

Thomas Friedman on Israel. Ignorant? Malicious? Hypocritical? All of the above?



by Lev Tsitrin

Even by the standards of the *New York Times*' op-eds on Israel, there is altogether too much hysterical frothing at the mouth in Thomas Friedman's recent "[*Netanyahu Is Shattering Israeli Society*](#)." What got him so worked up? To be sure, in his columns Mr. Friedman always yells "gevalt" (the Yiddish word for an ultimate calamity, in case you don't know) – but this time around his lamentations are truly heart-rending. In his inexpressible grief at the imminent self-destruction of Israel, Mr. Friedman verbally (and perhaps literally, though I

did not watch him as he set his words on paper) rent his clothes, put on sackcloth, and strew his head with ashes – the reenactment of lamentations of Jeremiah on the pages of the *New York Times* that was truly touching to read. Alas! “Israel today is a boiler with way, way too much steam building up inside, and the bolts are about to fly off in all directions.” “Israel has never experienced a Palestinian intifada, a Jewish settler intifada and an Israeli citizen judicial intifada all at once,” he continues to wail in his dirge.

But before we join Mr. Friedman in crying our hearts out, let’s take a deep breath and consider what he says more closely.

As is usual with Mr. Friedman’s political analysis, his assignment of blame for the situation is a little odd – more than a little odd, in fact. The Palestinians, needless to say, are presented as innocent, blameless victims merely responding to Israeli injustice. “Lethal attacks by Palestinian youths against Israelis are coinciding with an expansion of Israeli settlements and the torching of Palestinian villages by settlers ... On Sunday, a Palestinian gunman killed two Israeli Jews near Nablus to avenge the deaths of 11 Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli forces in Nablus a few days earlier. Settlers then set fire to and vandalized at least 200 buildings in four Palestinian villages in the area where the shooting happened” is how he interprets the murder of two young men by a Palestinian gunman that triggered the rampage in the killer’s village. That “11 Palestinians [who died] at the hands of the Israeli forces in Nablus” engaged in a firefight with Israeli troops who arrived to arrest three terrorists wanted for prior murder of an Israeli is too minor a detail for a profound thinker like Mr. Friedman, who only considers the big picture worth looking at.

Yet even Mr. Friedman, perched as he is far above the struggle, should admit that the term “coinciding” does not describe events that happened at a different time, one

preceding and triggering the other. As a general rule, Mr. Friedman tries hard to evade causality, but we know that it is there – and so do the Israelis. Yes, people “taking the law in their own hands” which Netanyahu himself decried, is reprehensible – but it would not have happened without a terrorist crime that preceded it. So no, there is no combination of “Palestinian intifada [and], a Jewish settler intifada.” There is, as always, Palestinian terrorism rooted in Palestinian intransigence – but what else is new, Mr. Friedman?

This lowers the volume of Mr. Friedman’s “gevalt” by two thirds. What remains unaddressed so far is “Israeli citizen judicial intifada.”

It is indeed a serious internal problem, given that “some 160,000 Israelis came out in the streets of Tel Aviv on Saturday night to oppose Netanyahu’s judicial takeover,” which is how Mr. Friedman mischaracterizes the proposed reform of Israeli judiciary. (Mr. Friedman also calls it “Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s judicial power grab.” And to deepen the drama of the moment, he misquotes Netanyahu as “telling his cabinet ministers, ‘I want to give you a fist to strike them’ – the protesters,” pretending that Netanyahu was talking of the people, not of their faulty argument.)

And those protesters’ “argument” against the reform – that Israel would become a dictatorship if Israeli judiciary is bound by due process, rather than is able to judge arbitrarily based on a nebulous, judge-defined concept of “reasonableness” that takes into account judges’ gut feelings rather than the wording of the law – is faulty indeed. The protesting Israelis have no clue of what they are talking about – but seem to loath the reform for no reason other than that it is spearheaded by Netanyahu’s government.

Yet to think of it, it was the Netanyahu haters who triggered the crisis by despising the law – rather than being concerned

for it. One recalls that way back when, in the Trump days, Israelis had an election after an election, Netanyahu's Likud getting the majority, and was seemingly able to form a stable coalition with the parties whose platforms were not incompatible but – they all refused to sit in coalition because Netanyahu had been indicted for a bunch of crimes (or what in Israel passes for crimes).

Was that refusal to participate in government based on any law? Not at all – it was based merely on loathing of Netanyahu, and if anything, it was against the law. Like all civilized countries, Israel has presumption of innocence. Until proven guilty, Netanyahu was innocent according to law – so who was violating the law – Netanyahu, or those who refused to join Netanyahu-lead coalition because he was indicted? Of course, the latter – because contrary to law, they presumed him guilty rather than innocent.

So why be surprised that Netanyahu formed a coalition with those who would join him – or that he favors the judicial reform, for that matter? Whose fault is it that Netanyahu's is a “far-right” government, as Mr. Friedman put it? Is it that of the much-despised by Mr. Friedman Smotrich and Ben-Gvir who wrung concessions out Netanyahu in exchange for their agreement to join his government – or of the likes of Ganz, Lapid, and Lieberman who refused to join it – even though they had no legal basis whatsoever for doing so, but were motivated by mere anti-Netanyahu spite?

Bottom line – those who gather in huge crowds on the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem clamoring for preservation of Israeli “democracy” and of the “rule of law” are themselves unwitting obstacles to both. They are being cynically used by the leaders of the opposition for whom, at the moment, the nobly-sounding appeal for law is a convenient stepping stone towards toppling Netanyahu, or at least entrenching their own power – and nothing else.

And the very same hate of Netanyahu – and what he stands for – is what motivated Mr. Friedman’s seemingly soul-rending op-ed in the *New York Times*. Needless to say, Mr. Friedman does not care about justice – if he did, he would have written a column or two about the state of American justice. If in Israel judges use the notion of “reasonableness” to decide cases arbitrarily, here in the US judges use the self-given (in *Pierson v Ray*) right to act from the bench “maliciously and corruptly” to do the same. But neither Mr. Friedman, nor the *New York Times* give a hoot. Yet they tear their hair in their despair that Israelis may put their judiciary in its proper place.

The *New York Times* and Mr. Friedman have strange priorities indeed. Perhaps the word “hypocrisy” describes them best.

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