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READER EDITION

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MITZPE DOSSIER

Furious, and Half Right

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I want to talk to the friend across the table who has done the reading. Not the one who repeats whatever the last hostile headline told him — thankfully, you are not that person.

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You have watched the UN turn an investigative mandate into a standing accusation.

You have watched “genocide” get pinned on the one army in the region that calls the people it is fighting and tells them which buildings to leave.

You have stood up in rooms where standing up for Israel cost you something, and you did it anyway, because you love the place and you can read.

And somewhere in the last two or three years you arrived, furiously and sincerely, at a verdict: that this government is dismantling Israeli democracy, that what is happening to the courts is an executive coup, that the men who run the country now are a danger to it, and that they have to be removed before they finish the job.

I am not writing to talk you out of the fury. I wouldn’t bother. I’m more than just a little peeved myself.

What I want to do instead is hand you a ledger.

The anger is not really the problem. The problem is that two very different things have been welded together inside that verdict — and it’s not always particularly obvious what’s going on.

Some of what you are furious about, you earned the hard way, by paying attention to a country that has genuinely failed its own people on more than one front. And some of what you are furious about was machined for you, in advance, by people who want Israel gone and needed you to carry their words into rooms they could never reach.

The earned grievance and the borrowed verdict arrived together, and the borrowed verdict now wears the earned grievance like a uniform.

So when you say “coup,” you think you are describing the thing you saw with your own eyes. You are not. You are describing the thing you saw, plus a word that was waiting in your pocket before you ever looked.

This piece is the work of telling those two apart. You can keep every ounce of the fury. You can want Netanyahu gone, want this coalition voted out, want the whole cast retired by an electorate that has had enough.

None of that is what I am here to touch.

I am here for the words, because the words were never yours, and they are doing damage you did not sign up for.

Start With What Democracy Is

BEFORE the coup, the thing it is a coup against.

A democracy is the machine that lets a coalition govern on the mandate it won and lets the voters fire it at the next election. That is the whole of it.

It is not a guarantee that you will like the government, or respect it, or be able to look at the people running it without your jaw tightening.

A government you find repellent, governing badly, on a mandate you wish it did not have, is a democracy doing exactly what a democracy does.

Disagreeing with a government, even despising one, is ordinary politics, and a healthy republic absorbs a great deal of it.

That distinction is the one the word “coup” is built to collapse, so hold onto it.

Now the harder part, because I want to give the coup charge its strongest form and not a strawman. The strong version is real: elected governments can in fact strangle a democracy from the inside. It has happened. A leader wins a legitimate majority, then uses it to rewire the rules so that he can never lose again, and by the time anyone calls it what it is, the ballot box has quietly stopped working. That is a real category, and someone who waves it away with “they were elected, so it cannot be a coup” is not being serious.

Being elected is not a defense, so the honest test has to look past who holds office.

The signature of a self-coup is the closing of the exits.

A self-coup captures the independent count and prosecutes the opposition into silence.

The next election gets postponed, or stage-managed, or never held at all. And certainly you can see that elsewhere in the region.

The marks of a government killing a democracy are always the same: it makes itself impossible to remove.

Hold this coalition up against that test and watch what happens.

The judicial reform that is supposed to be the coup ran through the Knesset as ordinary legislation, in public, over months. It was challenged in court, in the very court it aimed to rebalance, and in January 2024 that court struck down its central piece and the government complied. And the government that is supposedly seizing permanent power is, as I write this, dissolving itself and sending the whole question to the voters in an election it called.

Every exit a self-coup has to weld shut is standing wide open.

The legislation was contestable, and it was contested.

The court was reachable, and it ruled against the central piece.

Now the government itself is dissolving and handing the whole question to the voters.

That last point is worth sitting with, because it is the one the coup frame cannot survive. This coalition is going to the voters because a rabbi in his mid-nineties instructed his handful of lawmakers to walk, and the arithmetic that had kept the government alive evaporated in an afternoon.

A government that a single faction can collapse with a phone call, and that answers by handing the whole question to the voters, is the opposite of a junta.

Israel does not even make this hard.

Unlike Germany, which requires the Bundestag to line up a replacement chancellor before it can remove the sitting one, the Knesset can dissolve itself and go to elections without naming who comes next.

The sharpest version of the charge does not claim the exits are shut today. It claims the reform was built to shut them later, and that politics, not safe design, is all that stopped it.

Take that seriously, because it is an honest form of fear. The line it runs into is reversibility. Every government ever elected wants fewer constraints on itself. A self-coup is the point where the constraint-removal passes beyond what ordinary politics can undo.

This reform never reached that point. The override clause never passed. The selection change has not taken effect, and it sits right now in front of the very court it concerns.

And when the whole project was put to the test, ordinary politics unwound it in a relatively mundane expression of process. A reform that a coalition wobble can still reverse leaves the exit contested, and a contested exit is an open one.

There is a quieter claim folded inside the charge, and it is worth pulling out, because you have probably nodded along to it. It runs like this: that a clutch of small, unworthy parties has hijacked the state, that a minority is masquerading as the national will, that the tail is wagging a country that never voted for any of this.

I understand the feeling. But the leverage of small parties is Israeli democracy working exactly as it was built to work.

A system of pure proportional representation with a low threshold seats a dozen parties and forces them to bargain, and the bargaining hands outsized leverage to whoever is willing to walk away.

That is true of the haredi parties this year. It was true of the secular-Russian party that has jailing draft-dodgers in its platform. It is true of the Arab party that held the balance in a recent government. Small parties extracting concessions above their seat count is the machine running as it was built to run. You can hate the concessions. The mechanism that sets them is the same mechanism that will let you vote the price-setters out.

So the coup charge does not fail on a technicality, and it does not fail because I have defined coups to exclude anything Israel might do.

It fails on the facts. The exits are open. They are, at this moment, in use.

The Court Is the Outlier

UNDERNEATH the coup charge sits a second one, and this is the one even careful people repeat without checking, because it sounds like simple civics: that judicial reform is a polite word for gutting the judiciary, that an independent court is the one thing standing between a free country and tyranny, and that a government taking a chisel to it is therefore attacking democracy itself. That civics is sound. It was built for a different kind of state than Israel ever became.

The reflex you are running comes from countries with a written constitution and an entrenched bill of rights that sits above the legislature, where the court's job is to enforce a higher law that the people actually ratified, and where curbing the court means tearing pages out of a document the whole society agreed to.

That describes the United States. It does not describe Israel.

Israel has no written constitution. It never finished one. It runs on a handful of Basic Laws passed, most of them, by ordinary majorities in ordinary Knesset sessions. Some of them by a few dozen members of a 120-seat chamber late at night with the hall half empty. There is no higher law standing over the Knesset that the court is merely guarding. The court is not enforcing the people's constitution against the government, because there is no such document.

What there is, instead, is a court that built its own authority out of its own rulings, and a reform trying to pull some of that authority back.

Take the pieces one at a time, because the pieces are where the "denuding the judiciary" claim dies.

The power to strike down Knesset laws is not written anywhere. The court announced it had that power in 1995, in the Bank Mizrahi case, reasoning that the Basic Laws carried constitutional rank and that it could therefore void ordinary legislation that clashed with them.

There was no founding pact behind this, no referendum, no moment where the public or even the Knesset deliberately handed the court the keys.

It was a doctrine the court derived and then operated.

By January 2024 the same court had gone further and struck down an amendment to a Basic Law itself, the first time it had ever voided one, and two of the justices on its own bench wrote that the court had no such authority and that claiming it carried a heavy price for the democracy it said it was protecting.

The reasonableness standard, in the meantime, had grown elastic enough to let the court remove a sitting minister from the cabinet because it judged the appointment unreasonable.

The attorney general advises the government, represents the government, and runs the prosecution that can indict the government, three functions

most Western systems are careful to keep in separate hands, consolidated in a single office whose legal opinions the government is told it must obey.

And then the bench itself. The committee that selects judges gave the sitting justices, together with the bar, an effective veto over who joined them on it, an arrangement in which the court had a structural say in choosing its own successors.

Set that beside how other democracies actually staff and check their courts and the outlier comes into focus.

There is no single Western template, and anyone who tells you the reform simply drags Israel toward “the norm” is smoothing over a real argument.

Some democracies use professional appointment commissions. Some lean on direct political appointment — and they balance their courts against second chambers and federal structures and written constitutions that Israel does not have.

But on the one feature that matters most here, the picture is lopsided.

A court whose sitting members hold an effective veto over their own succession is genuinely unusual.

In most democracies the elected branches carry real, often decisive, weight in who reaches the high bench, and the judges do not get to quietly reproduce themselves.

To be fair, the democracies that let politicians pick judges balance that power against a written constitution or a second chamber or a federal structure, and Israel has none of those either.

Retire the self-perpetuating bench and you still owe a replacement brake.

That is the real argument, and the reform is the attempt to bring the court back toward the company it keeps while the harder question of the replacement brake goes mostly unanswered.

None of which means the 2023 package was well built. It was not.

The reform came fast, bundled, and at full pressure, with no serious attempt to bring the opposition or the professional bodies along, from a coalition that gave half the country every reason to read it as a smash-and-grab rather than a repair.

A country with this few brakes cannot afford a reform that removes one of the few it has without building a replacement.

The honest version of judicial reform answers the real distortions, the self-assigned review power, the runaway reasonableness, the conflicted attorney general, the self-perpetuating bench, and it does so without leaving a single-chamber parliament with a bare majority and nothing standing in its way. That reform was available.

The coalition did not write it.

You are allowed to be furious about that, and I traced the whole unfinished structure underneath it in [The Unfinished State](#) and the live appointments fight in [The Math Survives the Vote](#). The method was worth a real fight. “Coups” describes none of it.

Which brings me to the version of this charge that sounds the most damning and is the most inverted: that the government has been defying court orders and politicizing the police, holding the line against the rule of law itself.

Look at what is actually happening.

The justice minister has declined to convene a selection committee built on the very structure the reform is trying to retire, which gets reported as defiance. Flatly disobeying an unambiguous court order would be a real line, and I am not blessing that. What the justice minister is doing is narrower. He is declining to convene a committee whose own composition is the thing in dispute, while that dispute sits before the court, which is procedural discretion over a structure the reform exists to retire.

The attorney general, an office that has spent years filing against this government at a tempo no parliamentary opposition could match, reaches for legal procedure to block what it cannot defeat at the ballot box, and the press calls the blocking “the rule of law.”

This is the legal guild, the attorney general and the High Court in its review function and the bar and the legal advisers embedded in every ministry, a bloc that has accumulated a veto over elected government and now exercises it as routine.

When an elected minister directs the police on policy, that is the minister governing the portfolio the voters gave him. The reflex that reads it as capture, and reads the guild’s resistance as heroism, has the actors backwards.

The line being held is the guild’s own position, dressed up as the rule of law, and the guild would rather you not notice the difference.

The Words That Do the Enemy's Work

Now the vocabulary, because this is where I get less patient, and not with you.

“Fascism.” “Apartheid.” “Coups.” “The Israeli alt-right.” “Racist.” “Extremist.” These words did not grow in your garden. They arrived in your vocabulary pre-charged, and they share a family resemblance: each one is a real term with a real referent, stretched past that referent until it snaps over a target it was never cut to fit. Take two of them at their word and watch them break.

Fascism names a one-party state that governs through redemptive violence and answers to no law. Measure that against a coalition that lost votes on its own central bill, could not hold its own benches together, watched a single faction walk out and collapse it, and is now dissolving itself to face the voters.

Whatever your complaints about this government (and I have many if you'd like to compare lists), but that it cannot lose a vote and answers to no one is not one of them.

Apartheid names a legal order built to disenfranchise a population by race. Israel's Arab citizens vote, sit in the Knesset, sit on the High Court, and in 2021 an Arab Islamist party walked into the governing coalition and held the balance of power inside it.

No apartheid regime in history invited the people it was oppressing into the room where the government is formed. The careful user of these words retreats, when pressed, to creeping fascism, or de-facto apartheid, or apartheid in spirit.

A word that has to be qualified into “creeping” or “de-facto” to survive contact with the facts is a word being kept alive past its evidence, reached for as a verdict and propped up afterward.

The people who coined these words built them to end the argument before you reach your own judgment, to hand you a verdict pre-loaded inside a noun.

The same machine runs under the figures the words get aimed at.

You have been told that Smotrich is a reprehensible racist and that Ben-Gvir is an unrepentant extremist who shames the diaspora, and you have been told it so often that the labels now arrive before the men do.

Set the labels down for a moment and look at what is actually on the table, because it is two different things wearing one slate. I laid the whole party-by-party structure out in [The Wrong Words](#), so I will not re-tread that here, but the short version is that Israeli politics runs on several independent axes at once, and these two men sit on different ones.

Religious Zionism is the national-religious party, and Smotrich runs it on two tracks at once: sovereignty over Judea and Samaria, and a more Torah-governed state at home. He treats the settlement map and the halacha as one project.

Otzma Yehudit is the security party. Ben-Gvir's mission is the state's coercive hand turned hard against terror and crime, law and order and deterrence, and he cares far less than Smotrich about seating Torah where the law stands. Two different men on two different axes.

The merger was pure arithmetic, since the threshold punishes small parties that run alone, and within weeks of the vote the slate split back into separate factions.

The international media bureaus had read a bolt-together as a movement.

The genuinely ugly part of this is real, and stated plainly it is more useful than any slogan. Otzma Yehudit descends, in part, from Kahanism, the movement of Rabbi Meir Kahane, who built the Jewish Defense League to guard Jews in a New York that had stopped guarding them and then founded Kach in Israel in 1971. Kahane named some real dangers early, about Jewish self-defense and about an Arab rejection of any Jewish state at all that the mainstream took decades to take seriously. He still got many, many answers wrong. His program was a Torah-run state in place of the democracy, and the removal of the country's Arabs as a class — the citizen who had never raised a hand treated the same as the enemy — with a ban on Jews and Arabs marrying to seal it. Israel's courts barred Kach as racist, and on that program the label fit. What to do with a population that makes war and loses is a hard and legitimate question. It was not the one Kahane was answering. He wanted the Arab stripped of his vote and his home for the crime of being born one.

It is an inheritance with two halves, the part worth hearing and the part Israel was right to ban.

The man under the slogan is a Mizrahi kid from Mevaseret Zion, from an Iraqi-Kurdish family that came up the hard way in a traditional household that sometimes voted Labor.

Ben-Gvir found Kahane as a teenager, in the years when buses were coming apart in the streets and a Jewish child could grow up certain that his blood was cheap and the state could not keep him safe. He reached for the angriest answer on the shelf. He has been convicted at least eight times, almost all of it from those years, for incitement and for the Kahanist signs he carried, ugly speech of the kind a furious young man produced in a tumultuous, to say the least, time — and a free country argues with it rather than jails for it. And the establishment never forgave him for any of it.

The army would not take him, the bar tried to keep him out, the prosecutors charged him dozens of times and lost most of the cases, and most of the people doing the reviling had never once had to fear for their own children on a number 18 bus. That said, he carries one mark harder to wave off than the rest. He kept a photograph of the Cave of the Patriarchs killer in his

living room for years and took it down only in 2020, when he wanted onto a mainstream slate. That one is his to answer for, and he has not, as far as I am aware, really answered for it.

He holds the National Security portfolio now, and he holds it for a reason older than he is. The Jewish answer to a hostile world has never been to bare the throat. Guard your life, the tradition says, because the one who comes to kill you means it, and a state that lets Jewish blood run cheap has failed the first thing a Jewish state is for.

The electorate that put Ben-Gvir in that chair is younger and more Mizrahi and more peripheral than the cameras expect, and what it wanted was the safety the establishment never delivered to towns like its own. Reading that as bloodlust is a tell that you have been handed the caricature.

Where he has actually failed is narrower and realer. The murder wave in Arab towns has not broken on his watch — though it was climbing for decades before he arrived and runs deeper than any one minister's three years. And in May he filmed himself crowing over bound flotilla detainees kneeling on the Ashdod dock, until his own prime minister said the scene was not in keeping with Israel's values and his own foreign minister said he is not the face of Israel. They were right. Gloating over a bound captive is a failure of Jewish values, and a man who took an office to protect Jewish dignity disgraced it that afternoon.

So you can keep your distance from the man and still see him clearly, which is more than the slogan allows. Opposing Arab terror is not racism. Wanting a state that guards Jewish life is not fascism. The angry boy who found Kahane in a season of Jewish funerals is not the same person as a minister who has to answer for what he does with a portfolio and a flag.

Dislike him for the Hebron photograph and the dock at Ashdod. For the crudeness. And the carelessness. For the judgment that keeps failing him in the moments that matter. But the cartoon the headlines drew, the one you were handed before you ever looked, is not the man, and carrying it does the enemy's sorting for you.

And here is the thing that genuinely wears me down. These words were forged, on purpose, by people who want Israel gone, built in the seminar rooms and the NGO shops and the wire-service style guides that have spent fifty years working to make Israel unspeakable, and built to be picked up and fired.

What I did not expect, and what I have watched happen at Shabbat tables and in group chats and on panels full of people who would give their lives for Israel, is how readily our own side picks them up.

Someone reaches for “apartheid” or “fascism” or “coup” because it is the strongest word within reach and the moment seems to call for the strongest word, and does not notice that the word in his mouth was forged by the other side for exactly this use.

Your grievance is often real even when the word you borrow to carry it was forged by people who want Israel gone. The discourse is poisoned this thoroughly, and the only antidote is to think hard about a word before you let it out, and ask who built it and what it was built to do.

Which is the moment to hand you back something real, because the demonization frame has been hiding a critique you are entitled to, and it lands on Netanyahu.

He personally brokered the merger that carried Otzma into parliament, pushing it in 2019 and re-brokering it before the elections that followed, and his stated reason was the arithmetic. A small party that runs alone and falls short of the threshold throws tens of thousands of bloc votes in the bin, and he could not afford the waste.

So a prime minister manufactured a path into the Knesset for a party he needed only for its seats, to pad his coalition math and nothing grander. It is exactly the kind of cynicism worth being disgusted by, and you do not need anyone's permission for it. That one you earned, and it survives every map.

The Charges That Stick

So here is the other column of the ledger, some of the charges stick. They stick hard. And the sharpest of them does not come from Israel's enemies at all. It comes from inside the house.

Start with the one that should bother you most, because it is the one that is killing the fairness of the whole enterprise. The burden of defending Israel is not shared.

In June 2024 the High Court ruled unanimously that no legal basis existed for the blanket exemption of yeshiva students from the draft and that the state was obligated to conscript them. The army began sending notices the following month.

Of the first cohort, somewhere around one in twenty actually showed up, and enforcement since has been close to fictional, fewer than two dozen arrests against tens of thousands of evaders, in a war that has ground reservists through hundreds of days in uniform while their businesses failed and their marriages buckled.

Anyone who is furious about who fights and who pays, and about a political class that keeps writing exemptions for the ones who do neither, is reading the country accurately. There is nothing imported in that anger.

The reservist's line out of the Knesset hearings says it clearly: we have prayer, we are serving, we are dying.

And the sharpest objection to the latest exemption deal came not from the country's enemies but from inside the coalition itself, from a Likud committee chairman who drafted a real conscription bill and was stripped of his chair to mend fences with the haredi partners.

This is a decades-long statutory failure that successive governments of every stripe declined to fix.

And then the hard one, the charge that is neither cleanly earned nor cleanly borrowed, where the whole method of this ledger earns its keep. A prime minister under indictment is leading the fight over the courts. On its face that should bother you, and I am not going to pretend it does not bother me, because a man with a personal stake in how the legal system is built should not be the one rebuilding it.

But then look at what the man is actually charged with. In the first case he and his wife took cigars and champagne and some jewelry from two billionaire friends across more than a decade, a few hundred thousand shekels in all, charged as fraud and breach of trust. In the second he was taped talking to a newspaper owner about gentler coverage in exchange for hobbling a rival paper, a trade that never happened, charged again as fraud and breach of trust. Only the third case carries the word bribery, and no cash changed hands in it. The thing the prosecution calls a bribe is favorable coverage

on a news site, traded, it says, for regulatory rulings worth a fortune to the site's owner. A decade of investigation, and the whole haul comes to cigars, a conversation with a publisher, and good press.

The timeline alone is worth noting as well. The police opened these files in 2016, the indictment came in 2019, the trial has run since 2020, and in 2026 there is still no verdict, with none expected this year at all.

Partway through, the three judges trying the case told the prosecutors, on the record, that the bribery charge had little chance of holding and that they should think about dropping it for the country's sake. The prosecutors said no and pressed on.

Set a decade-long prosecution of an elected leader, over cigars and press coverage, with the judges themselves asking the state to fold its central charge, beside what a real autocrat is accused of.

The embarrassment here belongs to the people who will not let it end.

None of which is a defense of the man, and none of it tells you how to vote. Grant his worst motive in full. A defendant has every reason to want a friendlier bench, and a reform led by such a man carries that taint into the room.

Then look at what the reform actually does. It reaches neither his trial nor the judges hearing his case, and it ends no part of the prosecution.

The complaints about this court, the review power it assigned itself, the run-away reasonableness, the attorney general's three hats, the bench that picks itself, were on the record decades before this defendant was ever charged.

His stake taints his standing to lead the fight. It does not turn the fight into a coup, and a years-long prosecution over cigars does not turn the court into the rule of law. He has been on trial for six years and convicted of nothing, and the longer that holds, the more it tells you about the case against him and the less about the man.

Whom a Government Answers To

STILL. You are allowed to want them gone. Nothing above is a defense of Netanyahu's tenure, and nothing above tells you how to vote. You can take every word of it and still want this coalition retired at the first opportunity and Netanyahu personally finished. The only thing I am asking you to refuse is the move that turns "I want them gone" into "Israel has stopped being a democracy." Wanting them gone is your right as someone who loves the place. Declaring that Israel has stopped being a democracy is a factual claim, and everything above refutes it.

But there is an order of responsibility here that the diaspora loses constantly, and it is worth getting straight, because it governs what you do with all this fury once you have sorted it. An Israeli government answers, first, to its own citizens — the people who actually live and vote and bury their children under its decisions. It answers, second, to the Jewish people, which may well include you, and which is real, and which is not a chair you get to sit in when the cabinet meets. And it answers, a distant third, to the opinion of foreign capitals that will applaud Israel at funerals and pressure it at every other moment and never once send their own sons to hold its borders. International opinion is leverage to be managed. A government weighs it and then answers to the people who actually live under its decisions. A government that takes a hit in Brussels in order to protect those people is doing its first job. A diaspora that has the order reversed will keep mistaking Israel's first duty for its betrayal.

Get that order wrong and you reach for the most seductive lever ever handed to a diaspora Jew, the one that whispers you can pressure this government, defund it, sanction it, isolate it, and save Israel from itself. There is no clean valve for that. Indeed, pushing for that is actively supporting those who wishes there were no Israel from the river to the sea.

Watch how the instrument actually behaves once it exists. Sanctions open on a single settler, a single farm, a single labeled bad actor, and they feel surgical. Then they climb to organizations. Then they reach sitting cabinet ministers, and European officials are already pressing to widen the list past those two names.

A measure aimed at a coalition you have mis-read as a single far-right bloc lands, in the end, on a reservist in Be'er Sheva and a chemist who happens to be Israeli and perhaps your own grandchild in uniform.

The pressure you aim at "the government" always finds the country.

None of which is an argument to stand back, and I want to end this section on that, because the easy misreading of everything here is "so disengage, it is not your fight."

It is your fight. You are Am Yisrael, or you are one of its true friends, and the answer to a poisoned argument is to walk into the room holding something that points true.

Staying out of it only leaves the room to the people who poisoned it. Stay in it. Argue. Give, and visit, and bring your children, and make the case, and make aliyah if that is where this leads you. Just do all of it holding the calibrated instrument instead of the borrowed one.

So come back, one last time, to where we started, to you and the verdict you arrived at honestly and the words you reached for without checking where they were made.

You can be furious at this coalition. You can be sick over the men it seated to keep itself alive, done with a prime minister who may have overstayed his welcome, impatient past endurance with a draft deal it could not even pass, and uneasy that a defendant is steering the fight over the courts.

Hold every bit of that. It is earned.

What you do not have to do, however, is carry the enemy's words into the argument on your own side's behalf. The verdict it was steered toward, that Israel has ceased to be a democracy and the only cure is to break the government from outside, collapses against everything above.

You were furious, and you were half right. And the half you were right about is strong enough to stand on its own. It does not need the vocabulary of people who want the whole thing gone.

Put those words down. Keep the fury. It is more useful to Israel, and more honest about it, than the borrowed certainty ever was.

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