

# On That Distant Day<sup>1</sup>

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Winter 2023

## This time it's different.

I can recall how, in 1977, when Menachem Begin and the Likud came to power after three decades of Labor Party rule, there was alarm verging on panic in some circles. It was the end of democratic Israel! Fascism was at the gates! Israeli friends of mine spoke that way, too. I advised them to take a deep breath and calm down. Begin, I said, was a democrat, a man of principle. His commitment to parliamentary government and the rule of law was genuine. He had, both in his own party and in his coalition partners, responsible politicians who would counsel him sensibly. Whatever his policies would be, they would not threaten Israeli democracy.

Which turned out, of course, to be the case. Now, though, I feel like the friends I tried calming in 1977. The day after November's elections, I heard from one of them. He was the one person in our all-Jewish town to cast his ballots for Arab parties in elections, a professed anti-Zionist whose dire predictions for Israel's future led to stormy arguments between us. Ten years ago he and his wife moved to Portugal, from where he now wrote, "I think I can safely say I've been proven right."

I wrote back:

You've won the argument. For years now, Israel has seemed to me like a man sleepwalking toward a cliff. Now we've fallen from it. I don't know whether this will end with a smash-up and a slow, painful recovery or with something worse. If worse, it will be slow and painful, too.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/contemporary-israel/12801/on-that-distant-day/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=share-via-email](https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/contemporary-israel/12801/on-that-distant-day/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=share-via-email)

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Should I feel less frightened than I do? Fascism is still not at the gates. It's not the end of Israeli democracy, either.

But as I write these words in the second week of December, something very bad is happening. A former prime minister, currently on trial for graft and abuse of the public trust, his only demonstrated principles his own ambition and survival, has been voted back into office and is about to form—having driven every independent voice from a party in which he is now surrounded by political hacks and bootlickers—a coalition with four religious parties.

- One of these, ultra-Orthodox and Ashkenazi in leadership and rank and file, has traditionally devoted its efforts to promoting the power of its rabbis and procuring all it could from government budgets for its followers and their institutions.
- The second, which calls itself Sephardi, pursues similar goals; though its leadership is black-hat too, its base is religiously diverse.
- The third, described as “religious Zionist,” appeals to a knit-skullcap electorate and is hyper-nationalist and Jewish supremacist in its attitude toward Arabs.
- The fourth draws on all three of these constituencies and is more extreme than the third.

All agree on the **need to weaken Israel's judiciary and empower the Knesset** that will be controlled by them **to overturn High Court decisions**. All are prepared to **vote for legislation enabling the charges against the prime minister to be dismissed**.

And what will they get in return?

Party 1 has been promised an extension of the rabbinate's considerable (and lucrative) powers over Israeli life, plus large hikes in government spending on the ultra-Orthodox sector's many yeshivas and their students (who do not serve in the army and do not participate in the workforce) and on its religious school



Prime Minister Menachem Begin meets with Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem, 1977. (Courtesy of the National Photo Collection, Israel.)

system (which does not teach basic subjects like English and mathematics that would prepare its graduates for the job market, thus condemning most of them to a life of dependence on the welfare payments campaigned for by their politicians).

Party 2 will benefit from these measures, too, as well as from a Knesset bill allowing its leader—who would normally be barred from political office by his recent conviction for tax evasion (he has previously served a prison term for bribe taking)—to double as Minister of Health and Minister of the Interior before rotating as Finance Minister with the head of Party 3.

The latter, a former activist in the settler movement and advocate of Israeli annexation of Judea and Samaria, will also be given control of the Civil Administration in the Defense Ministry that is in charge of Jewish settlement in these territories. (Conquered by Israel from Jordan in 1967, they are still under military rule.)

The head of Party 4, an avowed admirer of Meir Kahane and a lawyer who has specialized in defending Jews accused of anti-Arab violence and hate crimes, has been awarded the Ministry of Public Security, which is responsible for Israel's police and its military wing, the Border Patrol.

And this is just the beginning.

Each day brings developments that were inconceivable a short while ago. **No, it's not the end of Israeli democracy. But it is the end of an Israeli consensus about what is and is not permissible in a democracy**—and once the rules are no longer agreed on, political chaos is not far away. Israel has never been in such a place before.

But, say the comforters, this is just one election. There will be others. That is democracy. You vote the rascals in and you vote the rascals out. “We'll be back in two years,” says outgoing prime minister Yair Lapid, whose *Yesh Atid* party is the largest in Israel's Center-Left bloc.

It's wishful thinking. Yes, there will be other elections. And the rascals will probably win them by bigger margins than they won this one, which was close.

This is in part because they have the demographic winds at their backs. The current ultra-Orthodox birth rate in Israel is twice the modern Orthodox one, which is a good deal higher than the nonreligious one. Defections from Orthodoxy are low, and the Orthodox comprise a relatively small percentage of Israelis who emigrate. Unless these trends change, the number of Orthodox voters will continue to grow proportionally. And since the ultra-Orthodox parties will always join hands with whoever most fully grants their religious and financial demands, and the nationalist religious parties with whoever most unstintingly strengthens and expands the settlements, where a large number of their voters live, the Center-Left bloc, which is answerable to a secular and liberal base, can never outbid Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud for religious support.

Still, you say, voters are not unchangeable. If the newly elected government disappoints those who elected it, won't enough of them turn against it to swing the next election the other way?

Not likely. **Israeli politics are now so solidified across entrenched lines of group identities that voting blocs are extremely stable.** In recent elections, of which the latest was the fifth in three years, there was much movement from party to party within each bloc but almost none from bloc to bloc. **Disgruntled voters in Israel switch teams, not sides.**

It's not impossible that the political landscape will undergo tectonic shifts, especially once Netanyahu, who is now seventy-three, leaves office. The Likud could conceivably split, part of it joining the Center in a new alignment. But even then, the currents driving Israel steadily rightward will persist. These are not just the slow-acting ones of demography. They are also the volatile ones of the Israeli/Jewish-Palestinian/Arab conflict. The more hopeless this conflict becomes, the more the Right and its religious allies gain and the Center-Left loses.

This has been happening for a long time.

With every dunam of Palestinian land taken for an Israeli settlement; every Palestinian stone thrown at the car of a settler; every act of revenge against a Palestinian village; every Arab stabbing or shooting of a Jew; every army raid to catch the stabber or shooter; every rocket shot from Gaza; every retaliatory

strike and counterstrike; every death, injury, insult, and humiliation, the fear and fury, and with them the feeling that the other side is ineradicably evil, mount—and each time they do, more Israelis decide to vote for the parties that best express these emotions.

They have spilled over, too, these emotions, into Israel proper. The May 2021 riots in Israeli cities, in which Arab mobs torched synagogues and Jewish property and Jewish mobs attacked and sought to lynch Arabs, were unprecedented in the country's history. Israelis were shocked by them. They thought that what happened on one side of the 1967 border wouldn't cross it. It did.

And more forebodingly yet, Israeli youth have been shown by poll after poll to be more extreme and dismissive of democratic values than their elders. According to a survey last year, a quarter of all nonreligious Israelis between ages eighteen and twenty-four, and half of all religious ones, thought Israel's Arab citizens should be stripped of the right to vote! Yet why should this surprise us? The main contact with Arabs that most of these young people have had has been while serving in the territories as soldiers. Some of them may be disturbed by having to act there as the masters of a people who have no rights, no freedom of movement, and no one to protect or defend them except a corrupt Palestinian Authority that has little power itself. Many, however, accept this as the natural state of affairs. Many fail to see why it should not be extended to Israel itself.

This is the voting population of Israel's future—and it is a future in which any alliance between the Center-Left and Israel's Arab parties, which might balance the Right-religious bloc, is ruled out. The chronically inflamed state of Jewish-Arab relations ensures as much, since no Jewish party can afford to be seen as “Arab-loving” and no Arab party wants to be accused by its voters of selling out to the Jews. Fleeting convergences of interest may be possible. Long-term collaboration is not.

The process feeds itself. The more the conflict with the Palestinians is exacerbated, the more the Right-religious bloc is strengthened; the more it is strengthened, the more exacerbated the conflict becomes. The cycle can be

broken only by ending the conflict, and the conflict now seems, after the last elections, more incapable of being ended than ever.

The rightward trend in Israeli politics tracks closely with the final collapse of the so-called peace process initiated by the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Not that prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace were particularly bright even at the time of Oslo. Yet for much of the post-1967 period, they were not negligible. Most Israeli governments recognized that without a resolution of the Palestinian problem, Israel was headed for disaster. In its standard formulation, this meant that unless Israel relinquished control of most of the territories acquired in 1967 along with their millions of Arab inhabitants, it would eventually have to either grant these inhabitants citizenship and cease to be a Jewish state or continue to deny it and cease to be a democratic state: a binational Israel that would inevitably implode from within or a morally repugnant Israel ostracized by the world and deserted by many of its own citizens—such would be the only, the intolerable, choice if Israel failed to extricate itself from the Palestinian quicksand.

For most of the period after the 1967 war, efforts were made, some more concerted than others, to do so. In the war's aftermath, overtures were made to Jordan, offering to return to it most of the West Bank in exchange for a peace treaty. In 1979–1981, Begin and Anwar Sadat conducted negotiations over Palestinian autonomy. In the 1980s, attempts were made to revive the Jordanian option. In 1993 came Yitzhak Rabin and Oslo. In 2000, Oslo having run aground, Ehud Barak went with Yasser Arafat and President Clinton to Camp David. In 2005, after the quashing of the Second Intifada that followed the failure of the Camp David talks, Ariel Sharon ordered an evacuation of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip as an apparent prelude to a unilateral disengagement from large parts of the West Bank. Incapacitated by a stroke, Sharon was succeeded by Ehud Olmert, who reversed course and strove to reach a two-state agreement with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas.

Abbas procrastinated, Olmert resigned because of corruption charges, and elections held in 2009 ushered in a Likud-Netanyahu government ideologically committed to an undivided Land of Israel—and though Netanyahu continued for a while to pay lip service to the idea of a Palestinian

state, it was clear from the start that he didn't mean it. By then, too, the conventional two-state solution, though its virtues continued to be sung by the world, was impractical, having been rendered so by the hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers now in Judea and Samaria. Not solving things but "managing" them became the slogan of the Netanyahu governments—and the Center-Left opposition, having run out of ideas of its own, went along. The Palestinian problem, until then at the heart of Israeli political debate, was shunted aside. Nothing had worked, ergo, nothing could work; why waste time discussing it? What couldn't be solved could be lived with.

And lived with in the Netanyahu years it was—to all outward appearances, successfully. The economy grew, the high-tech sector flourished, and dramatic breakthroughs were made in Israel's relations with the Arab world, all at the same time that talks with the Palestinians were abandoned and the settlements went on growing rapidly. Here and there, there was armed resistance and Palestinian terror. Now and then, there were eruptions of fighting with Hamas in Gaza. There were domestic problems as well—an overburdened health care system, a poorly performing school system, spreading lawlessness, spiraling housing prices, a cost of living that left Israelis struggling to make ends meet. But these were ills that afflicted other countries, too. On the whole, it seemed, Israel was doing well.

Concomitantly, the Center-Left began a period of decline. Its share of the national vote, having resulted in sixty-four Knesset seats in the elections of 2006, dropped to fifty-nine seats in 2009, fifty-eight in 2013, fifty-two in 2015, fifty in 2019, and forty-six in November. The Labor Party that presided over Israel's birth and first years fell from forty-one seats under Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 to its current total of four.



Bezalet Smotrich, left, and Itamar Ben-Gvir with supporters in Jerusalem, March 2021. (Photo by Emmanuel Dunand / AFP via Getty Images.)

And all the time that Israel was managing, it was headed for the cliff with its eyes shut. Its new government is not about to open its eyes now. Flush with his electoral victory, Benjamin Netanyahu has declared that, as far as Israel is concerned, the Palestinian problem can go unresolved indefinitely, since the Palestinians are but 1 or 2 percent of the Arab world. Why lose sleep over them when Israel now has diplomatic relations with Egypt, with Jordan, with Sudan, with Bahrain, with the United Arab Emirates, and with Morocco, and lower-level ties with other Arab countries?

One might as well say that a daily dose of poison is no reason for concern as long as it is a small percentage of one's diet.

Yes, the Palestinians, too, bear their share of the blame. They have been intransigent. They have cultivated a politics of grievance. They have supported terror. They have intimated that any agreement with Israel will mark but a temporary lull in their campaign to reclaim all of Palestine. They have not been the partners for peace that Israel could have wished for.

I fail to see, however, what consolation is to be derived from this. If I were a Palestinian dreaming of getting back all of Palestine, I could wish for nothing better than for Israel to swallow Judea and Samaria hook, line, and sinker. After that, I would need only to wait for it to choke. Ten years, twenty years, thirty years—and it will be gone.

“With God's help,” recently tweeted our new proconsul for the territories, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, “we in the incoming government will accelerate Israeli settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel.”

“With God's help,” *b'ezrat hashem*, is a ubiquitous phrase in the conversation of Israel's Orthodox. God's help will be needed if Smotrich has his way.

When you can think of no rational reasons for hope, you turn to irrational ones. The steady drift toward religion in Israeli life in recent decades, so opposed to the trend in Western countries, is directly related to the Israeli-Palestinian impasse. Israel's religious Right is often accused of being messianist. It isn't, not really. The Smotriches and Ben-Gvirs do not believe that the messiah is knocking at the door. They merely believe, as do many of the Israelis who voted for them, that God is on their side. So do the ultra-



Orthodox who make common cause with them, though they may ascribe to God different priorities.

I do not make light of the Jewish historical claim to the Land of Israel. I have always favored Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, because I believed that these were part of my people's heritage. But I believe that they also belong to the Palestinians who live in them, and I do not pretend to know whose side God is on, or whether he takes sides at all in such matters, or whether he still would be God if he did.

There is something, however, that I do know. **Zionism aspired to wean the Jewish people off the belief that God was on its side and could be relied on to rescue it from its predicaments—that it should rely on God rather than on itself because it was God's chosen.** This was precisely why most of the rabbis of Europe, where Zionism arose, and especially of Eastern Europe, where it struck its deepest roots, fought it tooth and nail. The bulk of ultra-Orthodoxy remained bitterly anti-Zionist right up to the declaration of the State of Israel, if not beyond that, while modern Orthodoxy, though it took part in Zionist construction in Palestine, contributed relatively little to it or to Israel's creation.

And now, with Benjamin Netanyahu in tow, these are the forces dragging us into the abyss.

Some saw it coming long ago. In 1879, the Hebrew poet Yehuda Leib Gordon wrote a long poem called "*Zedekiah in the Dungeon.*" *Zedekiah*, the Bible's *Tsidkiyahu*, was the last king of Judea, imprisoned and blinded by the Babylonian conquerors of Jerusalem. In Gordon's poem he muses in prison about his conflict, while still king, with the prophet Jeremiah, who insisted he govern by religious law, and about the similar confrontation of King Saul and the prophet Samuel, who first crowned Saul and then brought him down because he disobeyed God's command to slaughter the Amalekites he had vanquished. Zedekiah reflects:

Since our nation first began to be,  
The Law's upholders and the monarchy  
Have been at war. Always the visionaries  
Have sought to make the kings their tributaries,

As did, going back five hundred years,  
The earliest of all our seers,  
The son of Elkanah [Samuel]. . . .  
So every prophet in his hour  
Has sought to get the king under his power.  
What Samuel did to Saul is what  
I met with from the man of Anatot [Jeremiah],  
And what awaits each ruler of our nation  
Until the final generation.  
I see how on that distant day  
The son of Hilkiah [Jeremiah] will have his way.  
His dispensation will prevail;  
All governance will founder and then fail;  
Our people, erudite in chapter and in verse,  
Will go from woe to woe and bad to worse.  
I see . . . alas, I see!  
What the blind king saw, the king-elect is blind to.

To my friend in Portugal, I wrote:

If there is still a difference between us, it is that you take satisfaction (though I hope not just that) in what has happened and I feel only pain. And there is another difference, too. You put the blame on Zionism, and I put it on Judaism, of whose fantasies and delusions Zionism sought to cure us only to become infected with them itself. **Zionism wanted to make us a normal people.** It failed and grew warped in the process. Yet today, too, I honor the physician who sought to heal the patient rather than save only his own skin.

I never credited the warnings, sounded by many over the years, that the expansion of the settlements would bring Israel to the point of no return. I believed that in the end, sooner or later, however long it took, the only feasible solution, the one solution yet to be tried, would be seized on and the need recognized for two closely linked states, an Israel and a Palestine, sharing one country, with Arabs living in the Jewish state and Jews living in the Arab one. And this being the case, what difference did it make if there were one hundred

thousand Jews already living in the future Arab state, or two hundred thousand, or half a million? However many there were, they would be part of the solution, not the problem.

I was (as I often was told) naive. The point of no return was indeed not a question of numbers. It was the point at which there would be too much recrimination, too much distrust, too much hatred, too much blind conviction, too much disdain for the notion of a shared humanity, for such a solution to be possible. What settler today would be willing to live under Palestinian sovereignty? What Palestinian would want settlers as his neighbors? And perhaps this wasn't even a point that had to be reached. Perhaps it was, all along, the starting point.

And so that won't work, either. We're over the cliff and falling, and no one knows how far down the ground is.

I wrote my friend:

What more can I say? We're both old now. Neither of us will live to see the end of this. I will die, anguished, in my country and among my people, and you will die, tranquil, among foreigners in a foreign land, and it is good that you don't envy me and that I don't envy you, and that each of us will have the death he chose.