights, and that the safety and flourishing of each community is bound up in each other? What could grow in a Land where there is a basic acknowledgement that both communities are not just accountable to themselves, but to one another?

We call for a "day after" plan, but it must be said: We are already living one kind of day-after, rooted in Netanyahu's political narcissism and marked by a refusal to recognize either the humanity of the Palestinians or their right to self determination and statehood. We must insist on and make real a very different vision of tomorrow, of next week, of the days and months and years ahead.

We know: No one is going anywhere.

What does this mean in practice? We cannot continue in war if we are to live together. It means that when I see images of Kfir Bibas, who turned one year old in captivity, I think of my own child. When I see ten-year old Amr Mohamed Najjar, who was shot and killed by the IDF outside of Nablus last month, I see my own child. If no one is going anywhere, it means that every new parent in Ein Kerem hospital in Jerusalem is accountable to the starving pregnant women of Khan Younis and Rafah. It means that I seek a flourishing Palestinian government that shirks extremism, bloodshed, and corruption, alongside an Israeli government that disavows Kahanism and refuses to continue a brutal war that puts civilian safety in the back seat behind one man's desperate attempt to avoid criminal accountability and jail time. It means that we demand an end to the occupation.

It is important – essential – to note that this model of mutual accountability is not a fantasy, the dream of another naive American staring at a phone screen an ocean away from the events in Gaza. It is a practice that is already being lived out by organizations and individuals in the Land: from the political organizing of Standing Together and Women Wage Peace; to the community building of groups like the Imbala Cafe, the Sulha Peace Project, and the Bereaved Families Forum; from media outlets like +972 and Local Call as well as activist-artists like Yuval Avraham and Basel Adra, and Hadar Cohen. These entities and individuals are midwifing a new model of what is possible in Israel and Palestine – not based in normalization of a deadly and stagnant status quo, or sharing an inequitable society – but another vision altogether, rooted in mutual liberation: it is upon us as American Jews to decide to be part of this new model of family, and mutuality. Will we, in the midst of our own grief, be brave enough to partake?

*Rabbi Margo Hughes-Robinson is the
new Executive Director of Partners for
Progressive Israel.*



Partners Applauds Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's Speech on Israel and Palestine

Partners for Progressive Israel applauds the brave and balanced speech delivered yesterday by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. Senator Schumer outlined with devastating clarity what lies ahead for Israel if it continues to be led by Benjamin Netanyahu and controlled by a band of political zealots who seek river-to-sea domination and prefer ruling over, rather than living peacefully alongside, the Palestinian people in a state of its own. Like Senator Schumer, we believe that the horrors of October 7 require Israelis to hold a “fresh debate”, go to elections, and change course at once – difficult as that might be for a traumatized nation. We agree, as well, that the U.S. must use its “leverage” with Israel so that American support doesn't contradict the goal of achieving long-term peace and stability.

Senator Schumer correctly began his speech by noting that he expresses the sentiment of the mainstream of Jewish Americans. Indeed, like the Senator, the majority of American Jews regard Hamas as a major obstacle to peace, but also understand that Israel has its own extremist wing, which has been consistently aided and abetted by Mr. Netanyahu.

We also thank Senator Schumer for rejecting the term “colonizers” as increasingly applied to the Jewish people in Israel and for his acknowledgement of the legitimate, longstanding ties to the land of both Jews and Palestinians. The Senator is to be applauded for carefully dissecting why a democratic one-state future offers no true solution, and why a nondemocratic Israel-controlled one-state reality is a guarantee of forever war.

Finally, we share the Senator's plea for “courageous leadership” and an “all-out push to bring about peace”. Ultimately, only a cessation of violence can bring back the hostages, and only a peace agreement can bring lasting security for both peoples and prevent another October 7. There is no military solution.

By Ron Skolnik

העבודה מורצ

A merger between Labor and Meretz, the two predominantly-Jewish parties that constitute Israel's center-left, seems to be fast approaching. What is far less certain is whether this combination can provide the reenergized leftwing alternative that Israeli society badly needs.

Let's start with a flashback: When the official results of Israel's June 1992 elections were announced, the country seemed to finally be turning a political corner. After fifteen long years, the pro-settlement, anti-compromise Likud party was no longer going to lead (or co-lead) the governing coalition. With the First Palestinian Intifada grinding into its fifth year, and the First Gulf War having generated the beginnings of a regional diplomatic initiative (the "Madrid Process"), voters chose the Labor Party, winner of 44 seats, to be Israel's foremost political force. Labor's junior coalition partner and main ally was Meretz, the new, politically rambunctious,

left-Zionist alliance, which had won 12, making it Israel's third largest party. Israel's liberal and progressive forces seemed to be ascendant.

Three decades later, both components of the once powerful political tandem are now in tatters. After years of gradual, stop-and-start electoral decline, Meretz failed to enter the Knesset in the November 2022 elections, gaining only 3.16 percent of the vote – below the 3.25 percent minimum threshold (and two-thirds less than its 1992 showing). The blow was not only political, but financial as well: The State of Israel provides funding only to those political parties who actually make it into Knesset, meaning that Meretz ended the 2022 campaign saddled with significant [debt](#). Meanwhile, since chair Zehava Galon's resignation in late 2022, no senior party figure has stepped up to take over, rendering Meretz politically rudderless.

Labor's fortunes have arguably been even grimmer. While Israel's "founding party" managed to enter the Knesset in 2022, it did so only barely, garnering a measly 3.7 percent and becoming Israel's smallest parliamentary faction. Indeed, its most recent result represents a greater than 90 percent loss of its 1992 vote share.

Since the election, Labor's poll numbers have sunk even further, and consistently fall well below the threshold line. Many of those who supported it in the past harbor a lingering resentment toward Chair Merav Michaeli, who firmly rejected Meretz's pre-election proposal to pool the parties' votes as a joint electoral slate. At very least, such an arrangement (in which each party would remain independent) would have ensured Meretz's continued Knesset representation alongside Labor – and might even have added enough anti-Netanyahu seats to prevent the formation of the current far-right government.

With both parties continuing to lack luster, the idea of combining forces has remained on the political agenda. Nearly a year ago, for example, Labor MK, Rabbi (Reform) Gilad Kariv, [demanded](#) a full merger, arguing that the differences between the two parties had become "microscopic".

Now the moment of truth is arriving. Last December, a deeply unpopular Michaeli announced that she would be stepping down from her party chair role. Labor has scheduled a May 28 leadership primary, and the results of that race will likely determine the merger's fate. Meretz's interim leadership group has already [endorsed](#) the idea of an amalgamated party in principle; all that's left is for Labor to agree.

Enter Yair Golan, former IDF Deputy Chief of Staff and former Knesset Member and Deputy Minister, who has emerged as the leading candidate to succeed Michaeli. (While rumors are circulating of possible other candidates, no one has yet put their name forward at the time of this writing.) Announcing his candidacy in late February, Golan made clear that his aim in running was to bring Labor and Meretz into a political union under a new

name and fresh brand. Golan's March 18 [campaign video](#) suggests that the party might be called "The Democrats". Meanwhile, he has already received the [endorsement](#) of half of Labor's Knesset faction, MKs Kariv and Naama Lazimi.

Golan first drew media attention in 2016, while still in uniform. Addressing a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, he [compared](#) the fascistic trends in modern-day Israel to those that had plagued Europe in the 1930s. Golan was bitterly attacked by rightwing political leaders, and some believe that the speech caused him to be passed over when the next Chief of Staff was appointed.

Retiring from the army, Golan entered politics in 2019. He first joined the center-left political party created by former prime minister Ehud Barak, "Democratic Israel", which ended up running together with Meretz and the Green Movement. When Barak soon disbanded the initiative, Golan was left without a framework, and eventually joined Meretz. There he continued to be overshadowed by more veteran political figures, including Zehava Galon (by whom he was [roundly defeated](#) in a leadership contest) and Mossi Raz.

After the 2022 elections, however, Golan's reputation began to soar. With Meretz out of Knesset and its senior representatives dropping out of political life, Golan became a leading figure in the protest movement, calling for nonviolent "[civil rebellion](#)" against the Netanyahu government's anti-democratic "reforms". Then, on October 7, he became something of a national hero: Upon hearing the awful news, Golan donned his old uniform, grabbed a weapon, and drove his car to the border with Gaza, where he [rescued](#) Israelis under Hamas assault at the ill-fated Nova music festival.

A man with significant military "cred" in a country at war, Golan might indeed be the best electoral bet for Israel's center-left in the near term. Initial polls show a Golan-led merger garnering a respectable, if not spectacular, seven to nine seats.

But, it must be asked honestly, does Golan offer the sort of compelling vision around which the Israeli left can build itself anew in the years ahead?

Golan revealed his electoral approach and basic philosophy in the primary campaign he waged to become Meretz's chair in 2022. As opposed to a burgeoning trend on the left to promote joint Jewish-Arab political work, Golan [sought](#) to steer Meretz headlong toward the political center so that it would become less "purist", in his words, and more palatable to more Jewish Israelis – especially those who vote for Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid and Benny Gantz's center-right National Unity. Golan railed against those in Meretz urging it to become a party with Jewish-Arab co-leadership, saying such voices should be "[silenced and suppressed](#)".

Golan's terminology also shows how far he was from Meretz's traditional role as pusher of the political envelope: He generally eschews the word "occupation", he [explained](#) in 2022, since his broader, more centrist target constituency finds such language off-putting, and it [prefers](#) not to think about Palestinian suffering. Golan has also openly questioned whether a Palestinian partner exists and he uses the term "separation" from the Palestinians, rather than "peace", another word increasingly avoided by the mainstream. Based on his numerous media interviews, there is no indication that Golan has meaningfully changed his approach.

Golan's aim, then, seems to be the formation of a new center-left party that manages to grow by being similar enough to the centrist parties to peel away a share of their voters. In the absence of any bigger or unique ideas, however, would such an accomplishment really be much of a game-changer? And would it not make more sense for this kind of liberal party to band together with Yesh Atid?

Since the collapse of any real peace process in 2008, after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's fall from power (Netanyahu's participation in John Kerry's 2013-2014 peace initiative being more

posture than substance), Israel has been in need of a counternarrative that presents a bold alternative to the paths put forward by the mainstream right (eternal occupation and creeping annexation) and the far-right (expulsion). Golan, on the other hand, seems to be offering something more akin to a pallid rearguard action of a fading Labor Zionism, and it is fair to question whether his party would infuse the left with the energy it so desperately requires.

New upstart political frameworks are being created, however, even if they currently occupy the political fringe. "[All Its Citizens](#)", for example, recently founded by Avrum Burg and Faisal Azaiza, is a party dedicated to the principle of absolute, constitutionally-guaranteed equality between all Israeli citizens, Jewish, Arab, or other. The party models this pursuit via its joint leadership structure. All Its Citizens embraces words like "occupation" and "peace" that have fallen out of favor, and it rejects the idea of a frosty "separation". Instead, the party believes that peace will need to be based on "partnership" between the two national peoples who share the same homeland between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.

While All Its Citizens still lacks any mass appeal, it has already begun the type of "subversive" work that Meretz once took pride in by challenging stale political and societal norms – work that sometimes requires years of effort before coming to fruition.

Israel's February 27 municipal elections showed that such efforts might already have some ballot box viability. Election day saw several local Jewish-Arab election slates competing for city council spots, and though not all managed to gain seats, a few did. These included the "We Are All the City" slate in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, which picked up three councilors with 7.6 percent of the vote, and "The City Majority" slate in Haifa, with three percent, enough to elect one. That one was Sally Abed, one of the prominent leaders of the Arab-Jewish "Standing Together" movement; and while, as a

Can a Labor-Meretz Merger Reinvigorate the Israeli Left?

nonprofit, “Standing Together” itself was not legally or financially involved in either of these electoral efforts, as private citizens, its dynamic activists were a driving force in both.

It is still not clear what role, if any, Standing Together or its members will seek to play in national politics once new elections are called. But for the many leftwing Israelis who feel uninspired by the current choices, the movement offers an attractive option and the 2024 municipal elections could be seen as a promising test-run.

Deep societal transformation is slow and takes much more time to accomplish than the several months of a single Knesset election campaign. Political groups working for a truly shared Jewish-Arab society, or a shared Israeli-Palestinian homeland, are therefore unlikely to be rewarded with major electoral victories any time soon. But for fundamental change to be made, there must be always be those who “go ahead of the camp”, take political risks, and point the way forward. A merged Labor/Meretz party, be it called “The Democrats” or anything else, will soon need to decide what it wants to achieve and what role in Israel’s future it wishes to play.

Ron Skolnik is an American-Israeli political columnist and public speaker, whose articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including Haaretz, Al-Monitor, Tikkun, the Forward, Jewish Currents, & the Palestine-Israel Journal.



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Over the last six years, we have shared, through our “[Kolot:Voices of Hope](#)” series, dozens of profiles of remarkable Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, who have been standing up, against tough odds, for progressive values of peace, social justice, human and civil rights, and democracy.

In the coming weeks, we will be bringing you updates on the important efforts being made since the horrific events of October 7 by many of the organizations we’ve featured in “Kolot”. We begin today with “Women Wage Peace”, whose diverse, multiethnic membership includes Jews, Arabs, Druze, and Bedouin women. The organization was created following the 2014 Gaza war (“Operation Protective Edge”), and was cofounded by Vivian Silver, the Canadian-Israeli activist who was murdered on October 7 on Kibbutz Be’eri by Hamas terrorists.

Since that dark day, Women Wage Peace has doubled down on its [demand](#) for an Israeli-Palestinian political agreement as the only path forward, and has continued to ask Palestinian and Israeli women to sign its “[Mothers’ Call](#)” for a negotiated “inclusive, just peace”.

Indeed, when Prime Minister Netanyahu recently declared that he’ll settle for nothing less than “total

victory”, the organization “schooled” him on what such a victory *should* mean – a ceasefire with security arrangements, the release of all hostages, the reconstruction of Gaza facilitated by moderate Arab states, a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Israeli-Saudi normalization.

Women Wage Peace has also been at the forefront of efforts to protect noncombatants, cosponsoring, for example, a [benefit concert](#) featuring singers Mira Awad and Achinoam Nini (“Noa”), which called for the release of all hostages abducted from Israel into Gaza, and for the protection of the Palestinian and Israeli civilian populations.

For their indefatigable efforts “bringing communities together to build peace in the Middle East with a special focus on the role of women,” Women Wage Peace has been [nominated](#) for this year’s Nobel Peace Prize. We’ll keep our fingers crossed, in hopes that they are granted this prestigious honor.



SYMPOSIUM



1. Post-October 7th: Trauma (May 5th)

A. "Every Day Is October 7th": Israeli Responses

Representatives from civil society will attest to the traumatization of the Israeli psyche.

B. Devastation in Gaza

Members of NGOs working to support civilians in Gaza will speak about the Hamas-Israel War, including the humanitarian crisis on the ground.

2. Toward Healing (May 19th)

A. Ways a Wounded Israel Begins to Heal

In the wake of the October 7th massacre and the ensuing war, Israelis will discuss healing strategies.

B. How Are Palestinian and Jewish Israelis Finding Hope for Healing?

Trust between Israeli Jews and Palestinians has been tested by the events of October 7th and the war that followed. How are Palestinian & Jewish Israelis coming together to restore belief in shared society?

3. Rethinking Security for Two Peoples (June 2nd)

A. What Does "Security" Mean for Israelis and Palestinians in a Post-War Era?

Security is an essential key to moving forward. Experts will discuss how the Hamas-Israel war has reshaped the meaning of security for the long term. What can be done to stop the settler violence on the West Bank?

B Israeli and Palestinian Electoral Landscapes

What's next for the two governments, including the prospect of new elections? What are possibilities for new leadership at this critical time?

4: Moving Toward Palestinian Statehood (June 23rd)

A Peacebuilding in Two Societies

Leaders will discuss the feasibility of a two-state solution given the current landscape.

B. Confederation: Progress Toward Reconciliation

Israelis and Palestinian leaders will speak about a paradigm shift in conflict resolution: embracing partnership. They will sketch an outline of what two states/one homeland might look like.

[REGISTER](#)

Dahlia Scheindlin, *The Crooked Timber of Israeli Democracy*
(Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023)

BOOK REVIEW

Review by Peter Eisenstadt



Dahlia Scheindlin

The year 2023 will certainly go down as the strangest year in Israel's history, and the most consequential since at least 1967. (We now, in March 2024, are still living what might be called the "long 2023.") It was a year of two monumental events, at first glance not closely connected. The year 2023 actually began a little early, on 29 December 2022, when Benjamin Netanyahu began his 6th term as prime minister, after his coalition won the fifth election held in Israel over a four year span. There was much talk during the "time of the five elections" of the instability of Israeli democracy, and the coalition that took power at the end of 2022 indeed seemed more politically stable than its

four predecessors. But it immediately plunged Israel into its greatest period of domestic political instability, perhaps since the days of the S.S. Altalena. In 2023 the massive weekly demonstrations against the Netanyahu government was not about a single administration and its judicial agenda. The fight was for Israeli democracy, and a debate about what it means, how to preserve and protect it, how to defend it against its enemies, foreign and domestic, and how to strengthen it. And what led the government to pause the push for their un-democratic, so-called "judicial reform" was not the nine months of weekly protests, involving hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens, but Hamas.

The unprecedented barbarities and atrocities of October 7th were followed by the still-ongoing devastation of the Gaza war that began that afternoon. Although on 1 January 2024 the Israeli Supreme Court struck down the Knesset's recent change to the "reasonableness" clause that had been the catalyst for the democracy demonstrations, this was, as important a story as it was, basically a one-day coda, and then back to news of the war. But our political task now, as will be the task of future historians and scholars, is to connect the two parts of 2023. What is the link between Israeli democracy and Israeli and Palestinian security and insecurity? Can a

truly democratic society be in a perpetual state of war with its neighbors? Is Israel the “only democracy in the Middle East” or rather is it that “only in the Middle East would Israel be considered a democracy?”

Dahlia Scheindlin has been for a number of years been one of the most penetrating commentators on Israeli politics, and those questions and many others are explored in her timely and deeply insightful new book, *The Crooked Timber of Democracy in Israel*, an exploration of Israeli democracy from Ben-Gurion to Ben-Gvir, both in theory and practice. When I think of the strengths and weaknesses of Israeli democracy, what first comes to mind first is the unique Israeli obsession with not being a “freier,” best translated as a sucker or patsy. A freier is one who hasn’t yet realized that rules such as traffic laws or queuing on lines exist only for those too stupid to follow them, and that life with all of its complexities grants a permanent exemption from rule-obedience to those with the chutzpah to take it. For secular Israelis, perhaps one reason that not following rules achieved such cultural significance was to make as sharp a division as possible with the Haredim, for whom, to outsiders, the whole point of their lives can seem to be to submit themselves to the yoke of rules, as many as possible, the more onerous and binding the better. Israelis have never decided whether the essence of democracy is the freedom to follow rules or the freedom to not follow rules.

David Ben-Gurion was definitely not a freier. Scheindlin quotes David Ben-Gurion, in the 1930s, sparring with the Revisionist Zionists for control of the Jewish Agency, as saying “we have a principle more dear to us than democracy, and it is the building of Palestine by Jews.” The new Zionist man and woman, thought Ben-Gurion, were creating a society of non-freiers, Jews tired of being diaspora patsies, people who would know when to follow rules (the rules Ben-Gurion liked) and when not to do so. And so for Ben-Gurion, argues Scheindlin, democracy was a nice idea, as long as it didn’t curtail his power too much.

As for Ben-Gurion’s great rival, Vladimir Jabotinsky, his views on democracy were at once more liberal and more illiberal than Ben-Gurion’s, leaving a “complex legacy” that, as Scheindlin argues, “sometimes seems

irreconcilable with itself.” Jabotinsky, much more directly than Ben-Gurion, wrote of the importance of democracy as a Zionist ideal, and even of power sharing with an Arab minority. But that was always premised on first creating a Jewish majority. One problem with democracy is that the principle of “one person, one vote” always works better if you are confident that you have more persons and votes on your side. Until 1948, it was not clear where this Jewish majority would come from or, as Scheindlin says, that among the Zionist leaders of the Yishuv, “democracy in a robust sense was compromised, secondary, and subordinate in the overriding aim of creating a Jewish majority.” (Israel solved the problem of democratic representativeness in 1967 by adopting a “one person, no vote” policy for Palestinians in the newly-conquered territories.)

In 1948 Israel promulgated a Declaration of Independence – one that, as Scheindlin notes, does not include the word “democracy.” And Israel remains one of the very few democratic countries without a constitution. There were many reasons for this, including that defining the limits of established religion in a country in which shul and state were promiscuously co-mingled would have been politically difficult, and perhaps especially, not wanting to spell out the minimum rights afforded to Palestinians in a country in which they were viewed as a hostile and unwanted minority. In 1949 Ben-Gurion opposed the idea of a citizenship law because civil rights for Arabs “undermine our moral right to this country.” (And when a citizenship law was finally passed in 1952 a majority of Palestinians did not qualify.) Most fundamentally, Ben-Gurion opposed a constitution because he came to “oppose the very principle of limiting the power of the state and the legislature, of hindering the rule of the majority.” The opposition to the principle of judicial review did not begin with Netanyahu. In 1948 Ben-Gurion stated that “the American constitution has turned into a conservative, reactionary institution that stands against the will of the people,” and he well might have been largely correct in that assessment of the American constitutionalism, pre-*Brown v. Board of Education*, but at least the US Constitution grapples with the problems of eliminating all anti-majoritarian

safeguards in governance. To address this, in 1950 Israel adopted the notion of “Basic Laws,” providing a sort of quasi-constitutional patina to a non-constitutional legal system, though they only require a parliamentary majority to be adopted, amended, or repealed. And until 1992, most Basic Laws concerned governmental structures and had nothing to say about human rights.

In any event, Israel was no in rush to promulgate Basic Laws. It was not until 1958 that Israel approved its first one, so laws as fundamental, as basic, to the structures of Israeli governance and society as the Law of Return (1950), the Abandoned Property Act (also 1950), and the Law of Rabbinic Courts (1953) are not Basic Laws. It was not until 1969 that *Bergman v. Ministry of Finance*, established something like the principle of judicial review by the Supreme Court, though it was a far weaker version than that found in American jurisprudence. It was not until 1992 that Israel adopted a Basic Law, the Human Dignity and Liberty Act, that addressed human rights, and this was eroded and modified by the Nation-State Basic Law of 2018.

Scheindlin concludes that “the least democratic decades” in Israel’s history were the first, from 1948 to 1966, when Israel’s Palestinian residents were under a military regime that attempted to control every aspect of their lives. And it was during these years that the Labor Zionist hegemony, and its institutions such as the Histadrut, were at their most ubiquitous and overbearing. This began to crack thereafter, and perhaps the deepest irony Scheindlin’s book is her contention that the decades after 1967 saw a real expansion of internal Israel democracy, at the same that the conquests of 1967 gave a profound new impetus to Israel’s anti-democratic forces. The debate over the Israel’s future, with the decline of Labor Zionism and the rise of Likud in the 1980s and 1990s, created, for the only time in Israel’s history, some real competition between the center-left and center-right coalitions, and as Scheindlin notes, “Israel looked briefly like a two-party system.” Dovish political parties, like Dash, Ratz, Shinui, Hadash, and Meretz seemed to be proliferating and gathering momentum, while in 1988 the Knesset banned Kach, the party of Meir Kahane, from running in the next election,

calling out its “incitement to racism.” As noted above, the push for civil rights finally resulted in a Basic Law passed in 1992, as piecemeal and inadequate as it was. In the 1990s gender equality, LGBTQ rights, even somewhat loosening the grip of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate over civil society seemed to be progressing. And most importantly, there was a peace process that might actually address Israel’s most basic problem was underway.

But we know happened next, or what didn’t happen next, the so-called “turning point in Israel’s history that didn’t turn.” After 1996, with the first election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister, the parabola of democracy in Israel had reached its apex, and then began its slow but steady vertiginous descent. In retrospect, certainly from a post- October 7th perspective, the single most significant event in this decline was the 2005 unilateral disengagement from Gaza, which revitalized the Israeli far right. The disengagement violated their assumption that all Israeli governments would, in the end, defend their liberty to settle, in Scheindlin words, “in all parts of the land,” and certainly that no Israeli government would ever forcibly remove them from Gaza. And they couldn’t believe that Ariel Sharon, as prime minister, as head of Likud, their party and the representative of their side, had done this. There needed to be a party to the right of Likud and Likud needed to be pushed to the right. The Gaza disengagement sparked the rise of the fascist right, and breathed new life into the fading embers of Kahanism.

For everyone else, the need for the disengagement should have been evidence that the settlement enterprise was dangerously overextended, that Israel could not indefinitely juggle Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, while ignoring legitimate Palestinian aspirations for self-determination. On October 7th the juggling ended. The barbarities of that day will forever be seared into Jewish memories. Everything fell down. All of the forces of the IDF will not be able to put things back together again. And a purely military solution is the only thing that the current Israeli government knows how to do, striking back against Gaza in what amounts to a barely controlled rage, largely indifferent to the fate of civilian Gazans. Many wars have no winning side, only

losers. There will be no winner of the Gaza War.

Scheindlin's book had the misfortune to be published in September 2023, sort of like publishing a book about Israel in May 1967. Certainly, many of the old October 6th realities of Israeli and Palestinian life are gone forever. The question of democracy, that so dominated Israeli debate in 2023 until October 7th, seems insignificant, a second-order internal Israeli matter in comparison to the horrors and the global implications of the Gaza War. However, the question of the future of democracy in Israel, and the relevance of her book, has only grown more significant since its publication.

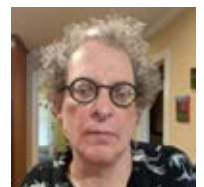
When it comes to democracy in Israel, as Scheindlin shows, there never has been a golden age, and there can be, or should be, no nostalgia for a past that never was. Israel was built, as the book's title emphasizes, on crooked timber, the title borrowed from a quote from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, that "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made." Anything that Israel builds is likely to be somewhat off-kilter, especially anything having to do with Palestinians. Everything that Israel has tried, for a century, has failed. Palestinians have their own failures, but neither side can take comfort or exculpation from the failures of their counterparts. Israel can take another lesson from Kant, one of our great moral philosophers. He insisted that a law is not a valid law unless you try to make it apply to everybody, and make it universal. A country with two of sets of laws for two different groups of people is not a country with twice as much law but a country with no laws at all. Lawlessness begins when people can choose what set of laws they wish to follow. Lawlessness happens when people think there are no negative consequences for not following rules or laws, or when a nation tries to maintain its own sense of security by enforcing the insecurity of others. That will end, perhaps, in the needed post-war reckoning.

There was, after October 7th, an initial outpouring of sympathy for Israel and for those murdered in the Hamas atrocities. Much of that goodwill for Israel has since been eroded. I am not sure how much of a rise in antisemitism there has been since, but there certainly

has been a vast increase in what is being called "anti-Israelism;" those who look at Israel and see nothing but a sordid history of a murderous colonial settler state. This is just a caricature of a very complex history, but it will only be effectively refuted if Israel can summon the best aspects of its democratic past. This was on display during the democracy protests of 2023, with its out-of-doors vigor, its inchoate freshness, its egalitarian skepticism of leaders, and the recognition that democracy in Israel means more than minatory rule of narrow Knesset majorities. The democracy movement had difficulties attracting Palestinian Israelis. That was a problem. Those who thought the democracy movement could finesse the occupation clearly were wrong. Let us hope these problems are corrected because the democracy movement will have to be a big part of what happens next. Scheindlin's book provides needed instruction on the way forward. When, recently, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a startling speech, that "at this critical juncture, I believe a new election is the only way to allow for a healthy and open decision-making process about the future of Israel, at a time when so many Israelis have lost their confidence in the vision and direction of their government," he was placing his faith in his assumption that Israeli democracy can rescue Israel. At the least, the contrast between the authoritarian majoritarianism of the current Israeli government and the true forces of democracy has never been clearer.

The great historian Nathan I. Huggins, in *The African American Ordeal in Slavery*, concluded his book by quoting the final, haunting line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. It applies to all peoples struggling against a past from they are both drawing upon and struggling to escape. "And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Somewhere upstream, let us hope, a more democratic Israel and a more democratic Palestine await.

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