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From Selma to Palestine

Despite its shortcomings as an historical portrayal of the rabid racism that plagued the 1960's American South, CBS's June 20, 2021 *Selma* special drama did present a fair depiction of Dr. Martin L. King's role in African Americans' struggle to earn the right to vote as sanctioned by the Constitution of the United States.

The movie's sanitized scenes of violence perpetrated and egged on by white law enforcement personnel and politicians (including a semi-literate, bible thumping, full-of-hate rural white citizens) on Black Americans were merely the tip of the iceberg of the vast panorama of bigotry, racism, lynchings, violence, and brutality perpetrated on American citizens whose ancestors were forcibly bought and brought, in chains, holding pens, and cages to help make America the economic power of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the world bully since the 1950s.

On August 6, 1965, a reluctant President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act which "closely followed the language of the 15th amendment [and] applied a nationwide prohibition against the discriminatory voting practices adopted in many southern states after the Civil War, including literacy tests as a prerequisite to voting."

The day before, and on August 5, 1965, while tensions were simmering in the Watts, Los Angeles neighborhood, I would ride the bus from New York on a 1,325 mile trek to the American South.

My first encounter with Israel's version of a more benevolent and less brutal Jim Crow was in South Carolina.

The unoccupied far back bus seat enticed me to lie down and snooze so as to catch up on much needed jet-lag sleep. In Greenville, SC, the bus driver admonished me not to cross the demarcation line between black “folks” to the back of the bus and the white “people” to the front half of the Greyhound conveyance monster that “lapped the miles.”

And two years later I came face to face with Jim Crow in a very personal manner. On our way to Mardi Gras, accompanied by our Spanish university professor who knew every watering hole along the way, we stopped at an El Dorado, AR, gas station. I headed to the men’s rest room to the side of the 1960’s style men’s restrooms and was confronted with two signs. One sign spelled “White Gentlemen,” while the other sign screamed “Negroes.”

Bewildered, I stood transfixed between a white world and a black world. Of the two restrooms, to which one did I belong? Lest I insult my college buddies, my Near Eastern complexion made me pause for what seemed like an eternity – until the silence was broken -when a colleague who’d just emerged from the privileged White Gentlemen only restroom uttered: “Halaby, you better hurry up and take a piss; we’ve got a long way to go.”

While racial, social and economic justice have always been slow to come about in America, much change has, begrudgingly come about.

And many of the great changes came about not only as result of the integrity and determination of “men and women of the moment,” but also because the U.S. Constitution has been the hammer and the anvil that has helped forge these perpetual improvements to the 18th century document drafted by men of vision.

Not so with Israel, America’s darling child, the Only Democracy in the Near East, the wayward child that tells its parent to hop, jump, and deliver unlimited support in the form of tax payer largesse all the way from the U.S. treasury to its Tel Aviv weapons factories and spying technology sold to autocrats and thugs around the world, including China, “I am Joe Biden, and I am a Zionist’s” new nemesis.

When Israel expelled over half of Palestine’s population in 1948 and declared itself a state, Europe and America helped birth and support this new colonial enterprise, not because of their Love for the Jewish people, but as a way to expiate for their guilt over their complicity and acquiescence to Germany’s dastardly Nazi experiment.

Israel would be the regional occupying policeman and the launching pad for the many interventions to have come about since 1948. Think Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, and now, the Gulf Sheikdoms.

While the U.S.'s Constitution has been a vital cornerstone of American jurisprudence and governance, and while power was to be equally shared by the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches, to their credit, the drafters of the constitution deliberately excised religion from interfering in the business of governance. And fortunately this has kept theocracy out of the public arena.

Not so with Israel.

Seventy-three years after it established itself as an ethno-religious socialist government, Israel has yet to draft a constitution. Run by a hodgepodge of parties, early secular Zionist and socialistic ideals have turned into a polarizing theater of ethnic and religious struggles. While Israel claims to be a pluralistic society, it is a mish mash of competing groups that include: Sephardic Jews vs. Ashkenazi Jews, Eastern European Jews vs. Western European Jews (with German Jews at the apex of this stratified amalgamation of immigrants), recently arrived Russian immigrants vs. older stock immigrants, secular Jews vs. religious Jews including the not-so-religious Jews vs. the ultra-religious ones, young, vs. old, militarists vs. pacifists (much fewer in numbers). These divisive tribal affiliations that have emerged in Israeli society over the past 40 years and have been the call to arms for Netanyahu and his ilk; capitalizing on these fractious divisions of wannabe competing party leaders, Israeli politicians have utilized racism, bigotry, settlements, expansion, the Holocaust, Iran, and Palestinians (an inferior, virus-plagued sub human citizenry to be killed at every opportunity) as a unifying ploy, a stratagem has kept Netanyahu and his like-minded ethno-racist supporters in power for over twelve years.

And it is precisely because Israel has no constitution that mayhem and chaos (buttressed by sheer military power, including a nuclear arsenal, and hatred of Palestinians) will continue to plague an ethno-racist colonial state bent on subjugating its neighbours and controlling successive compliant American Administrations and Congresses.

I have no doubt that Biden is more than elated to see Netanyahu dumped into the Israeli courts where he will be tried for corruption and possible prison quarters. Congressional leaders are equally elated to see Naphtali Bennet assume Israel's premiership.

Boys and girls of the media and US Government officials, don't celebrate too soon. Bennet is further to the right than Netanyahu. In 2013 Naphtali Bennet bragged: "I killed many Arabs in my life, and there's no problem with that." He has referred to Palestinians as monkeys in trees, and his ultra-orthodox religious affiliation is as rabid as they come.

And Israel's new President, Oren Herzog, a staunch Likud Party member, released in 1995 a campaign ad depicting himself killing a Palestinian lawmaker.

Bennet and Herzog have yet to reign in the ultra-nationalist religious fanatic settlers, always protected and abetted by the Most Moral Army in the World, who storm Palestinian neighborhoods and utter, every chance they have, "death to Arabs," "Shufat [Palestinian Jerusalem neighborhood] is burning," "May your village burn," "Muhammad is dead," "Lynch them," "Kill them," "Another Nakba [expulsion] is coming," and a whole bunch of homophobic slogans and epithets hurled at foreign journalists who "work for Arab media," including beatings, arrests, and the destruction of their video cameras.

In every single one of these incidents, including soccer games, and for years now, Israeli children are encouraged to participate in these pogroms whose sole intention is to terrorize Palestinians into submission and expulsion from their ancestral lands.

While the recent Israeli elections have sidelined Netanyahu, Israel's future is in the throes of chaos, bloodletting, settlement expansion, continued EU and American cover, military adventures, and corruption on a large scale.

After 73 years of racist policies and hostilities, it behooves Israel's leaders to draft a constitution that will guide this fractured society into a better future, a future that is inclusive, instead of an ethno-religious exclusive regime a la mode of Hitler's Duetschland uber alles.

With all the diverse and competing tribes (Haredim, nationalists, ultra-Zionists, opportunistic secularists, xenophobes, and militarists, to name but a very few), Israel is on a runaway train on a collision course with history.

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