

JPF REPORT #72

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Brand Managers

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I was a guest on NPR's **call-in show** *On Point* last week, along with Israel's hilarious young writer Etgar Keret. We spoke our minds. Eventually, a caller asked the inevitable question, something like this: "Why are your guests going on about the deficiencies of Israeli democracy when it is so clearly the only real democracy in the Middle East? Israel suffers existential threats. Shouldn't we be celebrating Israeli democracy rather than criticizing it?"

This may seem a reasonable, even innocent, complaint. It actually sharpens the differences between how Israelis view their fate and how American Jews view theirs by means of Israelis.

TO A GREAT many American Jews (the reasons are too complex to pursue here), Israel has become the necessary hero, the vicarious nationality, the white rook supporting America's white queen. Israel is, more and more, their brand to be managed. Democracy, in this context, has become a common synonym for good. When the caller insisted that Israel was admirably democratic, she was really insisting that Israel is worthy of American support.

The explicit premise here is that axes of evil are poised to strike—and strike Israel first. The implicit one is that gentiles will never much like Jews and don't need new excuses to throw us to the wolves.

THERE ARE ISRAELIS who speak this way, of course; the next time Bibi Netanyahu is interviewed by Wolf Blitzer, you'll see a master in action. But for most Israelis, Netanyahu included, the performance of Israeli democracy is even more urgently a pragmatic problem. It is not just a public relations challenge. Their lives depend on it.

For Israel is a country that is **fragmented in serious ways**, a plural society that is not quite pluralist. **Etgar Keret** tenderly observed that Israeli buses do not run on the Sabbath, and the orthodox influence is growing, yet an Israeli drag queen represented the country at the Eurovision song contest. Is this stand-off really sustainable without deep constitutional protections? (It is not.)

More important, to say that the discriminatory features of existing constitutional law alienate the country's Arab minority is not to favor Palestinians in some popularity contest. It is a call for reforms that will preserve Israel from disaster. An intifada driven by the frustrations of Israeli Arabs will bury the two-state solution and open the door to wholesale ethnic cleansing, as in the Balkans. To question the health of Israeli democracy is to invite a diagnosis, not a slur.

The point is, democracy is not some victory lap Western peoples, fattened on capitalism, eventually allow themselves. It is a way of keeping the peace. The question of whether Israeli democracy works well enough will fascinate educated Americans and may embarrass some American Jews but, most important, it points to whether or not Israelis can solve their internal frictions nonviolently. And internal threats are more "existential" than anything Iran can inflict—about which more in my next post.

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