

The Israeli Trumpess

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WHAT WILL DONALD Trump do if he loses the elections in a week and a half from now, as most polls indicate?

He has already declared that he will recognize the results—but only if he wins.

That sounds like a joke. But it is far from being a joke.

Trump has already announced that the election is rigged. The dead are voting (and all the dead vote for Hillary Clinton). The polling station committees are corrupt. The polling machines forge the results.

No, that is not a joke. Not at all.

THIS IS not a joke, because Trump represents tens of millions of Americans, who belong to the lower strata of the white population, which the white elite used to call “white trash”. In more polite language they are called “blue collar workers”, meaning manual workers, unlike the “white collar workers” who occupy the offices.

If the tens of millions of blue collar voters refuse to recognize the election results, American democracy will be in danger. The United States may become a banana republic, like some of its southern neighbors, which have never enjoyed a stable democracy.

This problem exists in all modern nation-states with a sizable national minority. The lowest strata of the ruling people hates the minority. Members of the minority push them out of the lower jobs. And more importantly: the lower strata of the ruling majority have nothing to be proud of except for their belonging to the ruling people.

The German unemployed voted for Adolf Hitler, who promoted them to the “Herrenvolk” (master people) and the Aryan race. They gave him power, and Germany was razed to the ground.

THE ONE and only Winston Churchill famously said that democracy is a bad system, but that all the other systems tried were worse.

As far as democracy is concerned, the United States was a model for the world. Already in its early days it attracted freedom-lovers everywhere. Almost 200 years ago, the French thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote a glowing report about the “Democratie en Amerique”.

My generation grew up in admiration of American democracy. We saw European democracy breaking down and sinking into the morass of fascism. We admired this

young America, which saved Europe in two world wars, out of sheer idealism. The democratic America vanquished German Nazism and Japanese militarism, and later Soviet Bolshevism.

Our childish attitude gave way to a more mature view. We learned about the genocide of the native Americans and about slavery. We saw how America is seized from time to time by an attack of craziness, such as the witch hunt of Salem and the era of Joe McCarthy, who discovered a Communist under every bed.

But we also saw Martin Luther King, we saw the first black President, and now we are probably about to see the first female President. All because of this miracle: American democracy.

And here come this man, Donald Trump, and tries to rip apart the delicate ties that bind American society together. He incites men against women, whites against blacks and hispanics, the rich against the destitute. He sows mutual hatred everywhere.

Perhaps the American people will get rid of this plague and send Trump back where he came from—television. Perhaps Trump will disappear like a bad dream, as did McCarthy and his spiritual forefathers.

Let's hope. But there is also the opposite possibility: that Trump will cause a disaster never seen before: the downfall of democracy, the destruction of national cohesion, the breaking up into a thousand splinters.

CAN THIS happen in Israel? Do we have an Israel a phenomenon that can be compared to the ascent of the American Trump? Is there an Israeli Trump?

Indeed, there is. But the Israeli Trump is a Trumpess. She is called Miri Regev.

She resembles the original Trump in many ways. She challenges the Tel Aviv “old elites” as Trump incites against Washington. She incites Jewish citizens against Arab citizens. Orientals of eastern descent against Ashkenazis of European descent. The uncultured against the cultured. The poor against all others. She tears apart the delicate ties of Israeli society.

She is not the only one of her kind, of course. But she overshadows all the others.

After the elections for the 20th Knesset, in March 2015, and the setting-up of the new government, Israel was over-

run by a band of far-right politicians, like a pack of hungry wolves. Men and women without charm, without dignity, possessed by a ravenous hunger for power, for conspicuousness at any price, people out for their own personal interest and for nothing else. They compete with each other in the hunt for headlines and provocative actions.

AT the starting line they were all equal—ambitious, unlikable, uninhibited. But gradually, Miri Regev overtakes all the others. All they can do, she can do better. For every headline grabbed by another, she can grab five. For every condemnation of another in the media, she gets ten.

Benjamin Netanyahu is a dwarf, but compared to this bunch he is a giant. In order to remain so, he appointed each of them to the job he or she is most unsuited for. Miri Regev, a rude, vulgar, primitive person became Minister of Culture and Sports.

Regev, 51, is a good-looking woman, daughter of immigrants from Morocco. She was born as Miri Siboni in Kiryat-Gat, a place for which I have deep feelings, because it was there that I was wounded in 1948. Then it was still an Arab village called Irak-al-Nabshiyeh, and my life was saved by four soldiers, one of whom was called Siboni (no connection).

For many years, Regev served in the army as a public relations officer, rising to the rank of Colonel. Seems that one day she decided to do public relations for herself, rather than for others.

Since her first day as Minister of Culture, she has supplied the media with a steady stream of scandals and provocations. Thus she gradually overtakes all her competitors in the Likud leadership. They just cannot compete with her energy and inventiveness.

She declared proudly that she sees her job as the elimination of all anti-Likud people from the cultural arena—after all, “that’s what the Likud was elected for.”

All over the world, governments subsidize cultural institutions and creative people, convinced that culture is a vital national asset. When Charles de Gaulle was the President of France, he was once approached by his police chiefs with the request to issue an arrest warrant for the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, because of his support for the Algerian freedom fighters. De Gaulle refused and said: “Sartre too is France!”

Well, Regev is no de Gaulle. She threatens to withdraw government subsidies from any institution that publicly opposes the policy of the right-wing government. She demanded the cancelation of the program of an Arab rapper who read from the works of Mahmoud Darwish, the adored national poet of the Arab citizens and of the entire Arab world. She demanded that all theaters and orchestras perform in the settlements in the occupied territories, if they want to keep their subsidies.

This week she won a resounding victory when Habima,

the “national theater”, agreed to perform in Kiryat-Arba, a nest of the most fanatical fascist settlers. Indeed, no day passes without news of some new exploit by Regev. Her colleagues explode with jealousy.

THE BASIS of Israeli Trumpism and of Miri Regev's career is the deep resentment of the Oriental—or Mizrahi—community. It is directed against the Ashkenazim, the Israelis of European descent. They are accused of treating the Orientals with disdain, calling them “the second Israel”.

Since those recruits of Moroccan descent saved my life near the birthplace of Miri Regev, I have written many words about the tragedy of Mizrahi immigration, a tragedy of which I was an eye-witness from the first moment. Many injustices were committed by the established Jewish population against the new immigrants, mostly without bad intentions. But the greatest sin of all is rarely mentioned.

Every community need a sense of pride, based on its past achievements. The pride was taken away from the Mizrahim, who arrived in the country after the 1948 war. They were treated as people devoid of culture, without a past, “cave-dwellers from the Atlas mountains”.

This attitude was a part of the contempt for Arab culture, a contempt deeply embedded in the Zionist movement. Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, the right-wing Zionist leader and forefather of the Likud party, wrote in his time an article entitled “The East”, in which he expressed his disdain for Oriental culture, Jewish and Arab alike, because of its religiosity and inability to separate between state and religion—a barrier to any human progress, according to him. This article is rarely mentioned nowadays.

The Oriental immigrants came to a country that was predominantly “secular”, non-religious and Western. It was also very anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. The new immigrants understood quickly that, in order to be accepted in Israeli society, they must get rid of their traditional-religious culture. They learned to distance themselves from everything Arab, such as their accent and their songs. Otherwise it would be difficult to become part of the country's new society.

Before the birth of Zionism—a very European movement—there was no enmity between Jews and Muslims. Quite the contrary. When the Jews were expeled from Catholic Spain, many centuries ago, only a minority immigrated to anti-Semitic, Christian Europe. The vast majority went to Muslim lands and was received with open arms all over the Ottoman Empire.

Before that, in Muslim Spain, the Jews achieved their crowning glory, the “Golden Age”. They were integrated in all spheres of society and government and spoke Arabic. Many of their men of letters wrote Arabic and were admired by Muslims as well as Jews. Maimonides, perhaps the greatest of Sephardic Jews, wrote Arabic and was the

personal physician of Saladin, the Muslim warrior who vanquished the Crusaders. The ancestors of these Crusaders had slaughtered Jew and Muslim alike when they conquered Jerusalem. Another great Mizrahi Jew, Saadia Gaon, translated the Torah into Arabic. And so on.

It would have been natural for Oriental Jews to take pride in this glorious past, as German Jews take pride in Heinrich Heine and French Jews in Marcel Proust. But the cultural climate in Israel compelled them to give up their heritage and pretend to admire solely the culture of the West. (Eastern singers were an exception—first as wedding performers and now as media stars. They became popular as “Mediterranean singers”.)

If Miri Regev were a cultured person, and not merely a Minister of Culture, she would have devoted her considerable energy to the revitalization of this culture and giving back pride to her community. But this does not really interest her. And there is another reason.

This Mizrahi culture is totally bound up with the Arab-Muslim culture. It cannot be mentioned without noticing the close relationship between the two for many centuries, during which Muslims and Jews worked together for the

advancement of mankind, long before the world heard of Shakespeare or Goethe.

I have always believed that restoring pride was the duty of a new generation of peace-lovers that will arise from among the Mizrahi society. Lately, men and women from this community have reached key positions in the peace camp. I have high hopes.

They will have to fight the present culture minister—a minister who has nothing in common with culture, and a Mizrahi woman who has no Mizrahi roots.

I HOPE for a Jewish-Mizrahi revival in this country because it can advance Israeli-Arab peace and because it can strengthen again the loosened ties between the different communities in our state.

As a non-religious person I prefer the Mizrahi religiosity, which has always been moderate and tolerant, to the fanatical Zionist-religious camp that is predominantly Ashkenazi. I have always preferred Rabbi Ovadia Josef to the Rabbis Kook, father and son. I prefer Arie Der'I to Naftali Bennett.

I detest Donald Trump and Trumpism. I dislike Miri Regev and her culture.