

The Upstairs/Downstairs Dilemma

by [Stephen Schecter](#) (August 2019)



Four People, Alex Katz, 1953-54

When I visit the city I stay with this friend. I could stay with my son and his wife, but she has a cat and I am allergic to cats. I have stayed with this friend many times before. I

met her through another friend and we hit it off straight away. I liked her laugh, her lack of pretence, her down to earth savviness. She must have liked something like that in me, too, or so I like to think. Over the years we have exchanged hospitality, though the ledger is much in her favor. But I like to think I keep up my end of the friendship which, were it not for our differences about Israel, would be well-nigh untroubled. As it is not, it is, to paraphrase my friend, a good thing we like each other.

When I stay with her I stay in the basement where she has a suite of rooms she uses as her overflow apartment. She keeps some clothes there, her ironing board, her computer still hooked up to a modem with no wi-fi, a kitchen which is not in use but can be used, two bedrooms, a bathroom, and beyond that area her furnace, laundry room, and storage area. She lives on the floor above, and above her she has tenants. She doesn't have wi-fi because she works at a computer all day at her office and does not want to be glued to one at home as well. But I notice she does use her computer at home to check messages, of which there are many, and the lack of wi-fi usually gives her problems, which means she spends more time at her computer in her home that she otherwise would. I point that out feebly, but do not press it.

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Of course, I would prefer her to have wi-fi. It would make my life easier when I visit. But I would prefer even more if we saw eye to eye on Israel. I don't press that point any more or

our friendship might dissolve, and I cherish the friendship. But it makes me sad to think the Israel she loves is the Israel of Labor Zionism and kibbutzim and her network of relatives, friends, and acquaintances she has inherited from her parents and amassed on her own over the years who are proud to live west of the Green Line. She hates the colonists who have settled the land in Judea and Samaria and the governments that support them. She overlooks the fact that some of those governments are governments of which she once approved, but since the parties of which she is fond have declined in popularity, she can give full vent to her disdain for their successors. I have heard her blame them and the settlers they support for the poverty levels in Israel. I know she is wrong, but I also know there is no point trying to point out the one has nothing to do with the other, perhaps even the contrary. Her convictions run deeper than the facts, as they do with many other people I know whose friendship I have ceased to cultivate. But I continue to cultivate hers. I know her love of the country is fierce, and I know she would be devastated to see it destroyed. Were that to happen I can see her among the mourners, which is more than I can say for myself, who no longer believe in national mourning for Jews. Perhaps that is why I overlook this fundamental disagreement we have. Her fierceness is one with her gumption and mercy, which I both admire and value. She also lets me, between visits, keep my shaving cream in her downstairs bathroom, and always knows where to get good bath mats for her shower. These, too, are qualities not to be dismissed lightly.

The last time I was there I saw she had a bath mat just like mine. I felt good about that because I always had trouble getting good bath mats, ones that would fit without slipping yet stay clean with a bit of care. I was moving up in the world, I said to myself, at least in the housekeeping department. My friend is a great shopper. She snaps up deals when she sees them and stores the goods she buys for an

appropriate occasion—birthdays, anniversaries, Jewish holidays, someone's need for a pick-me-upper. She tucks these presents bought for no one in particular around her house and pulls them out when needed, telling the lucky recipient she bought it with her or him in mind. No matter that she bought it months or years ago. She may even have thought of that person when she made her purchase. God works in mysterious ways, even in shopping malls, I would have said, but my friend does not set much store in God. She does, however, believe in righteousness, which usually keeps her in good stead, but sometimes not.

When I went upstairs after my shower I saw she had an invitation to an event from the New Israel Fund. I deduced from the card on her kitchen counter she was still supporting them. I do not approve of the New Israel Fund. It supports, despite its disclaimers, the BDS movement which advocates boycotting and pulling investments from Israel. It implies that every attempt to strengthen the Jewish nature of Israel, like a recent law declaring Israel the Jewish state, is a step towards fascism. It certainly considers the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria an obstacle to peace between Israel and her neighbors. Personally, I consider the New Israel Fund to be anti-Semitic. I also consider it to be supercilious in its pretension to bolster Israeli democracy against Israelis who do not see eye to eye with it on certain issues. Those Israelis would be akin to the deplorables Hillary Clinton castigated because they voted for Trump. It bothers me that my friend continues to support the New Israel Fund and shares their prejudices. It bothers me that she considered Trump anti-Semitic because David Duke supported him when he was running for president. I have not asked her if she still thought Trump was anti-Semitic even though he has been more supportive of Israel than any U.S. president. After all, she had always let me know she never liked Stephen Harper, who was

the most pro-Israel prime minister Canada ever had. I stopped discussing Israel with her after that, as I have with most people, unless they come after me. But I would be lying if I said it does not bother me. Perhaps I should tell her the joke that was circulating on the internet. Question: what's the difference between Donald Trump and liberal American Jews? Answer: Donald Trump has Jewish grandchildren. I doubt she would laugh, and that too bothers me.

I have tried to learn something from this disagreement. I think my friend cannot let go of her world view because it is bound up with her childhood, though childhood here covers a lot of territory, extending well into adult life, as it does for all of us. I have noticed a similar process at work with other friends I have known well and from whom I am now estranged over this issue, the issue being not their world view as much as it is the way it impinges on how they see Israel. For although I consider most people's world view erroneous, I can live with it, disagree with it, even play with it when discussing any topic but Israel. And that is probably because Israel is linked to my childhood, to the innocence I can still feel before I left it and to which I would now make my way back after a long and twisted detour. After all, I used to think as most of my former friends do until a series of incidents turned my head around. I started to understand the world in a new light, no longer divided into top and bottom, right and left, but structured by complexity, freedom, and risk. Most questions henceforth needed to be looked into, not sloganeered into correction. And so I looked into Israel. But the more I looked the more I saw that Israel was in the right and the Arab Muslims were in the wrong. For a world which had suddenly turned myriad shades of grey this was stunning. Suddenly everything I had been fed at Hebrew school turned out to be correct. Israel did not need to be criticized but defended. Now, of course, I also criticize Israel for not

doing enough to defend itself and line myself up with those who advocate conquering and annexing Judea, Samaria and Gaza. For that people think me right-wing. I think I am only following the facts and the lessons of history. Having ignored them for so long, I thought it imperative I pay attention, only to discover people are hardly interested in facts and history. They prefer slogans, which confirm their sense of rightness in the world. But I know between me and the world there is no rightness. There is not even rightness between me and me. A difference not much different from the difference between upstairs and downstairs in my friend's place.

Traditionally, this difference has been known as the mind-body problem, or the difference between our higher and lower functions. On the one hand there is the body, with its claims and urges. On the other there is the mind, the reasoning capacity which is supposed to keep the body in check, rein in the impulses that get us into trouble because the body yearns and the body weeps. Which is only another way of saying sin coucheth at the door, but we shall rule over it. Too often, of course, we do not, but even when we do, we are still as sad as Cain. We are sad for what we have had to give up; the knowledge that once we were naked and happy, once we had an orgasm and were happy, once someone took us in their arms and we were happy. And so we want to return to the place to which we cannot return and, because we cannot, we call it the Promised Land, as if it were something ahead of us, not behind us. Which is why all those people so interested in progress always wind up regressing, willingly ready to leapfrog over facts and history. Even the Jews have not yet caught on that the land to which the Lord was directing their Israelite forefathers was only a goodly land, not the promised land, except for the fact He had promised it to their forefathers' forefathers, a promise He used as His calling card. Fact and history once again.

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Today few people have use for God's calling card. They prefer invitations like the one my friend received from the New Israel Fund. They don't think God ever goes downstairs, and maybe they think they don't go there either. But I do, almost all the time, always watching myself move between the spheres. Even at prayer I watch and am momentarily comforted. The world is too big to take on, my friends too complicated, myself too unsteady. But I can watch and wait for history to take care of things, the history to come which holds neither promise nor comfort.



If you like history you have to like God, at least the Jewish God, from Whom difference descended along with all those wondrous tales of bedlam and mayhem and then all those magnificent prayers of gratitude and praise. For the God of the Hebrews is paradox itself, the Place we cannot occupy but always need, wrath and compassion, a reminder of what it means to be human. And when I give up on explaining to the few friends I have left why even on their terms they should be backing Israel to the hilt and clamor for the defeat of the no-people who pass for Palestinians, I think to myself I can always cite the Master of the Universe Himself, Who long ago acknowledged to His wayward chosen people what a terrible

thing He was doing bringing that Jewish difference into Antiquity. But I know these few friends no longer read the Bible and console myself with the thought that no explanations are necessary other than the simple phrase: because God said so. And I don't even care if they hurl those words back at me when they point out my sins they no longer consider sins although I do, even if I beg off their being mortal, unlike the sins of the misnamed Palestinians which are beyond both mercy and redemption. What can you say to people who consider thugs and gangsters and latter-day Savanarolas as paragons of the oppressed? What do you say to people who are wilfully blind to their misconceptions? Forgive them Father for they know not what they do? But that prescription belongs to the successor religion I do not share. I do not forgive and I do not forget. I simply overlook, as I overlook my own double dealing in upstairs and downstairs.

One could consider that sloth, a deadly sin if ever there was one. But what good would it do to make a federal case out of it, as we used to say when I was a boy? Shall I berate my son and daughter-in-law for putting her cat ahead of me? Shall I hound my friend for her take on Israel when she already knows how wrong I think she is? Shall I stand up and scream in synagogue about the rabbi's take on Israel as a man used to do in the synagogue I used to attend? I remember thinking at the time he was crazy and now I have turned into a crazy man, too. May God preserve us from the descent into madness, we pray on the Day of Atonement. From one Day of Atonement to the next I diligently work to see the descent does not happen. And so I watch and hold my tongue, the first step in a life of observance. One day, perhaps, I shall be ready for the next step. One day soon, I hope, for I am coming to the end of my days.

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Stephen Schechter is a poet, writer and sociologist who specializes in telling stories from the Hebrew Bible. His work can be seen at www.shabbtai.com.

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