An Israeli twist on homophobia and racism

written by Yacov Ben Efrat | July 26, 2018

At the mass rally held by the LGBT movement at Rabin Square on July 22, 2018, protesters not only demanded to be accepted as different, but also called for full equality. They cried out against the injustice caused by a government that excludes homosexual men from having children through a surrogate mother.

LGBTs demands target the hearts and minds of Israeli society. They demand an egalitarian and democratic society when, in fact, their country favors the Jewish nation over the Arab nation, religious over secular. However, like the massive social protest of 2011, the protest opposes a discriminatory society while omitting to oppose the discriminatory state. The omission seems contrived, especially considering that the Surrogacy Law excluding gay men passed in the Knesset on the same night as two strongly nationalistic laws, one against "Breaking the Silence" and the other, called the Nation-State Law, prioritizing Jewishness over democracy. On one fateful night, the fundamentalist Right realized its darkest desires.

Not very long ago, I need hardly point out, those who murdered Jews because they were Jewish also murdered homosexuals, Gypsies, and the mentally challenged. Today, those who hate Arabs and expel refugees because of their skin color discriminate against homosexuals, even if they are Jews. The fact that the Surrogacy Law and the Nation-State Law were passed by the same number of votes is not coincidental. It conjures up a reality that endangers the future of Israeli society.

Prime Minister Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu had earlier promised to support surrogacy for homosexual men. Those who believe that in changing his mind he caved in before the pressure of the ultra-Orthodox, and that he prefers the governing coalition over his previous commitment, do not understand the world we live in. The people who stand behind these laws – as well as laws changing the face of the High Court, religionizing the army and the schools, applying Israeli law to the West Bank settlements, and preferring "Zionist" culture – are not the ultra-Orthodox. They are the Jewish Home and the Likud: Israeli fundamentalist parties that are closely connected to the populist Right in Europe and the United States.

It is no coincidence that Putin and Trump's "attention" to Netanyahu was evident in their Helsinki summit. Putin hates homosexuals, and Trump hates them even more. Both men lean toward dark nationalism mixed with xenophobia. They denigrate women and love adore brute force, and that is what they love about Bibi. He is the darling of the world's nationalist villains. He serves as a model for them, and they are the rising power. So why should Bibi consider the rights of homosexuals, Arabs, or immigrants?

An ethno-nationalist tsunami is sweeping the world – from India to Russia, from Europe to the United States. Nations are busy rewriting their histories. They prefer a "glorious" past to an uncertain future. Trump wants to make America great again. Putin emulates Ivan the Terrible. Austria, Hungary, and Poland are reinventing the past, and Netanyahu is laboring to redefine Israel. He wants to weaken the legal system, take over the treasonous media, destroy the old elites, and erase any chance of reconciliation with the Palestinians. The new Poland, on whose land three million Jews were killed, is updating its biography. With the exception of a few rotten apples, Poland "did not cooperate with the Nazis." Its ruling Nationalist Party passed its own version of a "Nation-State Law", which at first criminalized anyone accusing the Polish people of collaboration with the Nazis—and later, with Netanyahu's concurrence, softened this "offense" to a civil one.

Holocaust survivors and their descendants promised not to forget or forgive, but Netanyahu forgave Poland. Its new government deplores the independence of the Polish Supreme Court; it views the free press as a source of fake news, and it sees Netanyahu as an ally in its struggle against the common enemy – liberal Europe. In addition, Bibi and the Polish leaders are in lockstep with Putin and Trump, who have declared Germany a foe.

The Surrogacy Law, as well as the Nation-State Law, are not a result of coalition constraints or the competition between politicians about who is more right-wing. They reflect the strategic choice of the Israeli Right as a whole, which stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the international fascist camp. The European Union and German PM Angela Merkel are facing a broad and threatening coalition that includes the Putin-Trump axis, the British Brexits such as Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini of Italy, Viktor Orban of Hungary, Sebastian Kurz of Austria, and Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland.

The world as we have known it has changed beyond recognition. Globalization based on neoliberal economics has gone bust. The economic crisis of 2008 created a political vacuum that has ushered in ethno-nationalism, patriotism, exclusion, and white supremacy.

LGBT is not big enough to withstand the fascist onslaught that is sweeping the world. In order for LGBT to prevail, social movements excluded from the threatening new world order must join the struggle. One hundred thousand protesters would not have filled Rabin Square if the fight were just about gay men demanding the right to have children through surrogates. The square was filled with a general feeling that this government is leading Israel to a place whose agenda is dictated by national religious messianism, and that populism based on hatred of Arabs, immigrants, homosexuals, and women is making Israel an unbearable place.

Just as no one can fathom what Trump wants to achieve for the US and the world, few can understand where Netanyahu is going. When Minister Yuval Steinitz was asked about the fate of Gaza, he replied honestly, "Nobody knows." Netanyahu knows how to swim in murky political waters, he knows how to overcome coalition crises, he has proved his ability to win elections, but he hasn't the faintest idea what Israel will look like a decade from now.

The Nation-State Law proves that the Israeli Right has no vision. It builds walls of hatred and discrimination while trying to prevent the inevitable: the creation of a bi-national, diverse society in which Israelis and Palestinians live together, a society based on a shared economy, renewable energy, common infrastructure, and a regime that safeguards equality for all citizens regardless of religion, gender, race, or sexual orientation.

The importance of the LGBT demonstration in Tel Aviv stems from its political nature. The demand of gay men for equality raises the issue of equality for all. Those opposing discrimination based on sexual orientation cannot ignore discrimination based on religion and ethnicity. The struggle for LGBT rights is part of the fierce struggle between ethno-nationalism and global partnership,

between dictatorship and democracy, between liberalism and fascism, between democracy and occupation. It is, therefore, crucial to support the LGBT movement at a time when the world has lost its ethical compass.

– Translated from the Hebrew by Robert Goldman

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