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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, April 8

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April 8, 2019

Ha'aretz

Netanyahu Warns Right Could Lose Election

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu invited Likud ministers for an emergency meeting in his residence on Monday, urging them to do more to ensure the party has the upper hand in Tuesday's election. "It's not clear at all that we have 61" Knesset seats to form a governing coalition, Netanyahu told ministers, despite positive signs in recent polls. In meetings with settler leaders on Sunday, the prime minister claimed his regime is in danger and tried to dissuade them from supporting other right-wing parties, especially Moshe Feiglin's Zehut.

Times of Israel

Gantz: Annexation Pledge 'Irresponsible' Bid for Votes

Blue White Party Leader Benny Gantz on Sunday condemned Netanyahu's controversial pledge to extend Israeli sovereignty to West Bank settlements, calling it an "irresponsible" bid for votes. Netanyahu said Saturday he planned to apply sovereignty over West Bank settlements. "Why not ask how it is that for 13 years Netanyahu could have annexed and didn't?" asked Gantz. Gantz added that he opposed "unilateral" moves but supports "a regionally and globally backed peace agreement while maintaining our basic principles."

Associated Press

PA: Israel Will Have Real Problem if it Annexes West Bank

Netanyahu will face a "real problem" if he follows through with his annexation promise, the Palestinian foreign minister said Sunday. Riad Malki said that Palestinians would "resist" such a policy if carried out. "If Netanyahu wants to declare Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank, then you know he has to face a real problem, the presence of 4.5 million Palestinians, what to do with them," Malki said. "We will stay there," he said. "The international community has to deal with us."

Times of Israel

Israel Advances Largest Batch of Settlements Since 2017

Israel's Civil Administration's High Planning Subcommittee has advanced plans for over 3,600 West Bank homes. Nearly 1,200 of the homes advanced will be located well beyond the Green Line in isolated settlements such as Shilo, Elon Moreh, Rehelim, Mitzpe Jericho and Nokdim. Also advanced through the deposit stage was a plan for 720 homes in the central West Bank town of Haresha, a move that retroactively legalizes the outpost of roughly 50 families.

Times of Israel

How Pro-Pot Feiglin Has Won over Voters on Left and Right

Feiglin, a radical right-wing activist who served as Likud Knesset member from 2013-15, has languished on the fringes of Israeli politics for over two decades. The self-declared ultra-nationalist has finally found mainstream popularity with his new Zehut party — and, to the surprise of booksellers across the country, with its manifesto, which now sits prominently on their shelves, if it's not sold out. With the pro-cannabis Green Leaf party not running in elections for the first time in 20 years, legalization advocates have gradually turned en masse to Feiglin.

Washington Post

Arab Israeli Candidates Launch Last-Ditch Campaign

MK Ayman Odeh and other Arab Israeli candidates hit the campaign trail hard this week, working against concerns that participation among Israel's minority Arab population will slip. If Arab Israelis come out in force, they have the potential to block a right-wing coalition and prevent smaller right-wing parties from passing the threshold. But frustration is high: The joint list has split, crime and poverty riddle Arab Israeli communities, and some say they've seen few results from their elected representatives. Meanwhile, a law that many Arabs complain codifies their status as second-class citizens has bolstered calls for a boycott.

Times of Israel

Oman FM: Arabs Must Assure Israel it is Not Under Threat

Oman's foreign minister urged Arab countries on Saturday to reassure Israel that it is not under threat in the Middle East, drawing a rare public rebuke from his Jordanian counterpart. Oman's Yusuf bin Alawi and Jordan's Ayman Safadi shared the stage at a regional gathering of the World Economic Forum, held on Jordan's shores of the Dead Sea. "I beg to differ on a number of issues," said Safadi. "The problem is with Israel doing what's right for peace."

Times of Israel

G7 Says Clear Differences on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Foreign ministers from G-7 countries had "clear differences" during discussions on the Israeli-Palestinian situation, the group said in a joint statement. The final communique from the G7 came after a two-day meeting in Brittany, France. While the ministers' statement didn't outline their disagreements, it said that they "remain united in our belief that this conflict has gone on for too long." The foreign ministers called for a resumption of talks between the two sides and asked for an end to incitement and violence. They also said the humanitarian and security situation in the Gaza Strip needed "addressing."

No Hasty Annexation

By the Editorial Board

- Campaign promises are legendary and notorious. For politicians, it is the coin of the realm in every election: Vote for me, and I'll make your life better; vote for me, and I'll take care of your biggest concerns. Except that not every campaign promise is the same. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announcement in a television interview Saturday night that he plans to annex settlements in the West Bank is not some candidate pledging to parents in Jerusalem that he will reduce payments for pre-kindergarten schooling. Such a broad campaign pledge as annexing West Bank territory is not a local matter but a clarion call with worldwide ramifications, demonstrated by newspapers around the world carrying the story.
- Netanyahu told news channels Saturday night that he had told US President Donald Trump he would not evacuate "a single person" from any of the settlements. "That [evacuation] will not be happening. If that's the [forthcoming peace] plan, there will be no plan." If reelected, Netanyahu told Ch. 12: "I will not uproot a single settlement. I will ensure that we will continue to rule over the territory west of the Jordan River."
- Netanyahu has expressed similar sentiments before, but now he was giving it a new twist: "Now you are asking an interesting question. Will we continue onto the next phase? The answer is yes. We will continue onto the next phase: the application of sovereignty. "I am going to apply Israeli sovereignty, but I don't distinguish between settlement blocs and isolated settlements. From my perspective, each of those settlement points is Israeli. We have a responsibility [to them] as the government of Israel. I don't uproot any, and I won't transfer them to the sovereignty of the Palestinians. I take care of them all." This was news, and reason enough for world media to cover the story. As The Jerusalem Post's Tovah Lazaroff pointed out, Netanyahu broke a diplomatic taboo, being the first time since he took office in 2009 that he used the word "sovereignty" when speaking of Judea and Samaria.
- If nothing else, this was the ultimate campaign promise. If politicians will say anything to get reelected, then this annexation announcement is the card Netanyahu kept for the last minute, aimed squarely at right-wing voters whose support Netanyahu is seeking to ensure a fifth term. Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked took credit for the abrupt announcement, saying it was because she and New Right co-party leader Naftali Bennett "changed the discourse. It's a great achievement for us that he speaks like that. I believe the declaration is a product of the upcoming elections and the pressure we exerted on him in the past."
- Netanyahu's new declaration might work for election results, but at what cost? Some analysts say such a move would be irresponsible, and disastrous for Israel's security, economy and diplomacy. The Arab Balad Party issued a statement following Netanyahu's pronouncement, saying: "The war crimes committed by Netanyahu and his government are causing irreversible

damage to the entire region, and we'll oppose and struggle against the annexation, and demand they respect the UN resolutions to dismantle all the settlements.”

- Netanyahu has a history of making last-minute campaign pledges that, once elected, he retracts. Whether Netanyahu actually applies sovereignty in the next government depends on who will be his coalition partners, and how much push-back he receives from the Trump administration. It is more than likely that the right-wing parties with which he forms a coalition would demand West Bank sovereignty as a condition for joining that coalition. Annexing territory is a major issue that has vexed Israeli citizens and governments for 52 years: What to do with all the land captured in the Six Day War? Decisions and answers to that question should not be made on the fly during an election campaign, especially three days before elections. These are serious matters that require national debate and discourse. Let's decide together, as a country, on such an important step.

Whatever Happened to the Israeli Left?

By Abraham Riesman, Columnist

- Barreling down a barely existent road in the South Hebron Hills, as I sit in the passenger seat of Nasser Nawaja's well-worn Dacia Duster, the conversation turns to the fate of the Holy Land. "Do you have more or less hope now than you did ten years ago?" I ask Nawaja, a veteran Palestinian activist from this rural stretch of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. A pause. A laugh. "Little bit less hope," he admits. "Ten years ago, more hope. Ten years ago, I see a lot of Israeli active. But now?" At a loss for English words, he jumps into Hebrew to make himself clear — his first tongue is Arabic, but he shares the Jewish state's official language with his other passenger, an Israeli Jewish 30-something named Avner Gvanyahu. The latter is one of the perhaps-crazy few still carrying out the work of the Israeli anti-occupation left. He is a former combat soldier who says he served in this very spot during the bloody early-aughts Palestinian-Israeli clash known as the Second Intifada. He now works for a much-demonized activist organization of repentant Israeli ex-combatants called Breaking the Silence, and that group brought him into the orbit of Nawaja, who documents and appeals against military demolitions of legally disputed rural Palestinian communities.
- After Nawaja laments in Hebrew, Gvanyahu speaks, and it's unclear where the translation of his friend ends and his own thoughts begin: "I mean, what happened after the Second Intifada was that, on the one hand, there was a moment of breakdown for this kumbaya peace," he says. "Meeting, eating hummus, getting to know each other in hotels — that broke down." The Second Intifada — a clash that lasted from 2000 to 2005 and consisted of asymmetrical warfare from the Palestinians and military might from the Israelis — was unleashed after a left-leaning Israeli administration's failure to secure peace, and thus played a key part in discrediting dovishness. "But," Gvanyahu says, "alongside that, there was a core of Israeli activists that realized, this is our moment to stand with our Palestinian friends." However, even though Gvanyahu cites a few small, hard-won victories in recent years, it's clear that he's aware of the dearth of progress on the foundational question of Israel, the one that peppers the air you breathe while discussing this oft-vilified nation-state: how to resolve the hatreds between Israeli Jews and indigenous Arabs.
- On April 9, the remarkably blatant inequality of the political status quo will be once again on display. Israeli citizens will swarm the polls for a pivotal national election that will determine the makeup of their Parliament and, as a result, who will be their prime minister. Meanwhile, 5 million-odd Palestinians who are directly or indirectly governed by Israeli military law will get no opportunity to select the people who make the ultimate decisions about their lives, deaths, status, and future. More than 5 million Jews dwell between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, forming a majority alongside a Palestinian minority within Israel's U.N.-recognized borders — but who are now also forming a growing and politically ascendant

minority in the Palestinian-dense West Bank, which Israel occupies and allows (in some cases encourages) Jewish settling of, in defiance of international law.

- Jewish settlers of the West Bank can vote in Israeli elections, but Palestinians there cannot, nor can those of the blockaded Gaza Strip, another Palestinian territory Israel first captured during a 1967 war. The roughly 1.6 million Palestinians in the territory of Israel proper can vote, but live with well-documented legal inequality. In American politics, this state of affairs is inevitably discussed when the country comes up. As the recent fracas over Congresswoman Ilhan Omar's criticisms of pro-Israel lobbying demonstrated, the policy agenda of the Israeli government is a specter that howls ever louder while it haunts the Jewish state's superpower patron.
- And yet, surreally enough, the Palestinian Question has been all but unuttered in the tiny nation's election season. The race has been brutal, dirty, and largely focused on voters' personal feelings about the Likud Party's Benjamin Netanyahu, the allegedly corrupt prime minister who has been in power for the last decade. But neither he nor the political novice leading the charge against him, retired general Benny Gantz, is willing to even entertain following through on Israel's occasional promise to permit the West Bank and Gaza to form an independent Palestinian state. Gantz is characterizing himself and his cobbled-together party, Blue and White, as ideologically centrist and thus slightly to the left of the hard-right Netanyahu coalition, which has increasingly pushed for West Bank settlements, ethnic division, and religious orthodoxy.
- The two men are a nanometer away from one another in the polls, and while Netanyahu runs ads suggesting a Gantz victory would end Netanyahu's ten-odd years of forcefully repressing Palestinian violence, Gantz boasts of how he bombed sections of Gaza "back to the Stone Age." Leading Netanyahu allies openly speak of formally annexing parts of the West Bank, a proposal that once was beyond the pale in mainstream discourse. A viciously racist political party whose leaders have called for the expulsion of Palestinian citizens of Israel deemed disloyal has been offered provisional membership in a Netanyahu coalition. Meanwhile, "leftist" has become a potent slur applied even to centrists like Gantz and his party mate Yair Lapid, and the failures of past stabs at peace have led progressive candidates to shove their anti-occupation messages to the side. In other words, I'm unsurprised by the answers Nawaja and Gvaryahu deliver when I ask them whether they think things might change if Gantz beats Netanyahu. "Both no change anything," Nawaja bluntly intones, then slips into Hebrew. Gvaryahu picks up: "I'll translate and then I'll also say that I agree," he tells me. "Nasser says that, when it comes to this issue, there isn't right or left or center. Everyone is right."
- It certainly looks that way from the vantage point of many American Jews. Though polling data suggests that most Jewish people in the United States still feel attached to Israel in one way or another, criticism of the country from within the U.S. Jewish community has reached unprecedented levels. Today's Israel is one that has largely embraced Donald Trump, a man whom American Jewry voted against at a rate of roughly 80 percent and who many of them believe is himself an anti-Semite. Horror about recent state violence against Gazans has

spurred the growth in stature of stridently anti-occupation Jewish groups like IfNotNow, Jewish Voice for Peace, and the Jewish Solidarity Caucus. American universities — which Jews are disproportionately likely to attend — are hotbeds of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement that seeks to ensure Palestinian rights through international ostracization of Israel and its inhabitants. As this younger generation enters the spotlight, we stand at the verge of one of the greatest schisms in the millennia-long history of the Jewish people.

- Which brings us back to the flabby Diasporan in the passenger seat. I am the sort of Jew that the present Israeli government has more or less written off. I make no secret of my lefty leanings. My religious practice isn't orthodox. I have no family in Israel or the West Bank and have no intention of becoming an Israeli myself (despite the fact that Israeli law would make that wildly easy for me, given my blood). To add insult to injury, I'm a journalist — a job that Netanyahu regularly attacks with Trumpian bile. And yet, like many an American Yid before me, I've become obsessed with Israel. In recent years, I've started making regular trips to the region that American leftists increasingly refer to as "Israel/Palestine" — a descriptive but provocative term that arguably concedes some legitimacy to the Palestinian-solidarity activists who refuse to recognize Israel. Given my social circles, I always feel somewhat queasy about going. I'm aware that there are those in the BDS camp who might see me as a reactionary for even setting foot in Israel, which they often portray as a rogue ethnostate that can only be changed through outside pressure and revolutionary change. Such people believe the left in Israel is at best a lost cause and at worst an active enabler of injustice.
- Their dispute is often not with individual Israeli policies so much as with Zionism, the hard-to-summarize ideology that advocates for Jewish self-determination and is the very basis of the Israeli state. Though such radicals may see the value in certain strains of non-statist, Arab-inclusive Zionism that existed before the establishment of Israel in 1948, they damn the mainstream Zionism of today as an ideology of Jewish supremacy and apartheid that must be overthrown. In the U.S., Zionism is a word that becomes increasingly radioactive the farther left you go on the spectrum. But in Israel, the average left-leaning individual — provided that they're Jewish — still identifies as Zionist. How could they not? To be otherwise, they feel, is to wish suicide for their own country. It is a bridge they cannot cross.
- I arrived on the eve of the elections with a mission: find out how the Israeli left is surviving, and see what the Palestinians they ostensibly want to help think of their efforts. I spoke to nearly 40 individuals who are struggling to move the status quo, particularly as it relates to Palestinians, in a more progressive direction. They were Jews and Arabs, people in Israel and people in the West Bank, folks who want one binational state and folks who want two separate states, Jerusalemites and Tel Avivians, Zionists and anti-Zionists, commentators and activists, immigrants and locals, lawyers and politicians, revolutionaries and gradualists, the religious and the secular — though I cannot claim to have a perfect cross section, I did my best to capture a broad swath of viewpoints and backgrounds. It was a cacophony of voices, many of them shouting down one another as much as, if not more than, their foes on the right. Precious few of them have concrete plans for fundamental change.

- What I found in the Israeli left was not a unified movement. Rather, it was a collection of individuals who are motivated less by optimism that things can change than by what you might call inertia or you might call moral compulsion. I was particularly fascinated by the Zionists among them, who see the way the global left is turning on them and bristle at being held responsible for the failings of the people in power against whom they rail. Above all else, those liberal Zionists are people who, however calm they may appear on the exterior, are panicked about what might happen were they to give up their progressivism or their patriotism. You can argue that they're complicit, that Zionism is bankrupt, that they had their chance and blew it. But it's hard to fight the feeling that far worse things lie ahead should they lose even one inch to their opponents on Israel's reactionary right.
- All of that said, I heard compelling arguments about why people should give up on the Israeli left. Take, for example, the words of Yara Hawari. She is a 30-year-old Palestinian academic, activist, and resident of Ramallah, the West Bank city that acts as the seat of the neutered and authoritarian Palestinian Authority (PA). She has little confidence that the Palestinian-led PA, which was established in the mid-1990s to bring limited autonomy for Palestinians in certain occupied population centers, can bring about national liberation. But she is even less confident that the opposition in Israel proper, however much it may oppose reactionary Netanyahu-ism, can further her cause. Indeed, she thinks it's probably best if the prime minister emerges victorious on the 9th.
- "Benny Gantz is more dangerous than Netanyahu," Hawari shouts to me over the din inside a hipster restaurant in Ramallah. "Look, the thing with Netanyahu is that everything is very obvious and up-front. I think the problem with Benny Gantz is that a lot of internationals in the international community are now beginning to ostracize Netanyahu because of his ugly alliances in Europe and around the world" — she's referring to the PM's recent, ostentatious moves to ally himself with illiberal strongmen like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro — "but if they have Benny Gantz as prime minister, who maybe wasn't so keen on these alliances or thought that it was more strategic to have the E.U. and the Western European countries on-side, I think that's more dangerous. I would rather Israel was very honest and allied itself with the fascist states around the world — because it is a fascist state — than have it put on this façade of liberalism. I think that's the most dangerous thing for Palestinians."
- Hawari may fear a Gantzian normalization, but she scoffs at the idea that those to the candidate's left within mainstream Israeli political circles can — or even sincerely want to — allow the Palestinians to achieve national self-determination. "No Israeli government is going to deliver a Palestinian state," she says. "I don't think a center Israeli government or a left-wing government — although I struggle with calling anything in Israel 'left wing' — I don't think they would ever deliver that." Instead, what little hope she has comes from watching the growth of BDS in lefty circles outside Israel and the resulting rise in the belief that Israeli policy cannot be changed from within.

- She is not alone in this view. “The Israeli left is nonexistent,” West Bank Palestinian author and activist Tareq Baconi tells me in a café during a torrential Ramallah downpour. “I cannot see what kind of reality could change that, or what kind of event would change that reality. There could be something that I don’t foresee, but unless something major happens, I don’t see how the Israeli political Establishment in the system can viably produce a Palestinian state or has any interest in producing a Palestinian state. What I think will happen is that we will have differences of how the occupation is managed.” “I think the real game-changer is what happens abroad,” says Amjad Iraqi, a writer, activist, and Palestinian citizen of Israel, over cups of water on a hot day in the coastal, ethnically mixed Israeli city of Haifa. “At the moment, the only real resistance is coming from outside, the only resistance that the Israeli political leadership is really taking into account.”
- To be sure, BDS promoters have seized the attention of the Israeli political Establishment and its backers in America. Indeed, the movement is perhaps their primary *bête noire* these days. Members of pro-BDS organizations have been barred from entering the Jewish state. The speeches at last month’s annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference were littered with BDS denunciations. Israel advocates regularly raise money in the name of combating BDS. An entire new wing of the Israeli government, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, has devoted itself to attacking BDS efforts around the world. Even left-wing Israeli politicians decry BDS on the grounds that it delegitimizes Israel and undermines the belief that the country has a right to exist as Jewish state. But no matter: Most of the Palestinians I spoke to didn’t much care what Israeli progressives had to say, anyway.
- Even Nawaja is unafraid to throw Israeli colleagues like Gvanyahu slightly under the bus. When I ask Nawaja whether he thinks change will come from inside or outside, he replies, “More from outside,” before slipping into Hebrew that Gvanyahu translates thusly: “He says that the solution has to come from both sides, but he thinks more from the outside. Because if Israelis will have to think twice before going abroad or if there will be pressure from the world, then Nasser thinks that could make Israelis think about this reality.”
- This is the basis of the increasingly repeated argument in American leftist discourse that Israeli progressives are too comfortable with the oppression of Palestinians and that, even worse, their progressivism is making that oppression palatable — that Israeli lefties’ talk and small victories on matters of human rights allow the international community to sleep soundly without demanding the outright demolition of unjust sociopolitical structures. However, there is already a hard core of domestic Israeli radicals who don’t need reminding about the injustice and actually support making their home country a pariah. For them, they live in a nation gone wrong. “Jewish supremacy is the only organizer or unifier of the Jewish society in Israel today,” says Orly Noy, an Iranian-Jewish writer, translator, and politician from the ostracized pro-Palestinian party Balad, over cigarettes outside a Jerusalem café. “That is the only thing. Nothing else. We are divided in every single parameter that you can think of except for this. I mean, 99.9 percent of the Jews in Israel deeply believe in the concept of Jewish supremacy. They won’t always define

it in such a term. You believe inherently, without questioning it, that we should have extra national rights in this land. Of course, it is our” — that is, she and her small cadre of allies — “political obligation to continue speaking with the Jewish society in Israel. That’s the political and the moral thing to do. But I don’t have any hope that the change will come through the Jewish society itself.”

- Noy balks on the question of whether or not she’d like to see a “two-state solution” (the creation of a separate Palestinian state in some combination of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem) or a “one-state solution” (a single, Palestinian-majority state comprised of all the territories that Israel now exists in or controls). However, she emphasizes that Israeli Jews are already a minority in the lands of their extended sovereignty and sees catastrophe on the horizon if that is not reckoned with. “I do want to see a Jewish national existence here that will be sustainable,” she tells me. “And we are so blinded by the power now that Jews don’t even ... It’s such a hypothetical question that it doesn’t even exist. But it will be very relevant pretty soon. We need to start thinking about these questions.” Few in the mainstream Israeli Jewish left are doing so, at least openly. But on the fringe, there are other Cassandras. Inside a sparse gallery space tucked away in a run-down section of Tel Aviv, I share an hour of conversation with Debby Farber, an Israeli Jew who works for an organization called Zochrot — Hebrew for “remembering.” The group is dedicated to, as Farber puts it, “de-Zionization of our identity” through art and education, with a particular focus on spreading the word about Zionist discourse’s third rail: the Nakba.
- The noun, meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic, is used by Palestinians and their advocates to describe the 1947-8 exodus of roughly 750,000 Palestinians from the territory that became Israel during the war in which the country was born. Israel’s defenders (and the textbooks read by the country’s children) often claim that the traumatic mass migration was chosen by Palestinians and therefore not the Zionists’ fault, but there’s a long-growing consensus among historians that the refugees were largely expelled by systematic Zionist force and threat. Public debate of the matter is nearly impossible within Israel, due both to social taboo and, since 2011, to a law that strips groups of public funding if they commemorate the Nakba. It’s no mystery why: If the refugees and their multitudinous descendants were allowed to return to Israel proper, as has been called for since a 1948 U.N. resolution to that effect, Jews would be demographically overwhelmed, making it impossible for the state to remain both Jewish and truly democratic. The very idea is a mortal threat. Though the Nakba’s original players are dead or dying, Palestinians mark it every year on the anniversary of Israel’s declaration of independence and its memory still threatens the foundations of the state.
- Zochrot is a tiny organization that does not rely on Israeli government funding and defies convention by openly discussing the Nakba in art exhibitions, lesson plans, tours, and an app that maps out where obliterated Palestinian communities used to be. It is perhaps a credit to Israel’s free speech, however circumscribed, that Zochrot is allowed to exist for now. But Farber readily admits that her work puts her at odds with her own family and that it’s a constant uphill struggle to gain any traction with Jewish Israelis. “In many terms, we are anti-Zionist; we are

saying that the Zionist movement was a settler-colonial movement,” she tells me. “Those liberals, leftists that you are talking about” — among Israeli Jews, that is — “are many times ... Even though they consider themselves progressive, they are still not ready. It’s difficult for them to face what Zionism did.”

- Stav Shaffir gives me the usual line, though I can’t really blame her. “When I think about Zionism, I think about our community being Israel — not only the only country in the world where the Jewish people can be a free nation in our own land, but also the place that is supposed to be a light,” she tells me over cappuccinos at a Tel Aviv restaurant, a silent assistant and a documentary film crew at her side. Someone’s shooting Shaffir for a doc about powerful women around the globe. But it’s unclear just how powerful she actually is. Shaffir is a smart, charismatic, 33-year-old Parliament member for the erstwhile-socialist Labor Party, a political camp that dominated Israeli politics — for better and very often for worse — from the pre-state days until the election of the first conservative Parliament and PM in 1977. Labor and its predecessor party, MAPAI, committed their fair share of now-regretted acts in their day, from placing Palestinian citizens of Israel under military rule to systematically abusing dark-skinned “Mizrahi” Jews from Arab and Muslim lands — not to mention helping to birth the Jewish settlement enterprise in occupied Palestinian territory. Now, in a grim summary of the present situation, Labor has been struggling to even make it into double-digit percentages in the polls, and they’re not even that leftist on much anymore.
- Nevertheless, Shaffir is the closest thing Labor has to a superstar. A former journalist who knows how to give a good quote in Hebrew or English, she first rose to prominence as a fresh-faced leader of 2011’s so-called Social Protests. The autumnal rallies were a *cri de coeur* against unjust economic factors for Israelis, but they famously avoided talking about the Palestinian Question, partly due to fear of alienating an Israeli Jewish public that had grown weary of the matter. She is now a member of the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, and despite her lack of a stridently pro-Palestinian message, she’s been receiving death threats, allegedly from anti-Palestinian racists. Their content is a reminder of just how derided even the center-left is right now: “I will kill you, burn you, you bitch,” and “An electric shock to your leftist brain would help,” read two of the missives. However, Shaffir is cheery when we meet, and she provides me with perfect examples of the verbiage that liberal Zionists from Pittsburgh to Petah Tikva employ when they talk about what Zionism means to them. “Zionism is hope,” she says with believable passion. “Zionism is making impossible things happen, like making Israel happen.” She condemns Netanyahu’s bigoted fear-mongering about Palestinians, but so too does she condemn pro-BDS leftists abroad: “When it comes to being truly progressive, it’s not about supporting BDS,” she tells me. “Being truly progressive is recognizing the right of Israel to exist, as well, and seeing the complexity of the conflict. Understanding that we need to have both sides happy with the solution and not only one side of the picture.”
- A couple of days later, I speak to Tamar Zandberg, a politician who stands to Shaffir’s left as head of the Meretz (“Vigor”) Party, in her spartan Tel Aviv office. She, too, aims for the stars when I ask what Zionism means to her: “We believe that, in 2019, that means ensuring our

sustainability in a democracy for all,” Zandberg says in her calming alto. “Peace. That means ending the occupation, a two-state solution, and a Palestinian state next to Israel. Pushing back on trends trying to divide us, to narrow democracy, to divide Jews and Arabs. To fight conservative trends, like chauvinism.” There was a time when this self-conception of liberal Zionism was prominent in the Israel conversation, especially among American Jews. There was a belief that the socialist values of the kibbutz and the generosity of the Jewish spirit were Israel’s foundation stones. In the days before social media, the Palestinian cause’s message was easier to miss. And if there had to be occasional violence and discrimination, well, these generations of Jews had living memory of the Holocaust and/or the threat of Israel’s annihilation in multiple wars — they could forgive a little rule-breaking in the name of saving millions of lives. Though they’d admit faults in their own side, liberal Zionists increasingly blamed the right wing for betraying the Zionist revolution after the 1977 conservative electoral victory. Liberal Zionists have become, in their own way, a conservative group insofar as their most vocal advocates spend a considerable amount of time urging the country to go back to its perceived roots of liberation and justice.

- This does not mean liberal Zionists are blind. One of the things you find when you spend time with the smartest of them is how open-eyed they can be about the skeletons in their ideological basement. During my trip, one liberal Zionist took me to a pair of radical Palestinian bookstores in East Jerusalem and recommended a bunch of anti-Zionist tomes about Israeli crimes. One of the most accomplished American liberal Zionists I’ve ever met has regaled me with stories about empathetic personal meetings with Palestinian leader and violent svengali Yasser Arafat. I went to a screening of a documentary about the early Israeli government’s horrific mistreatment of Mizrahi Jews; afterward, during a Q&A with the lefty producer of the film, he told us he was fully aware of how awful Israel has been in the past, then threw up his arms and said, “But don’t get me wrong: I’m a Zionist.” At the end of the day, in spite of everything, they’d all prefer a world with some kind of Israel in it rather than one with none at all.
- This bifurcated — some might say oxymoronic — desire to both defend Israel and instill it with progressive values alienates detractors on the left and the right. Liberal Zionism’s champions are people who, for the most part, are fully aware of how desperately hard it is to move the Israeli agenda in a leftward direction right now, especially on the Palestinian Question. “Occupation, for Israel, is ...” begins Ran Cohen, founder of an activist collective called the Democratic Bloc, speaking in a sparse conference room in Tel Aviv. “For most Israelis, it’s boring. It’s boring! It’s old news. They’re not aware of what’s going on. They are tired of hearing about settlements. The attempt to connect the occupation with poverty, or with issues of economical issues and so on, succeeded in a very minor way, as I see it. We need to reinvent ourselves and the discourse.” Nevertheless, Cohen still dreams of a future where Jewishness and democracy go hand in hand: “The Jewish nation is not afraid of a long wait,” he says with a smile. “I don’t want to give up.”
- Of course, the leftist counterargument here is that Cohen’s ability to wait is a luxury while, say, the nearly 2 million blockaded Gazans just a few miles south seethe in an open-air prison that is

predicted to become unlivable by the end of next year. The nonstop moral crises mean gradualism loses a significant amount of its appeal in discussions of the region. Plus, there's the question of what, exactly, liberal Zionism's beloved two-state solution could even look like. It would be tremendously difficult and politically costly to order a mass evacuation of any parts of the West Bank. What's more, Israeli Jews understandably lose sleep over the idea of a Palestinian state that could arm itself against Israel. They see how Israel pulled its troops and settlements out of the interior of Gaza in 2005 and was eventually faced with a government there controlled by the militant Islamist party Hamas (though that story is much more complicated than it may seem), which has repeatedly fired rockets into Israel. They think such things could happen in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, too. Historically, even when Israeli governments have made overtures about allowing the creation of a Palestinian state, they usually come with enormous caveats like full demilitarization of that new state, territorial carve-ups that allow Jewish settlements to remain in seas of Palestinian territory, and a permanent Israeli military presence on the theoretical country's border with Jordan. And yet, even that sort of "state-minus," as Netanyahu has memorably called it, is too much for many of today's Israeli voters to feel safe with.

- On top of all that, there's the fact that the Palestinians are divided between Hamas in Gaza and the late Arafat's Fatah movement in the West Bank, meaning there's no credibly unified Palestinian entity to do business with. With the expansion of the Israeli settlement project, we've entered a de facto and wholly unequal one-state reality for the time being. The status quo has made it increasingly standard among international lefties to declare the two-state solution dead. They are joined in this by right-wing expansionists. The debate among those two extremes is simply about whether the single state should be democratic or definitionally Jewish — i.e. whether Palestinians there should be granted the vote and other political rights. A plurality of Israeli citizens still want a two-state solution, but polls show a majority of them grimly conceding that such a deal isn't viable right now.
- It is against this backdrop that we must ask: What on earth can Israel's Zionist lefties accomplish? I posed this question to every one of them that I met and was struck by a subtle philosophical bifurcation that has bedeviled Zionism since at least the establishment of Israel: the difference between individual rights and national rights. The former are things like free movement, legal redress, and freedom from physical abuse; the latter include self-determination for identity populations and peace between said populations. Most of the left-leaning Zionist activists I spoke to were excited to talk about the ways they are pushing for individual rights, be they for people of Israel or those of the West Bank and Gaza. I spoke to human-rights lawyers and NGO workers who tout their accomplishments in saving and changing the lives of individuals and families. They think they can keep that up in the future. Trouble is, you can make the argument that the pursuit of individual rights is merely a way to make the deprivation of national rights for Palestinians in the occupied territories tolerable enough that it can persist. This is where those accusations of making the system palatable come in. Even when the Zionist lefties I spoke to were polite, it was clear that they truly hate being lectured by outsiders about whether their work perpetuates occupation and repression. I sit in the Tel Aviv offices of the

U.S.-based “pro-Israel, pro-peace” organization J Street and watch as a gathering of Israeli lefties from various allied organizations grows increasingly incensed over the stigma attached to their work by international leftists.

- “I meet three or four times a week [with] groups for the U.S. or Canada or Australia, and the second question they ask is about pinkwashing,” says Chen Arieli, chairwoman of the Israeli LGBTQ task force known as the Aguda. “Pinkwashing” is a pejorative term referring to the accusation that the Israeli government and groups like the Aguda present Israel as LGBTQ-friendly in order to distract from the oppression of Palestinians. “I’m so annoyed by it because ... I’m pinkwashing? I’m pinkwashing? I’m volunteering for 15 years in my arena and promoting civil rights. I’m answering those phone calls at 2 a.m. trying to find a Palestinian asylum seeker that’s running from Ramallah because his father beat him up because he’s gay. It’s illegal for me to help him and I can go to jail, but I help him. To blame the activist in the left and the civil society for pinkwashing is like peeing on the wrong tree. Sorry.”
- Then Liat Schlesinger, executive director of lefty think tank Molad, pipes up. “I think the worst thing is not taking our analysis,” she says. “This is a bit patronizing. What makes you think that you understand Israeli politics better than the forces in Israel?” She has no patience for foreign leftists who call for a single, binational state: “Then Israelis and Palestinians will kill each other, and there will be a religious fight between them. We can look like Syria or Bosnia. It’s not attracting.” Then Udi Volkov, an activist and former adviser to erstwhile peace negotiator Tzipi Livni, chimes in. “It’s this high and mighty, ‘You’re not doing enough for the occupation, you’re not doing enough,’ especially from young American Jews,” he says. “I get it! I completely get it.” He accepts that such Jews will often back BDS and have little faith in — or even knowledge of — his efforts. He just wants empathy: “I ask them to understand me a bit better.”
- A few days later, I sit outdoors at a Jaffa café at sunset with Raluca Ganea, executive director and co-founder of the community-action and anti-occupation group Zazim. I present her with the stance of international leftists who have given up on their Israeli counterparts and the dream of the two-state solution. “It’s very privileged,” she says, throwing the terminology of modern social justice back at her imagined audience. “It’s very easy to stand in another country with another citizenship, being very safe where you are, and say, ‘You’re not worth my time.’ We don’t have your privilege. I can’t just leave everything and go live somewhere else because I don’t want to be part of this. This is the only place I have. I can only try to make it better and I really need your help.” That notion is what I can’t stop thinking about from the confines of my Brooklyn apartment as I recover from jet lag and grapple with what I heard in the Holy Land. As is true when it comes to virtually every big question about Israel, I’m presented with a series of deeply flawed options. Do I advocate ostracization of the country’s Zionist left as a way to, I don’t know, push them to try even harder to resolve the Palestinian Question? Or do I endorse these comrades in arms, even if I don’t know whether or not I share their core ideology when it comes to the Zionist project? I don’t feel I have strong standing to pass judgment, given that I don’t live in the region and will face no consequences for titanic changes there. I bristle when leftist individuals and

organizations say Israel/Palestine is simple. To that claim, I cannot help but say: morally simple, perhaps (perhaps); but simple to resolve? Are you high?

- I ultimately have to turn inward and ask what I, as a progressive, would hope for from the world if I were the one living in a pariah state (which is, of course, no longer a wholly abstract question). I fully recognize that what the United States does is often fundamentally immoral, both to individuals and whole nations. So, too, do I recognize, given the incomprehensible violence done to this territory's indigenous population, that there's a solid argument to be made that my own government is illegitimate. But my country exists, and if the system is totally overthrown, I fear that the chaos that comes in its place may be even worse, including (perhaps especially) for vulnerable populations. I'm not prepared to stop trying to change things from within and I would hope that those abroad who share my values would have my back. I wouldn't blame them if they abandoned me, so I would only ask them to take a leap of faith and support my efforts. Who am I to deny the Israeli domestic opposition the same? I have to believe there's a midway point between BDS and blind loyalty; a position, however awkward, that calls for broad-based external pressure on the structures of Israeli power, especially as they relate to Palestinians, but allows for the support of domestic opposition, complicit though it may sometimes be. Maybe I'm wrong and no such position exists. But I cannot bring myself to feel another way right now.
- April 9 will not be a good day for the Jews and Palestinians between the river and the sea who want to see human rights flourish in the land they both call home. Perhaps Netanyahu will be unseated, perhaps not. Perhaps his unseating would be a good thing for the cause, perhaps not. I keep coming back to the words of a man hardly associated with the Middle East. As I wandered the streets of Tel Aviv on my final day there, I was surprised to find myself ruminating on Langston Hughes's 1935 poem about the compromised society to which I'd be flying in a few hours, "Let America Be America Again." Rolling Zionism around in my mind, I thought of Hughes's lines about how America's hypocritical slogans of liberty had been used in the service of destruction and oppression. And yet, he believed that those dreams, if reclaimed and actually lived up to, could still be put into the service of liberation: O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet— And yet must be—the land where every man is free. And:
O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath— America will be!
- So, too, is it with liberal Zionism in the Holy Land. For many people, Israel never was Israel. The dream has, in so many ways, been a nightmare. But as a Jew, I believe I am obligated to yearn for the messianic age, when all the world will be redeemed. That will mean the creation of a Land of Israel that uplifts rather than burdens. I look at liberal Zionism and am inspired by the rhetoric of balancing Jewish self-protection with human rights and democratic liberties. At the very least, I see how hard they are pushing to be the last line of defense against greater bigotry and deprivation of rights. I can only hope that Israel's liberal Zionism will somehow be repurposed, reimagined in a way that recognizes its predecessor's audacious achievements while abandoning its deficiencies. That true solidarity with Palestinian liberation can be found

among Israeli patriots. That thesis and antithesis will, in defiance of doubt, become synthesis.
That the Zion that never has been yet is the Zion that will be.