

A far-right coalition would devastate ties between Israel and U.S. Jews

How will a Jewish student on a U.S. campus respond when a classmate asks what they think about the election results in Israel and the new government to be established there? Let's assume that this student, let's say a young woman, came from a good Jewish home; her family was active in the Jewish community, her mother was even the president of the synagogue in the neighborhood and her father taught her that Israeli Independence Day is a festive occasion.

Let's assume this student was in a Jewish youth movement. That every summer, for as long as she can remember, she spent a few weeks at a Jewish summer camp. Learned to chat in Hebrew, learned about Israel, even took an Israel advocacy (*hasbara*) course there with excellent material produced by AIPAC. She also keeps in touch with two of the marvelous *shlichim* (emissaries) of the Jewish Agency who ran the camp. One is studying for a master's degree at the University of Haifa; the other finishing her medical studies in Jerusalem. They correspond sometimes. She also met with them when she visited Israel.

She is an earnest young woman. She is studying at a competitive university.

When the youth movement held an Israeli-Palestinian debate (she represented Israel, one of the counselors represented the Palestinians), she performed brilliantly. She still remembers some of the arguments: The area of the State of Israel is smaller than the state of New Jersey. The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Twenty percent of Israel's citizens are Arabs and they have full and equal rights. We are waiting for the Arabs to love their children more than they hate us. And, of course, Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.

She is now sitting in the lecture hall; class is about to start. The friend who asked the question pulled out a newspaper with a picture of Itamar Ben-Gvir waving a gun; he is still waiting for an answer, but she is getting ready for class to start, and she feels that all the answers that she always had are suddenly less relevant. Maybe they never were relevant. She feels a lump in her throat. Instinctively, she wants to protect Israel, but knows that something is broken. Israel is not the same Israel and she is not at a summer camp either.

The impact of last week's Israeli election result on Diaspora Jewry could be devastating, perhaps even fatal.

In recent days, I have been inundated with phone calls and text messages from friends and colleagues in the Diaspora, mainly from the United States. Some want to give advice, some to comfort. All of them are shocked by the fact that someone like Ben-Gvir could be a cabinet minister in the government. They do not talk about the significance of the matter in terms of PR or *hasbara*. No, no, they have already been through this. They have already understood that *hasbara* tricks are mainly preaching to the choir. They are talking about themselves.

Whoever calls me loves Israel and is connected to it. And they also understand, completely understand, that this is a democratic decision by the people of Israel. But they also know the ramifications. Israel plays an important role in the Jewish identity of Jewish people worldwide. You define your identity, among other things, also in your relationship to the place where almost half of the Jewish people live. What happens when this place changes its countenance?

A screenshot of journalist Tom Friedman's headline in this weekend's The New York Times went viral via hundreds, maybe thousands, of WhatsApp groups and mailing lists. A three-

time Pulitzer Prize winner, Friedman is one of the most important and influential writers in the world – a well rooted, committed Jew and a lover of Israel. And his article was titled "The Israel we knew is no more."

I try to be optimistic. Zionism is a movement that is all about optimism, and this place we live in is a place that would never have come into being without optimism. Diaspora Jews have no expectation that the next government will implement the Kotel agreement, or enhance recognition of Masorti and Reform conversion or marriage ceremonies in a way that respects the fact that there is more than one way to be Jewish.

But there is an expectation of responsibility from the elected prime minister of Israel: Benjamin Netanyahu, don't pollute the Zionist dream, don't pollute your legacy. Drive responsibly. Appointing Ben-Gvir as a minister will make your government a leper in the eyes of many of the world's Jews. They don't vote here, that's true. But if Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, then the prime minister of Israel has a responsibility that, under his watch, the bond will not be broken.

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