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The Strange Case of Dr. Netanyahu and Mr. Bibi

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The swearing-in ceremony of a new Israeli government is normally a celebratory occasion. After months of heated electioneering and arduous coalition-building negotiations, the freshly elected 120 Members of Knesset (MKs) gather in their pressed suits and shiny shoes to confirm a new government and wish it well. This is as it should be. The occasion is meant to be the epitome of “*mamlachtiyut*”—that untranslatable, uniquely Israeli notion of mildly dignified stateliness transcending cynical ambition and narrow partisanship in favor of national cohesion. The ceremony is intended to bestow popular legitimacy upon the new government, to assure the Israeli public that their representatives are there to serve them all, and perhaps even to revel in the miraculous existence of Israeli democracy itself.

But there was nothing *mamlachti* about the swearing-in ceremony of Israel's thirty-sixth government on June 13, 2021. To be sure, Israeli political culture is not for *faynsbmeckers* or shrinking violets. Anyone expecting Knesset proceedings to conform to the atmosphere of solemnity and boredom of a Scandinavian legislature is bound to experience some degree of culture shock. Good manners, however, are not what is at issue here, and it is vital to understand that what we witnessed at the Knesset on June 13 was not primarily about bad taste or the somewhat raucous style of Israeli politics.

In shouting down incoming Prime Minister Naftali Bennett—accusing him of being a “votes thief,” a “liar,” and a “scoundrel”—the witches orchestra of the soon-to-be opposition MKs doing the screaming did not only befoul what was meant to be a unifying, stately occasion. Nor did it merely silence Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid, who abandoned his planned message of unity and made do with a few short sentences of disgust and disbelief at the spectacle unfolding before him.

In reality, the June 13 Knesset horror show brought to a crescendo a deliberate, ongoing campaign led by the ousted premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, to cast doubt on the basic integrity of national elections in Israel and to delegitimize the new government. That campaign has been frothing for months. Back on the night of March 23, 2021, immediately following Israel's fourth national elections in two years, baseless allegations of election fraud were already being manufactured and actively promoted on social media by Netanyahu loyalists. In a clear wink and nod to the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, rumors that the Knesset Guard were preparing to fend off angry crowds of "cheated voters" abounded. On June 6, Netanyahu himself openly accused his political rivals of conducting "the greatest election fraud in the history of the country, in my opinion in the history of any democracy."¹ At the swearing-in ceremony itself, he charged that the new coalition was planning to pass "fascist" laws in the style of North Korea and Iran. Netanyahu repeated the claim of fraud the day after the ceremony, accusing the new government of being founded on "fraud, hate, and lust for power" and of endangering the security of the country.²

This is not the rough-and-tumble language of acceptable political discourse in a democracy. It is an assault on the most basic governing principles of the Israeli constitutional order, perpetrated by the man who, until June 13, was Israel's longest-serving leader and who, as MK, minister, and prime minister in successive Israeli governments, has repeatedly sworn solemn oaths to safeguard the State of Israel and its laws. Nothing like this has ever been done, or even attempted, in the seventy-three years of Israel's existence. It is, moreover, a premeditated assault undertaken by an exceptionally intelligent, self-possessed, calculating man with an acute sense of Jewish history and his place in it.

To be clear, by every international standard, the integrity of the electoral process in Israel is very high and has never been seriously questioned, let alone by the head of the government itself. Israel's world-class cyber capabilities also ensure that electoral integrity has been solidly preserved in the face of external efforts to disrupt or otherwise sully the democratic process. Moreover, as journalist Haviv Rettig Gur recently observed, the appointment of a prime minister from a relatively small political party in Israel is hardly unique among OECD democracies. In Belgium, the current premier, Alexander De Croo, leads a party with just twelve seats in the country's 150-seat parliament. Similarly, in Latvia, Prime Minister Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš heads the smallest out of the seven parties in that country's legislature.³ One can certainly question whether this is a desirable state of affairs and debate the merits of electoral reform in Israel. But there is absolutely no doubt that Israeli law, as it currently stands, permits the formation of a government in which the prime minister does not head the largest political party in the coalition. The notion that the new government has usurped power in "the greatest election fraud ... in the history of democracies" would be laughable if it weren't so pernicious.

How did Netanyahu come to this? In seeking to fathom the tragedy of “King Bibi,” and its implications for Israel, it is tempting to turn to Shakespeare. After all, as the late (and greatly missed) Harold Bloom famously argued, it was the Bard who invented human nature as we know it, and it was he who left us “an art so infinite that it contains us, and will go on enclosing those likely to come after us.”⁴ Even if we entirely forego the pleasures of flippancy (“to Bibi or not to Bibi ...”), there is much “Bibiology” that could be mined from sweet William’s canon. From King Lear’s cry, “I am a man more sinned against than sinning” to Shylock’s, “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” to Dick the Butcher’s call, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers,” to name but three examples, the possibilities are tantalizingly expansive.

But perhaps a more confined, and therefore more useful, literary analogy is to be found in Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In that classic gothic tale, the talented and accomplished Dr. Jekyll struggles to repress the all-too-human inclinations for abuse of power and self-harm that lurk inside him. In an attempt to master his evil inclination, Jekyll concocts a serum that he believes will effectively suppress his dark impulses. But over time (spoiler alert!) the good doctor is transformed into Mr. Hyde—the physical and mental manifestation of his own destructive personality—with disastrous consequences for himself and the society around him.

Stevenson’s Victorian meditation upon the duality of human nature is an imperfect analogy for twenty-first century Israeli psycho-political life, though it does serve as a useful literary device. The comparison helps stimulate some observations about the man who has dominated Israeli politics, and shaped Israeli society, for close to a fifth of the total duration of our state’s existence. It also invites us to consider the bipolar nature of our collective life under Netanyahu: the genuinely impressive economic, public health, security, and foreign policy accomplishments, alongside the deterioration of our political culture, rule of law, and governability in large parts of the country; deepening internal divisions and competing narratives of victimhood; a menacing atmosphere of mistrust; and growing dissatisfaction with our democracy.

Certainly, the personal and the collective are not synonymous. Yet in Netanyahu we find that rare historical figure whose private life and personality permanently altered the institutional DNA of the state he led. This intertwining of the personal with the institutional can be illustrated with two concrete and timely examples. The first pertains to the current debate about whether or not to impose term limits on future Israeli prime ministers. Normally, no such limitations are set in a parliamentary system. In fact, no existing parliamentary democracy imposes strict term limits on the position of prime minister. Yet the trauma of the last three years of Netanyahu’s hold on power has made such a far-reaching, constitutional change a matter of priority for the new government.

The second example is slightly more complex and much more ironic. In essence, it was Netanyahu's willingness to play fast and loose with the political rules that allowed for a new formula for coalition building to be established, paving the way for the current Bennett–Lapid government. Indeed, in a delicious twist of fate, the new government is an exact structural replica of the (then) unprecedented coalitional mish-mash concocted by Netanyahu and his (then) nemesis, Benny Gantz, to form an “emergency government” at the height of the Covid-19 crisis in April 2020.

In an attempt to lure Gantz into a unity government and break apart his Blue and White party (both of which he succeeded in doing), Netanyahu effectively created a new blueprint for government in Israel. This design involves a new *de facto* institution, the office of “alternate prime minister,” and the idea of a “parity government” controlled simultaneously by the two (alternate) prime ministers. Under this arrangement, not only do the two agree to rotate halfway through the term, but each has a veto on the government's agenda and each requires the other's consent to make any significant decision. Moreover, each (alternate) prime minister controls his or her “own ministers” so that the other (alternate) prime minister is unable to dismiss them.

That this novel and contorted arrangement came into being in the first place was due only to the fact that Gantz's deep mistrust of Netanyahu proved well founded. After splitting Blue and White and draining Gantz of much of his popular support, Netanyahu quickly dissolved the “emergency government” and took Israel to yet another round of elections. But the formula he created endured, and without it there would have been no viable template with which Lapid and Bennett could have formed the current coalition. The Netanyahu–Gantz precedent and its continuation under Bennett and Lapid point to a potentially major shift in the Israeli constitutional order. Will we now see the heads of political parties of six or seven seats managing to attain the premiership on a regular basis? Only time will tell. But the change bodes ill for large political parties and may contribute to the further disintegration of an already fragmented Israeli political landscape.

Ultimately, it was Netanyahu's own mendacious tendencies and proclivity for political shenanigans that precipitated his downfall and led to the Bennett–Lapid “transformational government.” Structural factors were actually mitigating in Netanyahu's favor, but he managed to entirely cancel the advantage they bestowed upon him through the sheer force of the Mr. Hyde side of his personality. Indeed, the Israeli electoral map has, for the past two decades, been moving steadily but decisively right into Netanyahu's comfort zone. All Dr. Netanyahu had to do was suppress Mr. Bibi, or at least not let him get out of hand. The doctor—blessed with good health, supranatural energy, a Rolls Royce brain, singular oratory skills, and unmatched political acumen—could have readily governed Israel for another decade.

But Mr. Bibi would not have it. Former protégé after former protégé (Ze'ev Elkin, Zvi Hauser, Yoav Hendel, Ayelet Shaked, and Bennett himself) and ally after ally (Avigdor Lieberman, Gideon Sa'ar, Benny Gantz) were treated to repeated acid baths of betrayal and personal humiliation, wounds that Mr. Bibi callously left to fester. In the end, Netanyahu simply exhausted his limited supply of credibility. He ran out of enough serious people who were prepared to work for or with him. United by a smoldering rancor at the indignities to which they had been subjected, enough of his erstwhile allies banded together—in spite of vast ideological differences and future electoral risks—to oust him from power.

The bipolarity of the Netanyahu era is now embedded in virtually every aspect of Israeli life. The last twelve years have seen Israeli GDP per capita rise from \$27,500 to \$44,000, yet the share of Israelis expressing faith in their democracy has plummeted. Asked in April 2019 whether they were optimistic about the future of Israeli democracy, approximately 55 percent of respondents in a survey conducted by the institution with which I am affiliated answered in the affirmative. By April 2021 that number had fallen to less than 40 percent. Asked whether they thought Israeli democracy was in great danger, in January 2017 only 46 percent of Israelis expressed the opinion that it was. By January 2021, 63 percent of Israelis believed their democracy was in great danger.⁵

BMWs, Audis, and Mercedes SUVs clog Israel's gridlocked roads, while our public transport system lags woefully behind those of countries with half of our GDP per capita. The Israeli public health system demonstrated outstanding state capacity in its record-breaking mass vaccination campaign against Covid-19 (partly due to Netanyahu's early bet on the Pfizer vaccine and "obsessive" telephoning to Pfizer's CEO, Albert Bourla). Yet in Arab towns and villages, in ultra-Orthodox cities and neighborhoods, in the Negev and parts of the Galilee, the state seems virtually absent and the police fear to tread. Israel has conducted spectacular intelligence operations in Iran, yet the Islamic Republic is closer now to reaching nuclear threshold status and an operational nuclear arsenal than at any point since Netanyahu came to power in February 2009. The groundbreaking Abraham Accords stand in contrast to the dramatic erosion of bipartisan support for Israel in the US Congress.

For years, Netanyahu has been the axis around which Israeli politics and society revolve, and may continue to be for some time. In this respect at least, to borrow from William Faulkner, the Netanyahu era is not dead; it is not even past. At the June 13 Knesset swearing-in ceremony, Netanyahu vowed to quickly topple the new Bennett–Lapid government and return to the helm. "We'll be back—soon," he said. The use of the plural form "we" raised some eyebrows. Was he referring to Dr. Netanyahu, Mr. Bibi, or both?

Notes

- ¹ Jeffrey Heller, "Netanyahu alleges Israeli election fraud, accuses rivals of duplicity," *Reuters*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israels-netanyahu-alleges-election-fraud-accuses-rival-duplicity-2021-06-06/>.
- ² Haviv Rettig Gur, "Netanyahu knows he's no victim of election fraud. So why peddle the claim?" *The Times of Israel*, June 18, 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-knows-hes-no-election-fraud-victim-so-why-is-he-peddling-the-claim/?fbclid=IwAR1ArprJrcKq86UV6POwnKscuQjR9qjgzJtitNRFtH3oCE1Iejuk_RImFow.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York, 1998), p. xix.
- ⁵ All of the above figures were collected by compound surveys at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy, and Strategy, and are on file with the author.