

Patrick Lawrence

End times: The wars of Gog and Magog.

Orit Malka Strook serves in the Netanyahu government as minister of settlements and national missions. She has a seat in the Knesset representing the National Religious Party–Religious Zionism, a political amalgam formed last year when the Religious Zionism party merged with the Jewish Home party, which was itself a merger of three Zionist-extremist parties. Orit Malka Strook’s political journey, this is to say, began on the far right and has proceeded to the far, far, far right of the Israeli constellation.

Orit Malka Strook was born in 1960 and is the product of a rigorous education in Israel’s most rigorously Zionist yeshivas. After she married in her late teens or very early twenties—the date is not clear— Orit Malka Strook and her husband, a rabbinical student, moved to a Jewish settlement on the Sinai Peninsula. When Israel handed the Sinai back to Egypt in 1982, the outcome of the Camp David Accords President Carter negotiated four years earlier, Strook and her spouse moved to a Jewish settlement in Hebron.

To give an idea of Orit Malka Strook’s politics in practice, one of her sons was convicted 17 years ago of violently attacking a young Palestinian in Hebron and spent two and a half years in prison for his offense. We can infer with some confidence this must have been an especially vicious incident, as settlers’ attacks on Palestinians have been absolutely routine in the West Bank for many years. Orit

Malka Strook was horrified at her son's criminal conviction, because the court accepted the word of Palestinians over the word of a Jew—so furthering the Palestinian cause, as she saw it, over the cause of the settlers, the Zionist cause.

Let us set aside the thought that Israel should have no such thing as a minister of settlements given they are all illegal, [as the International Court of Justice has at last ruled](#). Straight to my point, Orit Malka Strook, who still resides in Hebron, has lately taken to asserting that Israel is now “living through a miraculous time,” as Amit Varshizky put it in [a very important piece in Haaretz](#) earlier this month. Orit Malka Strook sees the Israeli assault on the Palestinian of Gaza as—from the *Haaretz* piece—“the birth pangs of the Messiah and the advent of redemption.”

The war in Gaza is not a war, of course, but to Orit Malka Strook it is the apocalyptic war God's chosen wage against Gog and Magog, the evil forces described in *Ezekiel* and then *Revelations*. These are the end-days, in Orit Malka Strook's cosmology.

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Reading the *Haaretz* piece and looking into Orit Malka Strook's story, my mind went immediately back to the early years of our new millennium and the administration of George W. Bush. This bears some explanation.

As readers will easily recall, Bush II authorized the invasion of Afghanistan shortly after the events of 11 September 2001, stating in his well-known phrase, “You are either with us or with the terrorists.” Bush and his minders, notably Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, respectively his vice-president and defense secretary, then

set about whipping up public fervor and gathering the support of loyal clients as they planned the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Bush II had a Manichean sensibility. He was a recovering alcoholic and had become a fervent Christian in the course of his recovery. To Bush II our world is divided between good and evil, and this was his thought as he recruited his “coalition of the willing”—a coalition of the coerced, as I have always thought of it.

It is well enough known that Jacque Chirac and his able foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, refused to take France into the coalition. An invasion of Iraq would destabilize the region, the French president thought (quite correctly). This made Paris a holdout among the major Western powers.

“Iraq does not represent an immediate threat that would justify an immediate war.” Chirac insisted two days before the U.S.–led invasion began. “France appeals to the responsibility of all to respect international law. Acting without the U.N.’s legitimacy, putting power before law, means taking on a heavy responsibility.”

Three-quarters of the French stood with Chirac, whose refusal strained Franco–American relations for several years. Remember “freedom fries” and the French as “cheese-eating surrender monkeys?” This was the level to which Bush II brought American discourse as he manipulated public opinion prior to the invasion. Good guys, bad guys. Black hats, white hats.

There is one detail of the U.S.–French confrontation over Iraq that remains very little known. Just before the 20 March 2003 invasion, Bush II called Chirac in a

late-hour attempt to persuade him to change his mind. The exchange was very heated. Bush II made a vigorous argument that with the events of 11 September the prophesied war of Gog and Magog had at last begun. I can only imagine what went through the worldly Chirac's mind, or indeed the look on his face, as Bush II discoursed in this manner.

I know of only one account of this conversation. It is in *The Irony of American Destiny: The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy* (Walker & Co., 2010), a book William Pfaff published late in his life. Pfaff got a description of the Bush–Chirac exchange, if I recall correctly what he told me later, from a high source in the French Foreign Ministry.

Bill Pfaff was a colleague and a friend. He taught me to trace the path of U.S. policy from the narrow project of Soviet containment in the immediate postwar years to the never-ending messianic mission to save the world with which we now live. Bush II and his Gog and Magog delusions were preposterous, yes. But they were, illogically and logically at once, the outcome of a consciousness that had endured—how shall we count?—since the 1945 victories, or since Wilson's make-the-world-safe-for-democracy, or the seventeenth century Pilgrim landings.

Pfaff was pithily right to name his book as he did. American foreign policy has been a tragedy since the U.S. has had one worthy of the term, beginning in the last years of the nineteenth century. With the world wars among the exceptions, it has been a line of tragedies from Wilsonian universalism through the Cold War and Vietnam and the post–Cold War triumphalism of the 1990s.

Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, Libya, Syria: The tragedies have but worsened since 11 September. What unifies these disastrous adventures? This is simply understood. Few senior officials since Bush II have professed to view the world as an end-times confrontation with Gog and Magog, but the fundamental belief remains just as Bush II had it: It is good-vs.-evil in our time, and it is as simple as that. Mike Pompeo, Trumps’s secretary of state and another Christian true believer, actually did think in terms of the end-times. Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security adviser, formed his outlook—this by his own admission—as he watched Westerns and Terminator films during his youth. “I see the world as divided between good guys and bad guys,” he has unabashedly said.

We are talking, in sum, about a set of policies not rooted in thinking but in belief—irrational policies, in a word. [The Cost of War Project](#) at Brown University, a distinguished and honorable undertaking, measures the results of Washington’s post-11 September adventures quite precisely: \$8 trillion, 905,000 casualties.

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Orit Malka Strook is prominent among those who believe the Zionist state now confronts the evil ones prophesied in *Ezekiel*, but she is not alone: By no means is she an isolated figure. “Increasing numbers in right-wing circles,” Amit Varshizky writes in *Haaretz*, “have lately joined Strook [sic] in identifying the war in Gaza with the War of Gog and Magog.” They subscribe, or some do, to the strange truths of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the founder of religious Zionism in the late nineteenth century. “When there is a great war in the world,” he preached, “the power of the Messiah awakens.”

We should sit up and consider the *Haaretz* report carefully. This believing-without-thinking is well inside the Netanyahu regime by virtue of Bibi's political dependence on extremist Zionists for his survival. There are implications to think about here.

Americans have long told themselves grand, delusional stories to justify their long history of injustices and cruelties, Bush II's Gog and Magog bit being merely an over-the-top telling, a variant on the theme. U.S. policy, certainly since the 11 September disasters, has been based ever less on rational calculation—to say nothing of concern for the global commonweal—than on what I think of as desperately held beliefs in the face of twenty-first century realities.

It is the same with the Israelis as the killing proceeds daily in Gaza and, increasingly, in the West Bank. Israeli policy—and this is true of American policy, too, at bottom—is conceived and executed by people who do not act rationally. They answer to their gods, whether this means Yahweh or divine Providence.

This means there is no talking to these people, for they live and act behind the thick, protective wall of messianic belief. They may pretend to listen to others, but they do not hear. Nothing others may say can change them. This is a grave circumstance, given the power people who act irrationally hold.

Between the U.S. and Israel, our world is defined by those who view it in radically simplistic binaries. To them there is no place for complexity in our increasingly complex world. One could argue this is a good definition of incompetence. This is our dreadful circumstance—dreadful because the way forward, beyond these

people, cannot be but long and arduous. And here we come to a final conclusion of sorts.

Only failure holds any promise of forcing the U.S. to change course. I unshyly applaud all of America's foreign policy failures for this reason, although I must quickly add that failure very often disappoints because the policy cliques in Washington seem committed to going from one failure to the next without changing anything.

If anything, Zionist Israel appears yet more dedicated than the U.S. to its course of righteous murder and destruction in the name of its apocalyptic destiny. This seems to me the grimmest reality of our time. If the assault Israel prosecutes in Gaza and the West bank—and now possibly in Lebanon and Iran—is an end-days battle against Gog and Magog, how can the righteous desist, or make peace, or negotiate an enduring settlement? How can it end short of their own destruction?

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