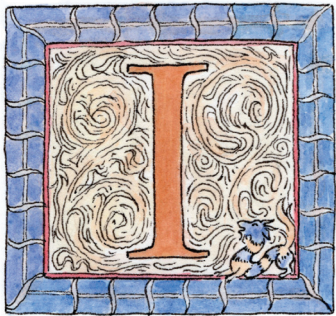


AMIR TIBON

Israel Is at Risk of Destroying Itself



IN SEPTEMBER 2014, immediately after that summer's war between Israel and Hamas, my wife and I moved from Tel Aviv to Kibbutz Nahal Oz, a small community situated on Israel's border with Gaza. Nahal Oz, home to approximately 400 people, was at the time officially the most bombarded locality in Israel. Our friends in Tel Aviv couldn't understand why we'd want to move there.

Eight years later, Nahal Oz is growing very quickly. Two dozen new families have moved here in recent years, many of them, like us, coming from the Tel Aviv area. The kibbutz has just finished constructing a new neighborhood, where we live alongside a wonderful group of friends and neighbors. On most days, when there aren't rockets flying, it's the best place in the world to raise a family: a tight-knit community surrounded by open fields, where neigh-

bors become real friends and educating one's children is the highest priority. When our friends from the big city come to visit on Saturdays, they no longer ask why we moved here. They ask how they can join.

During our years here, we have experienced some difficult moments. There were several rounds of fighting between Israel and Palestinian terror groups that forced us out of our home for entire days; there were sirens indicating an imminent threat that caught us with our two young daughters at the playground; there were fires started by Hamas that burned our fields and threatened our home. We love this place, but like thousands of Israelis living on the Gaza border, we sometimes pay a price for being here.



Politically, Nahal Oz tilts to the left: If our community had determined the results of Israel's election, Yair Lapid would still be prime minister. People here know the price of war, and we hope that one day, Israel will find a way to make peace.

After Israel's last election, in November 2022, something changed. Not just in my kibbutz, but in places like it all over the country — enclaves of liberal, secular Israel. Friends and neighbors who never had any doubt about calling this place home suddenly started discussing things that were once unthinkable: obtaining foreign passports for their children; moving money out of their Israeli bank accounts; preparing in different ways for the possibility of emigrating.

What thousands of Hamas rockets and mortars failed to do, Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right, ultra-religious government managed just weeks after it was sworn into power. The level of despair I now encounter in everyday conversations with friends who love this

country, served in the military, and contribute significantly to its economy is unprecedented.

It's not about the general political loss: Liberal Israelis have gotten used to living under right-wing governments, and I never encountered the fear and bitterness now on display after previous election losses. It's about the extremist nature of this specific Netanyahu-led coalition. In the past, Netanyahu, whether out of choice or necessity, always found himself leading coalitions that included, alongside his natural allies from the religious parties, at least one party from the center-Left. Ehud Barak, Tzipi Livni, Yair Lapid, Benny Gantz—the people leading the recent protests in the streets against Netanyahu—were all, at one point, partners in his different coalitions. This gave Israelis who didn't vote for him a sense that while they might not like the prime minister, they could live with him. No one ever talked about converting their savings to U.S. dollars and sending money out of the country.

Now, people aren't just talking about it—they're doing it. Perhaps not here, in my kibbutz, but certainly in Tel Aviv, Israel's liberal bastion and the city all liberal Israelis consider a second home. Just six weeks into Netanyahu's sixth term in office, several high-tech companies moved billions of dollars out of the country in response to his government's controversial judicial reform. The CEOs of Israel's largest banks privately warned the prime minister that this was part of a larger phenomenon, not restricted only to rich entrepreneurs but slowly spreading to upper-middle-class customers.

The extreme character of this government and the radical changes it seeks in the judicial system are just one part of the story. There is also a demographic issue. The growth of Israel's ultra-Orthodox population, which is largely dependent on government support, is becoming an existential challenge for Israel. Many ultra-Orthodox women and about half of the men are in the workforce, but few

have more than the most basic secular education; almost all are in low-paying, low-tax jobs, and very few work in high tech, the engine of Israel's modern economy. Many of the men continue to devote themselves to Talmud study, for better or worse preserving a model developed in Eastern Europe 200 years ago. A prosperous, modern economy cannot survive a demographic trend of this kind. Unfortunately, solving this challenge requires a government without the ultra-Orthodox parties, who wish to keep their constituents poor, uneducated in secular subjects, and disconnected from the modern world.

The previous government led by Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett—Israel's short-lived “government of change”—took some steps in the right direction. It wasn't a left-wing government: The most powerful people in it came from the center-Right. Nor was it a secular government: Bennett was Israel's first-ever religious prime minister. But it was a government without the ultra-Orthodox parties, and that was enough to create an opening for some badly needed reforms. Now, with Netanyahu relying on the ultra-Orthodox to hold on to power, Israel is moving in the opposite direction.



I'm not ready to give up on Israel yet, and neither are most of my friends and neighbors. Now is a time to fight back, not to retreat in despair. You will find us week after week in the streets, protesting this government's irresponsible actions. Not just in Tel Aviv, where the largest demonstrations are taking place, but in the Negev and in communities along the Gaza border as well.

People want their voices to be heard, and in this specific protest wave, we also need the voices of our brothers and sisters in the Jewish Diaspora. Netanyahu and his allies count on world Jewry

to support them in various ways, from philanthropic initiatives that replace governmental spending, to political advocacy and *hasbara* that maintain public support for Israel. Historically, world Jewry has obliged, and rightly so. Today's situation is different. If you want Israel to remain a strong, prosperous, and liberal country, don't hesitate and don't play by the old rules, because this government has thrown the rulebook out the window.

For now, we are still here. I wake up every morning in a community located less than a mile from Gaza and drop off my daughters at a bombproof kindergarten. At the same time, supporters of this government call me a traitor for writing critically of Netanyahu and highlighting his failures as prime minister. I can live with all that, and I don't even want to complain about it too much. But I fear for the future of this country under this leadership. It's not Hamas that will eventually destroy liberal Israel and force liberal Israelis to raise their children elsewhere. Only our own elected government can do that. *

AMIR TIBON is the U.S. news editor of *Haaretz*.