Life of a Salesman

written by Joel Schalit | September 21, 2018

Marine Le Pen's partner had just left the country. A Jew of Algerian background, Louis Aliot had been dispatched to Israel to raise funds for the Front National (FN).

Money was tight for the populists in 2012, and they were fishing for cash everywhere. Even from North African Jewish expats, sympathetic to the Front's Islamophobia.

"Bibi's made a point of welcoming all manner of brownshirt," Elie Schalit, my father said, as we ate Sukkot dinner. "He's nostalgic for the old country."

The longtime security official, who continued to perform various diplomatic and military roles well into his retirement, knew Netanyahu well.

He not only had worked with him, periodically since the 1980s, when Bibi first joined the foreign ministry. Elie had also known his father, Benzion, in Palestine, during the Mandate.

"But why the FN?" I asked, sounding somewhat incredulous. "They're the most overtly anti-Semitic of Europe's right-wing parties. You'd think they'd push his Holocaust buttons."

"Because Bibi is imitating the affection his father, and his Irgun ilk, had for their former compatriots, the Poles, during the 1930s, who trained the IZL, to encourage the community to leave Poland."

Reading Anshel Pfeffer's description of Netanyahu's fidelity to his father's politics in Bibi (Basic Books, 2018), it was not hard to recall my father's harsh words.

Friend of the Palestinians. Tel Aviv, April 2018.

Contending that the Israeli premier's politics are a direct consequence of his father Benzion Netanyahu's influence, albeit via an American filter, the Haaretz reporter encapsulates what most members of Israel's political echelon has always known about Bibi and his family.

Benjamin Netanyahu is not so much an ideological innovator as a torch bearer, a salesman, for a lack of a better term, for his late father's extremist politics, with all of their contradictory connections: Jewish but fascist, who fled anti-Semitism but was enamoured by anti-Semites.

For anyone seeking to understand why Netanyahu's government would ultimately give Poland a free pass to prosecute critics of its complicity in the Nazi genocide, and invite overt anti-Semites like Viktor Orban to Israel, *Bibi*'s history of the Netanyahu family accurately explains why.

Pfeffer adds an interesting twist to what makes Zionism such a tragedy, to allude to Bernard Avishai's 1985 book. Its revisionist exponents allowed themselves to follow the murderous logic of 19th Century nationalism to its fullest extent, to the degree that they would identify with Jewry's own persecutors, far above and beyond the utility of repurposing their xenophobia.

It would take the colonial context of Jewish settlement thousands of miles away from Central Europe, in Arab Palestine, to allow them to do that. The noticeable absence, albeit invisibility, of Arabs, throughout most of *Bibi*, is largely a reflection of that.

For Benjamin Netanyahu the Palestinians, at their best, are a "diversion" according to Pfeffer – a fictitious people standing in for real Arab nation states such as Syria and Iraq, which, like Palestine, conveniently, did not exist as nation states until the first half of the twentieth century, largely as a consequence of Western imperialism.

All it took for the Likud chief to enshrine their otherness in Israeli politics were the political campaigning tools he learned during his formative years spent living in the United States, where Netanyahu stayed through his graduate studies at MIT.

A student of America's soundbite culture (he even worked with coaches), Israel's future prime minister learned to reiterate and link to maximum effect keywords such as "Arabs," "Islam," "terror" and "genocide" in his television appearances and books, first endearing himself to US media as a terrorism expert, eventually triumphing over a Shimon Peres-led Labour in the 1996 elections.

Bibi hearts Trump. Tel Aviv, May 2018.

Curiously, Pfeffer chooses to deemphasise Netanyahu's propagandistic savoir-faire when discussing the 1995 assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, which most Israeli analysts and historians agree paved the way for Bibi's victory over Peres.

Widely blamed for galvanising Israel's extreme right to murder, Pfeffer singles out Ariel Sharon instead, rather than Netanyahu's incitement of settlers, who were regularly calling for Rabin's head. His rhetoric at the time was still fierce and he, more than anyone else, stood most to benefit from any tragedy. Realpolitik or not, it's an unconvincing point.

Pfeffer's biography fully reflects the ethnic narcissism of Netanyahu's politics. Palestinians have no real role in it, except as distant, impersonal foes engaged in a protracted conflict, who at best could be awarded limited self-rule. They as might as well be in Europe, along with the racist, anti-Semitic forces that helped accelerate Jewish immigration.

Instead, they are primarily confined to Gaza, where, in Bibi's last fifty pages, Pfeffer recounts several Israeli campaigns in the territory – Summer Rains, Hot Winter, Cast Lead, Pillar of Defence and Protective Edge – into a little more than a single page, to demonstrate the premier's disinterest in getting into it with the Palestinians.

Only the latter operation, Protective Edge, gets any analysis, due to the fact that it was the most conventional, war-like conflict of Israel's sojourns into the Strip following 2005's Disengagement, in which Israel withdrew troops and settlers from the area. Though Pfeffer notes how many Palestinians were killed in the operation (over 2000), there is little analysis or commentary on what

impact Protective Edge had on Israeli politics in the years following.

The same criticism could be applied to the lack of his interrogation of the previous campaigns, too, all of which, particularly following the 2006 Lebanon War, were, in significant part, intended to restore the Israel Defence Force's deterrence following its failure to defeat Hezbollah. Without a doubt, the IDF's periodic 'mowing the lawn' forays into Gaza have their own domestic logic. But the last decades' campaigns have been particularly significant in building support for Netanyahu and his politics.

The Palestinians might not exist, but Israel's prime minister has nevertheless gone after the Arabs that matter to him, repeatedly interacting with regional counterparts for decades, both within and outside of Israel's borders, taking a particular interest in engaging the Saudis. But the absence of any substantive discussions of these interactions in the book helps reinforce Pfeffer's portrait of Netanyahu's ethnocentric isolation, inside a country that, within its pre-1967 borders, is over 20% Muslim.

For *Bibi*, this myopia is key to understanding the Likud chief's personality. It is part and parcel of his profound dislike of non-Jews and Jewish liberals, which he developed growing up in the United States and then put into practice in Israeli politics, as though they were essential to Jewishness and Israeli national identity.

The Netanyahu effect. Jerusalem, May 2018.

An extension of Zionist anti-Diaspora sentiment, Netanyahu's version, in Pfeffer's view, is especially hypocritical, because of his reliance on right-wing American Jewish patronage. Without the support of Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, and philanthropist Sheldon Adelson, where would Bibi be today? Their backing has been crucial to his success.

The key, *Bibi* seems to suggest, is in recognising Netanyahu's proclivity to contradiction. Repeatedly citing the premier for out and out lying (to the point of even negating major parts of his own books,) Pfeffer portrays Israel's sophist-in-chief as being someone who routinely adjusts the truth to his own episodic requirements. That, in part, is how he has always won tight elections.

The question is why someone so transparent could appeal to the hardscrabble communards that once defined Israel. Pfeffer doesn't provide any answers, but the hints are there. Aside from the obvious cultural appeal of the worldview inherited from his father, his stewardship of the pro-market Likud to the Startup Nation era of instant tech millionaires and low unemployment helps.

Perhaps, most tellingly, it is Netanyahu's attraction to the laissez-faire ideology of Ayn Rand, as a student in the United States, that grounds it. Rand's Jewish, albeit secular libertarianism, with its emphasis on rugged individualism, is a perfect metaphor for the isolated and lonely Israel of the present, forced to stake out and innovate not only economically but politically, as well.

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