

# Israel's "Sorrow of the Left"

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TEL AVIV, Israel — Those on the left of Israeli politics increasingly express fears that the liberal and democratic country that their spiritual forebears built is slipping from their hands.

Earlier this month, center-left Haaretz columnist Ari Shavit published an impassioned outcry capturing the growing distress and anger I have heard in conversations over the last year with affluent and well-educated residents of Tel Aviv. Shavit takes great pride in Zionism's achievement in creating a state infused with "unequaled passion, creativity and vitality." But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government leaves him feeling "ashamed" and with "deep disgrace."

Among those in power, Shavit sees nothing but "ignorant hooligans" and "boorish" and "uncultured" people who are "smashing and shattering everything precious and sublime" in the country. He himself refuses to surrender to the night that has "descended on Jerusalem" and the forces of darkness that "cover the land." But his affirmation that "true Zionism will rise up" against the political right that he blames for all this smacks more of desperation than optimism.

To better understand the causes of the left's despair, I sought out Yaron London, host of the popular daily current affairs TV program, London & Kirschenbaum. A fixture in Israeli media—as radio and TV broadcaster, print journalist, songwriter, actor, filmmaker—for some 50 years and going strong, London is a man of the left who is inspiringly liberal in the old-fashioned sense of the term. He is distinguished by a skepticism of his own side and curiosity about the other side. Both the skepticism and the curiosity are nourished by a sense of humor rooted in a sympathy for the foibles and charms of real people.

In a lengthy and wide-ranging conversation in his comfortable apartment on a quiet Tel Aviv street, London rejected the notion that freedom and democracy are under assault in Israel. While he is acutely worried about the growing gap between rich and poor, London insisted that freedom of expression here has never been more robust.

Nonetheless, and without a hint of acrimony, he identified a half-dozen sources of what he dubbed the "sorrow of the left."

First, long-term demographic trends are working against the left. The Israeli right—which encompasses Jews from Arab countries, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and the deeply religious, as well as the less well-educated, and the poor—has a significantly higher birth rate than the left, whose members generally trace their ancestry to Europe and, for the most part, are better educated, more secular, and more prosperous.

Second, the left views the more than 400,000 Israelis living in the West Bank as having created an all-but-irreversible political reality that will prevent the Jewish state from disentangling itself from more than 2.5 million Palestinians who do not want to live in Israel and to whom most Israelis do not want grant citizenship.

Third, Israeli and Palestinian negotiating positions are so distant that it appears there is no near-term prospect “to establish something that resembles peace,” let alone a two-state solution.

Fourth, the violence and fanaticism in the Middle East have grown so terrible that the national security platform of the center left has become increasingly indistinguishable from that of the right.

Fifth, the left has been unable to produce “a leader who can compete with Benjamin Netanyahu’s mix of intelligence, charisma, and skill in controlling public opinion.”

Finally, the left has internalized the despair of permanent opposition. The right has dominated Israeli politics for almost 40 years with only two exceptions: Yitzhak Rabin, a former general and army chief of staff during the Six Day War, won election as prime minister from 1992 until his assassination by a Jewish extremist in 1995, and Ehud Barak, a highly decorated former general, headed the government from 1999 to 2001. “When we are repeatedly defeated over a long period of time,” London told me, “we gradually lose hope for victory.”

It follows from these considerations, he argues, that Israel faces two grim possibilities: One is “stagnation that promises persistent security tension with waves of terror and violent suppression.” The other is “annexation of the occupied territories that in the end will produce either institutional apartheid or a democracy in which Arabs will constitute approximately half of the population.” The so-called one-state solution “will be unstable and will lead ultimately to civil war.”

In these gloomy circumstances, London observes, the question is not why the left is depressed but rather why the right is not. His answer goes to the heart of the matter.

Unlike America, where social and economic issues divide left and right, Israeli politics revolves around conflicting opinions about “the relation to Arabs, the borders of the country, and Israel’s character as ‘a Jewish and democratic state.’” Whereas the left tends to define the Jewish people as an ethnic group and Israel as a secular state grounded in territory, a

common language, and loyalty to agreed-upon social and political arrangements, much of the right, according to London, views the Jewish nation as constituted by religious belief, and the Jewish state as subject to religious law and a messianic mission.

The tension between these conceptions, he worries, may be unresolvable. Moreover, contrasting understandings of the Jewish people and Israel, he thinks, explain divergent responses by the left and right to their shared existential anxiety for Israel's survival.

The Israeli left has long believed that the conflict with the Palestinians can be resolved and Arab and Islamist enmity overcome through humane and wise Israeli political leadership. But in light of the collapsing Arab state system and the spread of religious war in the region, "this perspective is weakening and therefore men and women of the left are inclined to think about a private solution," London said. "In almost all 'left wing' families, you hear talk about emigration, or at least doubts about life in the shadow of unending danger and reflections about the advantages contained in citizenship elsewhere." Grandfather to several grandchildren, London makes clear that he does not exempt his own extended family.

In contrast, he suggests, the right draws strength from its religious, or religiously inflected, understanding of Israel's fate. It interprets the establishment of Israel against remarkable odds as proof that the Jewish people will prevail in their ancient homeland while regarding the failure of many on the left to take Israel's side as betrayal of the Jews' divine mission.

In his assessment of the right, London may underestimate the extent to which liberal and democratic norms have spread, including among the extremely religious, just as in his account of the left he may neglect the rise of intolerance.

Very much to his credit, London is the first to worry that his observations do injustice to the complexities of Israeli politics. "Everything I told you until now is necessarily afflicted with superficiality and marred by crude generalizations," he stressed. "The boundary lines between the sectors in Israeli society are not drawn with a thick pencil. I spoke of tendencies and inclinations, not hard facts. A skeptic like myself, who has written a great deal and has uttered more than a few predictions that did not come true, must be careful."

The left in Israel—as well as the right in Israel, and, come to think of it, both left and right in America—could use many more affable skeptics endowed with an infectious curiosity like that of Yaron London.

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