

The K.F. Stone Weekly



(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")

November 08, 2015

THE SUBTEXT

As I begin composing this essay, it is a little after two o'clock here in South Florida, and a little after nine P.M. in Jerusalem. In theory, Israeli P.M. Bibi Netanyahu should be hitting the hay in the next two or three hours. One wonders how well Bibi's going to



sleep tonight, considering that when he puts his head on the pillow, it's going to be next to impossible to stop thinking about tomorrow: the day he's going to fly Washington, D.C. and have what no doubt will be a pretty tense tête-à-tête with President Obama. For Bibi knows that beyond the mandatory handshakes and perfunctory smiles, there's going to be a subtext built on a foundation

of hard feelings, mutual personal coolness and political gamesmanship. Up until a couple of days ago, everyone knew pretty much what the purpose and subtext of the state visit was going to be: burying the hatchet over the Iran nuclear deal, getting past the president's pique over Netanyahu's unprecedented address to Congress, and moving on to a discussion about ways in which the U.S. can help Israel defend itself against intensifying threats on and around its borders. In tangible terms, Netanyahu's aim was to get U.S. military assistance for Israel upgraded from about \$3 billion per annum to \$5 billion. In other words, Netanyahu's task was to get past the bad feelings, bury the hatchet as best possible, and score a big boost in military assistance -- all without tarnishing his image among the most conservative, hawkish members of his government. A tall order, no doubt, but not one to lose a lot of sleep over.

And then came Dr. Ran Baratz and his big mouth, a new subtext, and the reason why Prime Minister Netanyahu likely won't be getting a good night's sleep.

For the uninitiated, four days ago, Bibi appointed Baratz, a former philosophy professor and founder of the conservative website [Mida](#) ("Indicator") his new "media advisor and head of the public diplomacy and media." Turns out Baratz - whose appointment must be approved by Netanyahu's cabinet - is a loose cannon prone to posting sneeringly insulting attacks on leading Israeli and American politicians. It turns out that Baratz has not only [made scathing remarks](#) about President Reuven Rivlin, deemed President Barack Obama a modern anti-Semite and compared Secretary of State John Kerry's mental age to that of a 12-year-old, but has [also criticized Netanyahu himself](#). When President Obama reacted negatively to Netanyahu's controversial March 3rd appearance in Congress seeking to thwart a nuclear pact with Iran, Baratz wrote, "*This is what modern anti-Antisemitism looks like.*" To Secretary of State John F. Kerry, he recommended a career as a stand-up comic after retiring, saying he has the "mental age" of 12. Then too, many Israelis were incensed over Baratz's derision of President Reuven Rivlin. After social media saluted the modest president for flying coach on a recent official visit to the Czech Republic, Baratz joked that it served to prove that Rivlin was a "minor figure" in no need of protection, a man whom even Islamic State militants would turn down as a hostage. Rivlin's office said it asked the prime minister's office for clarifications.



State Department spokesman John Kirby said Baratz's comments about Obama and Kerry were "troubling and offensive." "*We obviously expect government officials from any country, especially our closest allies, to speak respectfully and truthfully about senior U.S. government officials,*" he said, adding that Kerry had spoken with Netanyahu earlier in the day. "*We understand the prime minister will be reviewing this appointment when he returns from his visit to the United States,*" he said. "*Obviously name-calling and insults certainly aimed at individuals doesn't do anything to help advance and deepen the relationship. ... It's a rule you learn in kindergarten about name-calling, and it's simply not a polite thing to do.*"

The appointment was derided by commentators and questioned even by Netanyahu's allies. [Two Cabinet ministers](#) -- both from Netanyahu's *Likud* party - urged him to reconsider. Both Social Equality Minister Gila Gamliel and Minister of Welfare Haim Katz came out against the nomination. Gamliel said that Baratz's comments against Rivlin and Obama "*undermine the symbols of our government and those of our greatest ally, and may be misconstrued as an official stance*" In a piece she wrote for the daily *Yediot Ahronot*, Israeli screen writer and satirist Mika Almog stated, "*This is the man the prime*

minister chose to be my mouthpiece, all of our mouthpieces, to talk to the world in our names. This man, with his words dripping with poison, his mouth is our mouth now."

Talk about going to bed with a dark cloud hanging over your head.

Increasingly, people whose political positions or pronouncements are found to be anathema to others are tarred with the brush of opprobrium; terms like "Nazi," "Third Reich," "anti-Semite" "fascist" and "racist" are splattered about, leaving permanent stains on both the innocent and the questionable. Once stained or labeled, all conversation, all communication comes to an abrupt halt. Why, we asked ourselves, would anyone in their right mind ever engage in dialogue with someone we are told is an anti-Semite or a Nazi? These terms have been brandished and bandied about so much as to be virtually meaningless. Yes, there *are* anti-Semites in this world; people whose hatred of Jews is pathological. And yes, there *are* racists and neo-Nazis who, given the chance, would reinstitute the Third Reich. But to see psychos behind every turn in the road is nuts; it leads to far more sleeplessness than is necessary.

Just because someone - the President, the Secretary of State, a rabbi or follower of J Street - will occasionally disagree with something the government of Israel does or says does not make that individual or group anti-Semitic. The number of people who have already voiced support for Ram Baratz - who believe that Barack Obama is a virulent anti-Semite and John Kerry a puerile clown is troubling, to say the least. To label those who have a different take on the need for universal healthcare or a significant raise in the minimum wage as fascists or socialists is to live in a world of absolutes. Increasingly, people are of the opinion that their belief is the only belief; that to disagree is to be a danger; that "my way or the highway" is the only philosophy by which to live.

I urge Prime Minister Netanyahu to withdraw his nomination of Ran Baratz. The worst possible choice for a public spokesperson is one who should really keep his big mouth shut. Israel has enough problems with the outside world. It does *not* need to be represented in public by an individual who will single-handedly alter the subtext of all future conversation.

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