

# Shalom TV **OPINION**

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## WHEN THE DESIRE FOR PEACE CLOUDS REASON

*A Response to David Remnick's The New Yorker Critique of Israel*

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When one has proven to be a most accomplished thinker, journalist, and author, one has earned the right to be taken seriously when expressing opinions on complex social and political issues. And when the reader finds himself in agreement with a major thesis of that opinion, there is a tendency to abandon a critical eye with respect to the details of the argument.

Such is the case for many of us who support the two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when we initially read David Remnick's critique of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the recent issue of his *The New Yorker* magazine [March 21, 2011]. This makes it all the more important to question the presumptions Mr. Remnick relies upon that have shaped his opinion.



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There are two assumptions at the heart of Mr. Remnick's contention that Prime Minister Netanyahu bears primary responsibility for the failure of the two sides to reach an agreement and to thereby implement a two-state solution. One assumption is that Mr. Netanyahu is a prisoner to his father's extreme right-wing Revisionist views, which is why he refuses to do anything to facilitate the peace process. The second flawed premise is the expectation that were Mr. Netanyahu to act as Richard Nixon did when the American president transcended his own ideological past and the ideology of his political base and took the dramatic step of opening diplomatic relations with China, the Israeli prime minister could achieve similarly positive results.

As much as one might hope that Mr. Netanyahu will be the Israeli head of state who ends the occupation and brings peace to both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, it is important to question the accuracy of Mr. Remnick's two overarching hypotheses.

Has Mr. Netanyahu said or done anything to suggest that he is of a different mind from his father, the great historian and scholar, Benzion Netanyahu, who has consistently opposed any territorial compromise with the Palestinians? The Revisionist ideology of Vladimir Zev Jabotinsky was that "both sides of the Jordan" should be Jewish Israel, which includes all of biblical Judea and Samaria (popularly known as the "West Bank" of the Jordan River). Mr. Remnick echoes a psychological analysis of Mr. Netanyahu that has been offered before: that a factor at play in the prime minister's failure to implement a two-state solution is filial loyalty to his father.

In word, and more important, in deed, the facts simply do not support what Mr. Remnick acknowledges as his own armchair psychology. In word, Mr. Netanyahu's dramatic speech last June at Ben Gurion University, the prime minister abandoned traditional Likud ideology and formally endorsed the two-state solution. Then, despite his intellectual and strategic misgivings, Mr. Netanyahu agreed to implement President Obama's call to freeze all settlement growth (horizontal as well as vertical, including in communities which are generally recognized to be included in Israel in any two-state solution) for a nine-month period as a means of bringing Palestinian President Abbas back to the negotiating table.

Furthermore, Mr. Netanyahu implemented a policy of removing many of the checkpoints on the West Bank which Palestinians argued were both a form of humiliation and an obstacle to economic growth. Under Mr. Netanyahu's prime ministership, the Palestinian Authority has had the opportunity to develop its infrastructure and its economy which the International Monetary Fund says grew an impressive nine percent in just the first half of last year.

Finally, when President Abbas did agree in the ninth month of the settlement freeze period to enter peace negotiations, Mr. Netanyahu met with him in Washington and agreed to a joint pledge to meet on a biweekly basis--and without preconditions to work continuously toward a peace agreement. Even after Mr. Abbas refused to continue participating in peace talks, ostensibly because Israel refused to extend the settlement freeze, Mr. Netanyahu continues to reiterate that he will meet any time and in any place, including Ramallah or Jerusalem, to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Both in word and in deed, there is evidence that suggests Mr. Netanyahu has moved far beyond the ideology of his father.

With respect to Mr. Remnick's assertion that Mr. Netanyahu should learn from the political lesson of President Nixon, the analogy is seriously flawed. Mr. Nixon was motivated to transcend his traditional anti-Communist rhetoric by the fact that the US needed China both as a new economic trading partner and as a counter-balance to Russia in the Cold War. There was virtually no political or security risk in Mr. Nixon's actions.

The more important error in Remnick's analogy however, is that by opening diplomatic relations with China, Mr. Nixon did nothing to put the American people or the future of the United States at any risk. The worst that could have happened would have been for the Chinese to reject his diplomatic overtures, though it is not likely that the Nixon administration would have made the overtures public without knowing they would be successful beforehand.

Mr. Netanyahu is in no similar circumstance at all. Any Israeli prime minister must consider the consequences of a peace agreement and whether there is enough credible evidence that the peace partner has both the will and the strength to insure the peace. In his interview on CNN, conducted as Mr. Remnick's editorial was being published, Mr. Netanyahu reminded his viewing audience that recent Israeli concessions in southern Lebanon and in Gaza have led to renewed attacks on Israeli cities. He also pointed out that, in the absence of a consensus among Palestinian leaders, a significant Palestinian faction (Hamas) remains committed to Israel's destruction. In contrast to the relatively benign context of the Nixon initiative, there are potentially very serious consequences to both the Israeli people and the Israel state in any similar type of action Mr. Remnick would have Mr. Netanyahu make at this time.

This does not mean Mr. Netanyahu is abandoning the peace process. Again, he reiterated his willingness to lock himself in a room with Mr. Abbas until a peace solution acceptable to both sides is reached. But to suggest that Mr. Netanyahu is in a position vis-a-vis the Palestinians that is in any way similar to Mr. Nixon's in regard to the Chinese is to totally dismiss the historical realities confronting each world leader.

Mr. Remnick frankly acknowledges that he normally does not take such a forceful and one-sided position on such complicated international issues; but in this instance, he feels that the future of the State of Israel is threatened by world opinion that is increasingly isolating Israel because of the immorality of the occupation. In both *The New Yorker* piece, and in his own interview on CNN commenting on it, Mr. Remnick states that Israel must change its policy and make peace.

Virtually all Israelis want peace with the Palestinians. The vast majority of Jews throughout the world understand the benefits to Israel, and of course the Palestinians, were there peace between the two peoples. Mr. Netanyahu stressed the same in his appearance on CNN. But the Israeli prime minister articulated the rationale that drives any nation in conflict with an enemy: there must be a "real peace" which guarantees the nation's security and the future well being of its people. This is the only peace Israel must make and one may assume that Mr. Remnick understands that such a peace can never be unilateral.

It is also worth noting that in his CNN appearance, interviewer Piers Morgan suggested Mr. Netanyahu was missing an opportunity to make compromises like another earlier world leader, Anwar Sadat, and to thereby assure Mr. Netanyahu's legacy as the man who brought peace to the Middle East.

Again, the analogy cries out in historical error. As courageous a statesman as Anwar Sadat was, and though he paid the ultimate price for what he believed was in the best interests of his people, Mr. Sadat was not the one who made compromises. When Mr. Sadat realized he could not defeat Israel on the battlefield, he was willing to recognize Israel if Israel returned all of the Sinai including the airfields it had constructed and the oil fields it had discovered. Moreover Mr. Sadat insisted that the Sinai be *Judenrien*, so he required Israel to evacuate the beautiful Mediterranean community of Yamit where Menachem Begin had planned to retire after leaving public life.

In this diplomatic process, peace was the goal extended by both sides. It is a tautology to argue that making peace is a "compromise." The Egyptians actually gave nothing and made no compromises to achieve this end. The compromises were made by Israel.

But Mr. Sadat did make an historic and courageous gesture as an overture to peace: he came to Jerusalem and declared that Egypt was prepared to recognize Israel's right to exist and make peace with the State of Israel.

Again, there is no circumstance presenting itself to Mr. Netanyahu that is similar to the one placed before Menachem Begin in 1979. No Palestinian leader has offered to come to Jerusalem and declare that Israel has a right to exist and that his people will lay down their collective arms as part of a binding and lasting peace agreement. No Palestinian leader has invited Mr. Netanyahu to Ramallah with a hand open in friendship despite Mr. Netanyahu's public declaration that he stands ready to accept such an invitation. To draw a parallel of the dynamic between Mr. Sadat and Israel on the one hand with Mr. Netanyahu and the Palestinians on the other is to seriously misunderstand the history of the Middle East conflict.

There is an enormous yearning for peace among people of good will everywhere. It would be to both Israel's benefit and the Palestinian's benefit for the occupation to end and a Palestinian state to flourish in peace alongside Israel. In that respect, Mr. Remnick's transcending message is a vital one and needs to be stated repeatedly.

But to put the onus on Mr. Netanyahu, as Mr. Remnick did in his *The New Yorker* editorial, or as Mr. Morgan did in the CNN interview, seriously misdirects attention and works against the implementation of a peace process. As long as the Palestinians are led to think that world opinion is insisting that Israel must make peace, the negotiating process is undermined and encourages the Palestinians to believe that if they can avoid the peace table long enough the world will force Israel to accept compromises Israel would never make in an honest process of negotiation.

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