

David Remnick, the Crisis in Israel and Shades of Gray



by Bruce Bawer

Since 1998, David Remnick has held the office of editor-in-chief of *The New Yorker*, that most definitive of weekly guides to the left-wing narrative, and during his tenure he's demonstrated amply just how much he deserves that position of solemn, even sacred, responsibility. Sacred? Well, yes. For while the ancient scriptures of their nominal faiths may not be regarded as particularly holy in the homes of many secular upscale Manhattanites, *The New Yorker* certainly is, because, week after week, it makes clear to its devout readers – in conjunction with the *New York Times*, of course – just what opinions should and shouldn't be tolerated at fashionable cocktail receptions and dinner parties.

A few illustrative highlights from his tenure. In November 2008, just after Obama won his first term, Remnick filed a

shamelessly flattering [profile](#) of Obama's mentor, the former Weather Underground terrorist Bill Ayers. Remnick not only depicted Ayers as a gentle soul – actually comparing him to the amiable, sweater-wearing paterfamilias portrayed by Fred MacMurray in the prelapsarian sitcom *My Three Sons* – but also allowed Ayers to rewrite his own personal history. Without any dissent from Remnick, Ayers insisted that his terrorism had been of a far more harmless variety than people imagined (although, he volunteered, he now felt a mature regret for the “juvenile and inflated” rhetoric of his youth) and claimed that, mischievous GOP propaganda to the contrary, he'd never been particularly close to the Obamas. That profile – carefully stripped of facts that would've blown to smithereens virtually every detail of Remnick's pretty picture – was the very apotheosis of shady, shoddy journalism.

And it was hardly a one-off. Remnick's *The Bridge* (2010), about Barack Obama, took the genre of duplicitous, brown-nosing hagiography to new lows. So determined was Remnick to glorify his subject that when a couple of serious historians suggested that perhaps Obama's elegantly composed memoir *Dreams from My Father* had in fact been ghostwritten by Ayers – just as JFK's *Profiles in Courage* was ghostwritten by Ted Sorensen – Remnick called them racists, even though Obama's own previous writings had been decidedly unimpressive and the book's style seemed to have Ayers's fingerprints all over it.

If the totally unaccomplished Chicago community organizer was, for Remnick, a golden god who could do everything short of walk on water, Donald Trump, the self-made multibillionaire and legendary building magnate, was, as Remnick wrote after the 2016 election, “vulgarity unbounded, a knowledge-free national leader who will not only set markets tumbling but will strike fear into the hearts of the vulnerable, the weak, and, above all, the many varieties of Other whom he has so deeply insulted.” A hundred days into Trump's presidency,

Remnick contrasted the “discipline” and “rigor” that Obama had purportedly brought to the Oval Office with Trump’s “impulsive” and “mendacious” manner. The reality of Obama’s failures and Trump’s successes as president have never had any impact whatsoever on Remnick’s unswerving determination to portray the former as a hero and the latter as a bum.

You might at least have thought that Remnick, a Jew, would appreciate such Trump achievements as the Abraham Accords and the recognition of the Golan Heights as part of Israel – especially given the stark contrast with Obama’s palpable hostility to Israel. But Remnick isn’t that kind of Jew.

Which brings us to the Middle East. Now 65, Remnick was born in Hackensack, the son of a dentist, and attended an Orthodox Jewish school in Paramus. (Could it be that he disdains Trump so profoundly because the latter’s outer-borough roots remind him a bit too much of his own bridge-and-tunnel background?) After attending a public high school, Remnick attended Princeton, then worked for the *Washington Post* before moving on to the *New Yorker*. His take on the Middle East will be familiar to anyone who’s spent any time in certain parts of Manhattan. In his view, Israelis, especially right-wing Israelis, are the principal cause of their frictions with their neighbors. And Islam? In 2013, Remnick wrote about the Boston Marathon bombings. Though capable of dismissing Trump as a crooked clown, he’s much too sophisticated to dismiss a pair of jihadist murderers as evil, or even as the misguided dupes of an evil theology; instead, he [described](#) the Tsarnaev brothers as “battered by history...by empire and the strife of displacement, by exile and emigration.”

To be sure, the events of October 7 represented terrorism on an almost unprecedented scale – and have thus posed for the American left, including the American Jewish left, an unprecedented ideological challenge. A veteran left-wing pro can easily tsk-tsk away most Palestinian misdeeds with references to the “cycle of violence” and to the perpetrators’

supposedly understandable anger over decades of “occupation” and “apartheid.” But the events of October 7 were too singularly horrible, too reminiscent of the pogroms in Czarist Russia and of Nazi genocide at its most systematically heartless, to be swept away with the usual glib formulations.

But don't worry: Remnick was up to the job. In his October 9 [piece](#) “Israel's Calamity – and After,” he was smart enough to devote the first several paragraphs to a sober acknowledgment of the attacks' singular brutality, although instead of condemning them severely in his own voice, he chose to quote, without comment, other people's condemnations. He cited, for example, *Haaretz* editor Aluf Benn's comparison of Hamas's depredations to “the massacre of Russian Jews in Kishinev, in 1903”; an Israeli journalist's statement that the survivors' accounts of October 7 “are stories from the ghetto”; and the admission by an Israeli lawyer (“who has represented Palestinians,” no less) that “[w]hen you see pure evil it is very hard to digest that humans are capable of it.”

Having cited these forceful reactions, however, Remnick pivoted with the elegance of a Maria Tallchief, shifting attention from Israelis as victims of Palestinians to Palestinians as victims of Israelis. He treated us to a Human Rights Watch official's characterization of Gaza as “an open-air prison,” Benn's complaint that Netanyahu runs a “government of horrors,” and Palestinian leader Mustada Barghouti's attribution of Hamas's actions to “the longest occupation in modern history.” The violence would not end, added Barghouti, until Israel ceased its “illegal occupation” and accepted Palestinians “as equal human beings.” Remnick challenged none of it – not the “open-air prison” calumny, not the “occupation” nonsense, and not even the “equal human beings” line, apropos of which any responsible journalist would have pointed out that while Israel has Arabs in its army, in its Knesset, and on its Supreme Court, Islam unequivocally categorizes Jews as subhumans deserving only of

extermination, and Palestinian schools notoriously teach toddlers to have no higher ambition than to kill a Jew.

No, instead of questioning the sob-sister approach to Gaza, Remnick joined in, dubbing Gaza “a welter of human misery...a poor, overcrowded, underemployed landscape of suffering,” etc., etc. – all the while making no effort to correct the widespread impression that this suffering is somehow the fault of Israel, rather than of a Hamas government that, having received, over the decades, a fortune in aid from around the world, has chosen to spend it not on development (Gaza, as many observers have pointed out, is perfectly positioned, with its perfect beaches and year-round sunshine, to be a Mediterranean tourist mecca) but on bombs, missiles, and terrorist tunnels. Remnick even faulted Netanyahu (whom he’s always hated) for failing to see the importance of “resolv[ing] the conflict with Palestinians in Gaza” – as if there were any realistic possibility of resolving *anything* with terrorists who are devoted not to the lives of Gazans but to the deaths of Jews.

Remnick’s October 9 article was only the beginning. He [picked](#) up the topic again on October 17, the day before President Biden’s scheduled trip to Israel. By this time, Remnick himself was on the scene. Again opening his piece in a calculated fashion – namely, with a first-person account of the funeral of a family murdered by Hamas – Remnick uttered the requisite words of sorrow and pity, but was quick to add that “[i]t is hardly an exercise in rhetorical ‘equivalence’ to observe that in Gaza, too, there are constant funerals, shattered families, civilians living in dread.” On the contrary, “rhetorical equivalence” is exactly the correct way to label what an author’s doing when he dares to liken the coldblooded jihadist butchery of innocent families (including the microwaving, burning, and decapitation of babies) to civilian deaths caused by acts of war – civilian deaths that, moreover, could probably have been averted if those very same

bloodthirsty jihadists, *whom those civilians elected as their leaders*, hadn't deliberately placed them in harm's way.

"Israel, like any other country," wrote Remnick, "has a right to safeguard its existence and its citizens." Yet in the next breath he seemed to deny this right: "But what will come from answering cruelty with accelerating cruelty, from an endless bombing campaign, from reoccupying part or all of Gaza? One thing is certain: it will intensify the suffering and resentments of ordinary Palestinians." Well, as far as I'm concerned, something else is certain: that Gazans have, over a very long period indeed, had every chance to exchange their suffering for lives of peace, promise, and prosperity, if only they chose to let go of their "resentment" – i.e., Jew-hatred. But, raised from infancy to make Jew-hatred the very heart of their identity, they opted to stick with that.

Remnick didn't even bother to try to make an argument against Israel's military response to October 7. He simply asserted, as if it were self-evident, that bombing and invading Gaza would be an act of pure vengeance, "born of rage," the product not of a determination to protect Israeli citizens and territory but of a "primal" urge to "eradicate." And there was only one man, apparently, who could save the Holy Land from the "catastrophe" that would inevitably result from Israeli vengeance: namely, Joe Biden, who, insisted Remnick, needed to use all the power of his "statecraft" to enjoin Netanyahu "to act with strategic foresight and restraint." In Remnick's bizarre world, you see, Biden is a wise and seasoned master of world affairs – a veritable Bismarck – and Netanyahu a foolish, impetuous hothead.^[1]

So much for Remnick's first two post-October 7 pieces. But they were nothing compared to the 10,000-word ["Letter from Israel"](#) that ran on October 28 and that consisted largely of accounts of Remnick's recent encounters with various Israelis and Gazans. For example, he recounted an exchange of text

messages with a young Gazan friend of his, the poet Mosab Abu Toha. I looked up Toha: he studied poetry at Syracuse, has been a “visiting poet” at Harvard, and was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist for his poems about – what else? – Palestinian suffering at the hands of the Jewish state. On October 14, the *New York Times* ran a predictably disgusting [piece](#) by Toha that came as close as humanly possible to defending Hamas’s butchery. “I wish,” he wrote, “the West...would think seriously about what led to such actions on the part of Palestinians led by Hamas.”

In his messages to Remnick, Toha raged about the number of Gazans reportedly killed in the alleged Israeli bombing of a Gaza hospital. What was psychologically revealing was that although Hamas’s story of the bombing was already being debunked, Toha refused to stop believing in it. The idea that hundreds of Gazans, including children, *hadn’t* actually been killed in a hospital was of no comfort to him. On the contrary, he *wanted*, on some level at least, for all those Gazans to have been killed, because the very idea fueled the anti-Jewish hate that is his very lifeblood. Not that Remnick read it that way. No, for Remnick Toha’s refusal to accept that hospital story was a lie provided the perfect occasion to make this remarkable pronouncement: “There were, of course, facts—many of them unknown—but the narratives came first, all infused with histories and counter-histories, grievances and fifty varieties of fury, all rushing in at the speed of social media. People were going to believe what they needed to believe.”

It’s a fascinating passage – especially given that Remnick himself is one of the leading shapers of today’s progressive narrative. To be sure, Remnick doesn’t ever say that that’s what he’s up to. He professes to be an objective journalist, a presenter of facts. But when you’re writing about October 7 and its aftermath, there’s no way to pretend that the facts – the almost inconceivably terrible facts – are anything other

than what they are. And so, in order to give leftist *New Yorker* subscribers an excuse to turn their heads away from those facts, at least a little bit, you've got to focus not on trying to establish those facts to the best of your ability but, rather, on pretending to ponder, at some profound level, the *Rashomon*-like reality of competing perspectives, the inescapability of the subjective, the inevitability of the "fog of war," the ultimate unknowability of, well, pretty much everything.

Putting the facts on the back burner, then, Remnick devoted his October 28 piece mainly to interviews in which Israelis and Palestinians offer their own, highly subjective takes. How, given this approach, to deal with the IDF's now-famous video of Hamas atrocities, which provided a solid ninety minutes or so of evidence of Hamas's barbarism? Here's what Remnick did. He described in detail the room to which he and other journalists were summoned to view the IDF's video: "There were three bowls of snacks—peanuts, walnuts, and sugar cookies—and complimentary I.D.F. notebooks," and so on. He took us right up to the moment before the video started ("Shefler excused himself and left the room. Harel-Fisch turned out the lights"). And then he cut discreetly away. Yes, that's right. In his entire 10,000-word piece, Remnick told us absolutely *nothing* about what he saw in that video.

Instead we got his interlocutors – a curious group indeed. Avichai Brodutch, a farmer whose family was kidnapped by Hamas, said of the terrorists, "The world should know how cruel these people are." But he also, bizarrely, made excuses for them: "It was overkill by Hamas. I don't think they thought things would go that far. At least, I want to believe that. Their religion is peaceful. No religion can be successful for long if it is not peaceful." I won't criticize Brodutch, whose grief and fear may well have rendered him incapable of lucid thought on this subject. He may well also have been reluctant to badmouth Hamas in the *New Yorker*, lest

the kidnapers retaliate against his loved ones. Besides, Brodutch may be uninformed about the brutal wars of aggression that transformed Islam, over three centuries, from an obscure local power on the Arabian peninsula into an empire reaching from the Bay of Biscay to the Bay of Bengal. But Remnick is surely aware of Islam's savage history, and for him to pass on without comment Brodutch's ludicrous claim that Islam is "peaceful" is unforgivable.^[2]

Another Remnick interviewee was retired IDF general and leftist icon Yair Golan, who drew a moral equivalence between Nazis and Israelis. Based on what? A single incident "in which an I.D.F. sergeant was filmed shooting a Palestinian who had stabbed an Israeli soldier but had already been subdued and was prostrate." Then there was Roni Stahl Lupo, who was born in the Hamas-devastated Kfar Aza kibbutz and whose sister, Ziv Stahl, Remnick identified as "the executive director of Yesh Din (There Is Law), a human-rights group." In fact Yesh Din is one of those self-identified "human-rights groups" based in Israel – B'tselem and Jewish Voice for Peace are others – whose actual focus is on churning out preposterous pro-Palestinian PR. So perhaps it wasn't surprising that Lupo, while saying that she was "enraged at Hamas," also confessed to being "deeply anxious about the bombing of Gaza," because she couldn't bear the notion that someone in Gaza "will be killed because of me."

Remnick also spoke to Islamic scholar Sari Nusseibeh, whom he described as having served as "an informal adviser to Yasir Arafat" and as having "always been a distinctly moderate voice in Palestinian public life." Neat trick. This conversation took up much of an October 30 *New Yorker* podcast in which Nusseibeh replied to a question about October 7 by saying that "human nature is not all good" and that there are "radicals in every society," claimed that Muslims' "problems with Jews have nothing to do with them being Jews," and proffered a stunningly feeble excuse for a condemnation of Hamas's

atrocities: “This was definitely a crime, to go around killing people like that.”

Then there was the famously left-wing (and ardently anti-Netanyahu) Israeli novelist David Grossman, who in the past has called for dialogue with Hamas and accused Israel of conducting itself like “a band of pirates.” [Noting](#) in 2012 Grossman’s fatuous contention that “[i]t is Israel’s fears, not a nuclear Iran, that we must tame,” Giulio Meotti pondered whether “the international success of Grossman and other self-lacerating Israeli writers has more to do with their talent for Israel bashing than their literary gifts.” Bingo. But when he spoke to Remnick the other day, Grossman – obviously shaken by the events of October 7 – wasn’t in the mood for the usual Israel-bashing. He called those events “evil, pure evil,” and even admitted that if, after Israel’s 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, the Palestinians had started to build in Gaza using the financial support they were promised, if they had made Gaza a kind of test case on how to build a life again, if Gaza had become, if not the “Singapore of the Middle East,” then at least a place where life could be developed, the next withdrawal would have come quickly. Instead, they chose another path. There were thousands of missiles aimed at us from Gaza in the next two years. And now, after they have done this, you start to think, Well, if you have such a neighbor, you had better be well equipped and suspicious all the time.

I suppose Remnick deserves at least a modicum of credit for including Grossman’s comments in his article. But the article was still a vile piece of work. Remnick flew to Israel knowing full well what his job was. He knew that *The New Yorker’s* subscription list is full of the names of *bien pensant* secular leftists, many of them Jews, who, although shaken to the core of their being by the diabolic crimes of Hamas, are possessed of a worldview according to which Israel is an extension of the West, a tool of America, an imperialist power, and hence a force for evil in the world, while the Palestinians are ever-

suffering victims with whose cause any decent, civilized soul is compelled to stand. Consequently, although they experienced Hamas's actions as a profound challenge to their worldview, these readers were deeply uneasy with the idea of actually *changing* that worldview; no, this time they couldn't see Palestinians as victims, but they could, perhaps, be persuaded to intellectualize the whole terrible thing, to see it in shades of gray, to be able to speak convincingly, at the next dinner party, of the fog of war and moral ambiguities and the complexities of history and the messy muddle of Israeli domestic politics and Netanyahu's strategic failures. And, heaven bless him, that's what David Remnick gave them.

In his October 30 podcast, Remnick stated that he didn't want Israel to imitate America's big mistake after 9/11. And what, in his view, was that mistake? Answer: lashing out militarily at Iraq – an act that Remnick attributed to irrational rage. Yes, Iraq was a major misstep. But the American government's other big post-9/11 error, I would submit, was *refusing to face up to the dark reality of Islam*. As a result, even today, tens of millions of Americans still don't grasp the real lessons of Islamic terrorism – and therefore responded to the atrocities of October 7 by marching in support of Hamas. And about that, David Remnick has absolutely nothing to say.

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Notes:

^[1] To use the word "statecraft" in the same sentence as the name of our staggeringly mediocre and at least semi-senile commander-in-chief was hilarious enough, but Remnick also took the opportunity to praise the Biden Administration for carrying off, in the case of Ukraine, "an enormously complex feat of high-stakes diplomacy and political skill." Just imagine what the Ukraine situation would look like now if Biden hadn't done such a magnificent job!

^[2] Incidentally, a Google search turned up a 2019 [article](#) in which Brodutch was quoted as being “optimistic” amid tensions between Gaza and Israel: “I wanted to live in the community of the kibbutz, and I knew that the tensions would cease one day, so I was not afraid...I have hope that one day I will be able to go to Gaza and have hummus there with some locals.”