On Amichai Magen’s “The Strange Case of Dr. Netanyahu and Mr. Bibi”

Sir,

Permit me to begin by revealing my own voting record. In the first three of the last five elections, I voted for Benjamin Netanyahu or rather the Likud party he headed; in the last two, I cast my ballot for parties led by his opponents. No, I’m not a “dirty leftist,” as so many other right-wing supporters characterize those who lost patience with Bibi and shifted their support elsewhere. Although my sympathies lie with the right, I eventually came to the conclusion that Netanyahu should be removed from office, because I felt that his overriding interest was no longer the good of the State of Israel but rather retaining his position as prime minister. That objective caused him to take actions that repeatedly harmed the country and its people. He stoked the flames of discord and even hatred between different camps, which resulted in a divisiveness akin to a white-hot blade gliding through soft flesh.

In the American political tradition, this situation was best expressed by Abraham Lincoln in the opening words of what became known as his “House Divided Speech,” in which he quoted from the Christian Gospels and declared, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Of course, Jews have an older tradition. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and the Babylonian Talmud teaches us that this calamity was punishment for the “baseless hatred” that led to Jew murdering Jew. Such hatred was fanned by Mr. Netanyahu and culminated in the shameful spectacle so brilliantly described and analyzed by Dr. Amichai Magen in his article “The Strange Case of Dr. Netanyahu and Mr. Bibi.”

As I read and reread the text, now for the third time, I realized that I could add nothing more to what was written. Any insight I could offer would pale in comparison to Dr. Magen’s penetrating analysis and would only detract from it. What I would like to add, however, are some words from the late Senator John McCain, from whom we in Israel have much to learn.
When Mr. McCain lost the American 2008 presidential race to then-Senator Barack Obama, his concession speech demonstrated the way in which an honorable man, who loves his country and views its democratic institutions as sacrosanct, concedes defeat. It stands in stark contrast to the angry words we heard from our outgoing prime minister after he had been bested at the polls. The following excerpt from McCain’s speech exemplifies the dignified route I wish all politicians in Israel who do not emerge victorious would take:

My friends, we have come to the end of a long journey. The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly. A little while ago, I had the honor of calling Senator Barack Obama to congratulate him on being elected the next president of the country that we both love.

In a contest as long and difficult as this campaign has been, his success alone commands my respect for his ability and perseverance. But that he managed to do so by inspiring the hopes of so many millions of Americans, who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president, is something I deeply admire and commend him for achieving … Senator Obama and I have had and argued our differences, and he has prevailed. No doubt many of those differences remain. These are difficult times for our country, and I pledge to him tonight to do all in my power to help him lead us through the many challenges we face.

I urge all Americans who supported me to join me in not just congratulating him but offering our next president our goodwill and earnest effort to find ways to come together, to find the necessary compromises, to bridge our differences and help restore our prosperity, defend our security in a dangerous world, and leave our children and grandchildren a stronger, better country than we inherited.

Whatever our differences, we are fellow Americans. And please believe me when I say no association has ever meant more to me than that.

It is natural tonight to feel some disappointment, but tomorrow we must move beyond it and work together to get our country moving again. We fought as hard as we could. And though we fell short, the failure is mine, not yours …

Tonight, more than any night, I hold in my heart nothing but love for this country and for all its citizens, whether they supported me or Sen. Obama. I wish Godspeed to the man who was my former opponent and will be my president.
And I call on all Americans, as I have often in this campaign, to not despair of our present difficulties but to believe always in the promise and greatness of America, because nothing is inevitable here . . .

This is how “Dr. Netanyahu” should have acted and spoken. That is the sort of speech he should have given. And that is what distinguishes a real mensch from a cynical politician.

Adv. Aaron Landgarten
Jerusalem

On Alfred Tovias’
“EU Foreign Policy on the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Reevaluation”

Sir,

Alfred Tovias’ analysis of the EU approach to the conflict is an important reminder of the complexities of this issue and coincides with the effort, led by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, of the post-Netanyahu government to improve relations with Brussels.

To succeed in doing so, it will be necessary to acknowledge and overcome the obstacles resulting from highly distorted images of Israeli and Palestinian realities. These were central to the many failed attempts by European policymakers to impose a false symmetry, combined with their blind determination to play a prominent role in promoting an elusive “peace process.”

Today’s policies are largely unchanged from those of the European Economic Community’s 1980 Venice Declaration, which was a response to the breakthrough peace treaty with Egypt (and in which the US was centrally involved). As Tovias notes, in distinguishing themselves from the US, the Europeans sought to transform the conflict “from a refugee issue to one of self-determination” for the Palestinians, led by Arafat and the PLO. Prime Minister Begin flatly rejected this attempt, and for many years, Europe was frozen out of political initiatives.

The 1995 Barcelona program and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), following the Oslo Accords, included a renewed attempt by the Europeans to compete with the US as a peace broker, primarily by pouring billions into Palestinian institutions. However, the Venice paradigm remained a core article of faith, including condescension toward Israel and the attempt to “combat asymmetry” by creating a Palestinian state that would, in the EU’s imagination, lead to peace.

Tovias also highlights the failure of European policymakers to perceive fundamental changes in Israeli society—particularly the trauma of “suicide bombings
in well-to-do urban populations [that] led to a quantum shift … No rational voter would push for a process that is perceived to lead to less security.” The absence of visible shifts on the Palestinian side as embodied in pre-1948 “return” myths, and Europe’s sponsorship of “facts on the ground” in the strategic portion of the West Bank known as Area C, will result in even sharper confrontation with Israel.

Another major point of contention, although not included in this article, is the EU’s unique embrace of and funding for a network of NGOs that use human rights and aid as soft-power weapons with which to weaken and demonize Israel—particularly through boycott and lawfare campaigns. Some of Europe’s core Palestinian NGO subcontractors and grantees have numerous and openly visible links to the PFLP organization, and seven were recently designated by the Israeli Ministry of Defense as terror fronts.

Tovias ends his analysis on a somewhat optimistic note, urging the EU to “adjust its policies to the new geo-economic and geopolitical realities on the ground.” If decision-makers, influential journalists, academics, and researchers in think-tanks follow this advice, they will open the door for cooperation instead of conflict.

Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg
President, Institute for NGO Research
Jerusalem

On Robert J. Lieber’s “Biden Foreign Policy: Sobered by Reality or Condemned to Repetition”

Sir,

Robert Lieber’s text on Biden’s Foreign Policy is a penetrating and comprehensive article. I would like to offer two comments. First, everything he wrote about Iran is made even more potent by the selection of Ebrahim Raisi as president, and the expansion in 2021 of both Iran’s nuclear weapons program and its aggressive conduct in the Gulf and Levant.

Second, something is slowly happening at the State Department that will be pernicious if it does not stop. Some foreign service officers quit under Trump. Fair enough; they are not obliged to serve a president they hate, though the civil service is supposed to be non-political. But now several have come back (or tried to come back) as political appointees, jumping the queue for good jobs. This behavior politicizes the Foreign Service. If a pattern emerges in which one serves as a very junior officer but then moves in and out when administrations change, we will have obliterated the difference between the Foreign Service
and the political in-and-outers like me. Those who want to strengthen a non-political, non-partisan, and highly professional diplomatic corps should resist such a trend.

Elliott Abrams
US Department of State, 1981–89, 2019–21
Washington, DC

Sir,

While I do not share the author’s disdain for “woke” or progressive tendencies in the current Biden administration, I echo his caution on positioning LGBT rights as a core element of American diplomacy, albeit for a different reason. While Prof. Lieber is wrong in identifying LGBT rights as trivial, or as conflicting with American interests as their promotion might hinder relations with human rights abusers, he is not wrong in pointing out that LGBT diplomacy ought to be rethought. America’s human rights stance is essential in setting the tone for the international community on human rights issues and is a core element of the moral standing of the United States in the world. Yet, I would like to make the progressive case for why American efforts to promote LGBT rights abroad can actually be counterproductive.

Queer scholars have long criticized the grouping of global queer identities within the Western liberal categorization of L-G-B-T. Needless to say, Western LGBT categories do not necessarily reflect all queer identities everywhere and inherent in them are many assumptions on what it means to be an LGBT person. There are numerous examples of non-Western queer identities such as *bakla* in the Philippines, *zongxing* in Taiwan, *mak nyabo* in Malaysia, *tongzhi* in China, and surely more who might be characterized as having a Western LGBT identity because of the fact that they are non-heteronormative, but sometimes for little more than that. What of their family relations? Place in the community? Religious identities? These potentially integral and culturally specific parts of their queer identities do not find expression within the LGBT categorization.

Therefore, the promotion of an America-centric view of LGBTQ rights risks erasing non-Western indigenous queer identities, with detrimental effects. Worse, it risks designating such queer identities as something foreign in the minds of the populace, as they are in fact conflated with the American conceptualization of LGBT.

The entangling of queer identities with an American foreign policy agenda is a dangerous business. When that policy is confrontational, queer people in other countries might bear the brunt of their compatriots’ anti-American sentiments.
This is not a theoretical risk. Scholars have pointed to an association between anti-Western and anti-queer sentiments in countries such as Jamaica, Uganda, the former Soviet Union, and China. Since the Arab Spring and color revolutions of the 2000s and 2010s, Chinese authorities have grown sensitive to seemingly innocuous Western diplomatic sponsorship of civil society organizations, including LGBT rights groups. This has led to no less than a purge of queer organizations in China over the last few years, and condemnation of LGBTQ people as agents of the West.

Contrary to Prof. Lieber, I believe that working toward a world that is safe for sexual and gender minorities is a core American interest, but I do question the use of the state’s diplomatic might as the appropriate tool. If the advancement of LGBT rights is to be a central goal of American foreign policy, it must be more carefully thought out and reflect its own limitations. America’s support for human rights should be unflinching and responsibly executed.

Tom Canning
London

On David Govrin’s “Yosef Govrin (1931–2021)”

Sir,

I was deeply saddened to hear the news of Yosef Govrin’s passing.

Knowing Ambassador Govrin was one the greatest privileges of my diplomatic career. He honored me with his friendship, and every encounter with him was a great experience and an opportunity to learn new things. Ambassador Govrin was an outstanding diplomat, a remarkable scholar, and a wonderful human being—wise, warm, and generous. He was a true mensch who will always have a special place in my heart.

Ambassador Edward Iosiper
Bucharest