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With Friends Like These

Gingrich, Israel and the Palestinians

by URI AVNERY

What a bizarre lot these Republican aspirants for the US presidency are!

What a sorry bunch of ignoramuses and downright crazies. Or, at best, what a bunch of cheats and cynics! (With the possible exception of the good doctor Ron Paul)".

Is this the best a great and proud nation can produce? How frightening the thought that one of them may actually become the most powerful person in the world, with a finger on the biggest nuclear button!

BUT LET'S concentrate on the present front-runner. (Republicans seem to change front-runners like a fastidious beau changes socks.)

It's Newt Gingrich. Remember him? The Speaker of the House who had an extra-marital affair with an intern while at the same time leading the campaign to impeach President Bill Clinton for having an affair with an intern.

But that's not the point. The point is that this intellectual giant – named after Isaac Newton, perhaps the greatest scientist ever – has discovered a great historical truth.

The original Newton discovered the Law of Gravity. Newton Leroy Gingrich has discovered something no less earth-shaking: there is an "invented" people around, referring to the Palestinians.

To which a humble Israeli like me might answer, in the best Hebrew slang: "Good morning, Eliyahu!" Thus we honor people who have made a great discovery which, unfortunately, has been discovered by others long before.

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FROM ITS very beginning, the Zionist movement has denied the existence of the Palestinian people. It's an article of faith.

The reason is obvious: if there exists a Palestinian people, then the country the Zionists were about to take over was not empty. Zionism would entail an injustice of historic proportions. Being very idealistic persons, the original Zionists found a way out of this moral dilemma: they simply denied its existence. The winning slogan was "A land without a people for a people without a land."

So who were these curious human beings they met when they came to the country? Oh, ah, well, they were just people who happened to be there, but not "a" people. Passers-by, so to speak. Later, the story goes, after we had made the desert bloom and turned an arid and neglected land into a paradise, Arabs from all over the region flocked to the country, and now they have the temerity – indeed the chutzpah – to claim that they constitute a Palestinian nation!

For many years after the founding of the State of Israel, this was the official line. Golda Meir famously exclaimed: “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people!”

(To which I replied in the Knesset: “Mrs. Prime Minister, perhaps you are right. Perhaps there really is no Palestinian people. But if millions of people mistakenly believe that they are a people, and behave like a people, then they are a people.”)

A huge propaganda machine – both in Israel and abroad – was employed to “prove” that there was no Palestinian people. A lady called Joan Peters wrote a book (“From Time Immemorial”) proving that the riffraff calling themselves “Palestinians” had nothing to do with Palestine. They are nothing but interlopers and impostors. The book was immensely successful – until some experts took it apart and proved that the whole edifice of conclusive proofs was utter rubbish.

I myself have spent many hundreds of hours trying to convince Israeli and foreign audiences that there is a Palestinian people and that we have to make peace with them. Until one day the State of Israel recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the “Palestinian people”, and the argument was laid to rest.

Until Newt came along and, like a later-day Jesus, raised it from the dead.

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OBVIOUSLY, HE is much too busy to read books. True, he was once a teacher of history, but for many years now he has been very busy speaking the Congress, making a fortune as an “adviser” of big corporations and now trying to become president.

Otherwise, he would probably have come across a brilliant historical book by Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities”, which asserts that all modern nations are invented.

Nationalism is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. When a community decides to become a nation, it has to reinvent itself. That means inventing a national past, reshuffling historical facts (and non-facts) in order to create a coherent picture of a nation existing since antiquity. Hermann the Cherusker, member of a Germanic tribe who betrayed his Roman employers, became a “national” hero. Religious refugees who landed in America and destroyed the native population became a “nation”. Members of an ethnic-religious Diaspora formed themselves into a “Jewish nation”. Many others did more or less the same.

Indeed, Newt would profit from reading a book by a Tel Aviv University professor, Shlomo Sand, a kosher Jew, whose Hebrew title speaks for itself: “When and How the Jewish People was Invented?”

Who are these Palestinians? About a hundred years ago, two young students in Istanbul, David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the future Prime Minister and President (respectively) of Israel, wrote a treatise about the Palestinians. The population of this country, they said, has never changed. Only small elites were sometimes deported. The towns and villages never moved, as their names prove. Canaanites became Israelites, then Jews and Samaritans, then Christian Byzantines. With the Arab conquest, they slowly adopted the religion of Islam and the Arabic Culture. These are today’s Palestinians. I tend to agree with them.

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PARROTING THE straight Zionist propaganda line – by now discarded by most Zionists – Gingrich argues that there can be no Palestinian people because there never was a Palestinian state. The people in this country were just “Arabs” under Ottoman rule.

So what? I used to hear from French colonial masters that there is no Algerian people, because there never was an Algerian state, there was never even a united country called Algeria. Any takers for this theory now?

The name “Palestine” was mentioned by a Greek historian some 2500 years ago. A “Duke of Palestine” is mentioned in the Talmud. When the Arabs conquered the country, they called it “Filastin”, as they still do”. The Arab national movement came into being all over the Arab world, including Palestine – at the same time as the Zionist movement – and strove for independence from the Ottoman Sultan.

For centuries, Palestine was considered a part of Greater Syria (the region known in Arabic as ‘Sham’). There was no formal distinction between Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians and Jordanians. But when, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the European powers divided the Arab world between them, a state called Palestine became a fact under the British Mandate, and the Arab Palestinian people established themselves as a separate nation with a national flag of their own. Many peoples in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America did the same, even without asking Gingrich for confirmation.

It would certainly be ironic if the members of the “invented” Palestinian nation were expected to ask for recognition from the members of the “invented” Jewish/Israeli nation, at the demand of a member of the “invented” American nation, a person who, by the way, is of mixed German, English, Scottish and Irish stock.

Years ago, there was short-lived controversy about Palestinian textbooks. It was argued that they were anti-Semitic and incited to murder. That was laid to rest when it became clear that all Palestinian schoolbooks were cleared by the Israeli occupation authorities, and most were inherited from the previous Jordanian regime. But Gingrich does not shrink from resurrecting this corpse, too.

All Palestinians – men, women and children – are terrorists, he asserts, and Palestinian pupils learn at school how to kill us poor and helpless Israelis. Ah, what would we do without such stout defenders as Newt? What a pity that this week a photo of him, shaking the hand of Yasser Arafat, was published.

And please don’t show him the textbooks used in some of our schools, especially the religious ones!

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IS IT really a waste of time to write about such nonsense?

It may seem so, but one cannot ignore the fact that the dispenser of these inanities may be tomorrow’s President of the United States of America. Given the economic situation, that is not as unlikely as it sounds.

As for now, Gingrich is doing immense damage to the national interests of the US. At this historic juncture, the masses at all the Tahrir Squares across the Arab world are wondering about America’s attitude. Newt’s answer contributes to a new and more profound anti-Americanism.

Alas, he is not the only extreme rightist seeking to embrace Israel. Israel has lately become the Mecca of all the world’s racists. This week we were honored by the visit of the husband of Marine Le Pen, leader of the French National Front. A pilgrimage to the Jewish State is now a must for any aspiring fascist.

One of our ancient sages coined the phrase: “Not for nothing does the starling go to the raven. It’s because they are of the same kind”.

Thanks. But sorry. They are not of my kind.

To quote another proverb: With friends like these, who needs enemies?

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