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Analysis | Rivlin Uses Holocaust Day to Challenge Netanyahu's Darkness and Despair

Where Rivlin sees a glass half full, Netanyahu sees a glass half full of poison



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The annual [ceremony held on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day](#) at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem provided an unexpected political drama this year, accompanied by profound philosophical debate. The instigator was President Reuven Rivlin, who used the occasion to tackle Israeli alarmism and absolutism and to implicitly challenge Benjamin Netanyahu in the process. The prime minister, for his part, responded in a way that confirmed and corroborated Rivlin's complaints.

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President Rivlin at Holocaust Day Ceremony:...



In what may have been intended as a rebuke to U.S. President Donald Trump over his refusal to specifically mention Jews in his statement for the January 27 International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Rivlin first dismissed the completely “universalist” view of the Holocaust which ignores the uniqueness of the Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jews. He described such a position as “a perversion of history” and “a moral mistake.” Most Israelis and most Jews around the world probably agree.

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But then [Rivlin courageously tackled the opposite perspective](#) as well, in which “the Holocaust has become the eyeglasses through which we look at the world.” Here, Rivlin challenged the way most

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Israelis, especially those on the right, regard the world around them, as well as the words and the slogans that Netanyahu uses to persuade them that the Holocaust is eternally just around the corner.

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Rivlin took issue with his idol Menachem Begin's justification for the 1982 war in Lebanon, which was to "prevent another Treblinka." He said that such an approach consigns the justification for Israel's very existence to preventing another Holocaust. He described the approach as "dangerous," one in which "every threat is existential and every enemy is Hitler." He decried the division of the world to either "righteous gentiles or anti-Semitic Nazis," a separation that transforms any criticism against Israel to an expression of anti-Semitism. Instead, Rivlin offered what he described as "a third way" that combines the Israeli vow of never again, accentuates Jewish solidarity throughout the world and adopts the Jewish value of respecting all men and women, regardless of their religion or race.

Netanyahu, who spoke immediately after, was either unprepared for Rivlin's assault or undaunted by it. In his own speech, he lambasted the "naive" belief that genocidal anti-Semitic hatred for Jews and for Israel will ever disappear. He described ISIS and Iran as seeking Israel's destruction, just as the Nazis had sought to eliminate European Jews. He said his main mission as prime minister was to prevent the destruction of Israel and that he was doing so in the name of Holocaust victims and survivors. In front of Rivlin's eyes, he was embodying the worldview that Rivlin had just rejected.

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Outside observers might assume that Rivlin was simply making philosophical observations, but most Israelis are well aware of the long-running tensions between their president and the prime minister, which are both ideological and intensely personal. Rivlin has never forgotten Netanyahu's immense but ultimately futile efforts to prevent his election to the presidency, and he has frequently clashed with him in private and public. Once considered a solid member of the Likud's no-compromise hard right and a supporter to this day of the concept of the Greater Land of Israel, as President Rivlin has often spoken out against demonization of Israeli Arabs and leftists and in favor of free speech and the Supreme Court, much to the chagrin of his former political allies. He has often criticized the current government's ultra-nationalist tendencies, especially when it was Netanyahu himself who was promoting them.

Even though they grew up in the same political camp, in many ways Rivlin is the polar opposite of Netanyahu. He is avuncular, good-humored, a people-oriented politician, a fair-minded right winger who fostered good relations with Israeli Arab Members of Knesset even when it was unpopular in his Likud party. Netanyahu has a much darker personality. He is obsessively suspicious not only of external enemies but also of fellow politicians, who invariably transform from allies and supporters to rivals and dejected enemies. Where Rivlin sees a glass half full, Netanyahu sees a glass half full of poison. Like his

predecessor Shimon Peres, Rivlin is an optimist; Netanyahu, on the other hand, seems enemies and misfortunes everywhere. It is one of the common traits he shares with Donald Trump.

Even though Israelis regularly describe themselves to international pollsters as happy and optimistic, it is Netanyahu's dark view of the world that gets their vote time and time again. His fatalism is a natural fit for Israeli Jews haunted by memories of the Holocaust and concerned about the real enemies that surround them.

Netanyahu's hopelessness, his insularity, his refusal to differentiate good from bad among Palestinians on either side of the Green Line not only thrive on the natural pessimism of Israelis, they also feeds it and perpetuate it and ensure that Netanyahu's despondency will return him to power time and time again.

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Rivlin's speech was meant to serve as a clarion call against Netanyahu's despair, which, in many ways, has turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. By invoking the Holocaust, Netanyahu plays to the natural Israeli tendency to view the world in terms of black and white and to thus absolve themselves of responsibility for their actions, especially the 50-year-old occupation. It is much easier for Israelis to believe that a catastrophe is around the corner, rather than redemption, and Netanyahu can be relied upon to deliver the goods. Rivlin's efforts, while admirable, seem doomed to fail.

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