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## The Fantasies of Avigdor Lieberman

## By Leonard Fein

Some people going through a reasonably civilized divorce confess to an unsettling fantasy. While they do not wish their partner ill, it would be nice if somehow that partner would just disappear. Cease to exist. Be utterly pulverized (albeit painlessly, to be sure). See the lightning storm up ahead? Maybe you'll get lucky and the next bolt will dispose of your burden. Presto.

There are ways in which the very troubled common law marriage of Israel's Jews and Israel's Arabs (they do, after all, share common citizenship and the family name "Israeli") generates the same kind of fantasy. They already sleep in separate rooms and even see other people. (The Jews, for example, prefer non-Jews from Russia — who account for a great many of newcomers from Russia in recent years admitted under Israel's Law of Return — to their Arab mates, and the Arabs, for their part, often feel more intimately connected to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.)

The widely publicized "separation fence" that now mars Israel's landscape and blights its humanscape is arguably a tangible expression of the same fantasy. Yes, there are immediate security considerations at stake: The principal purpose of the fence, we're told, is not to separate Israel's Jews from Israel's Arabs, but to separate Israelis from non-Israeli Palestinians — more specifically, to deter would-be suicide bombers from entering Israel. As some people see it, the trouble with the fence (aside from its questionable legality and its sometime intrusion on the land holdings of Palestinians who have the misfortune to live and farm where it is situated) is that it is inadequate to the separationists' agenda; it leaves too many Arabs on this side (i.e., the Jewish state's side) of the ersatz boundary.

Enter Avigdor Lieberman, head of Israel's Yisrael Beiteinu political party and quite possibly the chief beneficiary of Israel's bloody summer war in Lebanon.

Lieberman is, roughly, the Jean-Marie Le Pen of Israel — minus, of course, the French National Front leader's antisemitism. Lieberman is 48 years old, came to Israel from Russia when he was 20 and has long since replaced Natan Sharansky as the most prominent Russia political leader in Israel. He was, for a time, a senior aide to Benjamin Netanyahu, and he was both minister of infrastructure and minister of transportation under Ariel Sharon.

In the recent Knesset elections his party won 12 seats, and there was, for a time, talk about Lieberman and his party joining the coalition government. But back then — just months ago, even though it now seems a different era — Prime Minister Olmert was focused on achieving his goal of a withdrawal from the West Bank, which led him to turn leftward to Labor rather than lurching rightward toward Lieberman.

Rightward? Lieberman makes Bibi Netanyahu appear moderate. In an address to the Knesset five months ago, he unblushingly had this to say to Arab members of Israel's parliament: "World War II ended with the Nuremberg trials and the leaders of the Nazi regime were executed; not just them, but also their collaborators. Just as [Pierre] Laval in France was executed, I hope that this will be the fate of the collaborators in this house [the Knesset]. Just as they knew to mete out justice to Laval, thus should justice be meted out to you, in precisely the same way."

His grand proposal is to slice off of Israel an area of dense Arab population, trading it for parts of the West Bank where Jews have settled. The idea of stripping a fifth of your citizens of their citizenship, in effect exiling them without requiring them to move (never mind that it would be a clear violation of Israel's Declaration of Independence, a document of constitutional status), has a populist appeal. Lieberman is bright, clever, even charming; where the late Meir Kahane was a bothersome carbuncle, Lieberman is a bad dream on its way to becoming a malignant nightmare. While there's debate about whether he can fairly be classified a fascist, there's no debating his demagoguery. A fantasy is only a fantasy, no? So what if Lieberman wants a divorce from Israel's Arabs? Most Israeli Jews, even the moderates among them, might wish the same. But in the end, they know the difference between idle wishes and public policy.

What really matters here is not Lieberman, it's Olmert. Prime Minister Olmert, whose popularity in Israel is... well, let's put it this way: It isn't. In an effort to slow his free-fall, he now seeks to entice Lieberman into joining the governing coalition, perhaps as minister for strategic affairs.

Olmert, five months ago, was the new Olmert, the one-time civilized right-winger who had allegedly seen the error of his ways and had realized that moderation and negotiation are Israel's only sustaining alternative. But as it turns out, while Olmert's voice was the voice of a statesman, his hands were and now are again the hands of a conniver, an unprincipled political cheat.

The Palestinians doubtless harbor the same fantasy of disappearance, wishing the Israeli Jews would simply cease to exist. Altogether too many of them seek to help that disappearance along, cause it to happen not through magic but through menace and murder. But the issue here is not who walks the moral high ground, who the low. The issue is that both sides have to grow up and disavow magical thinking, whether its content be benign or malignant. History has tricked Arabs and Jews, in Israel and across its nebulous boundaries, into cohabitation. That, for better or worse, is their common destiny. Lieberman's denial and Olmert's mendacity are simply efforts to evade that destiny. Inevitably, they prolong the conflict. Magic can be a pleasant diversion from reality, but in the hands of charlatans, it is a clear and present danger.