

Zohar Shavit

Cabinet minister for rent

The demand by Yisrael Beiteinu chairman Avigdor Lieberman that Prof. Daniel Friedmann be appointed justice minister on behalf of his party appears at first like a joke from the satirical television show "Eretz, Nehederet" ("A Wonderful Country") and afterward like a deliberate provocation – a red cape before the bull of the justice and law enforcement system. Now we know that the demand is a serious one, that Likud has not rejected it outright and might even be willing to accept it.

I waited over a week for Prof. Friedmann's response. I expected the incumbent justice minister to announce that he rejected the idea out of hand, because he is not a professor for hire. I expected him to announce that he was not willing to switch from being the emissary of a suspicious prime minister to the emissary of a suspicious party head. I expected him to turn down the idea unequivocally on the grounds that Yisrael Beiteinu is a one-man party, and that this one man calls the shots. I expected him to say he was unwilling to serve in the cabinet as the representative of a party that is calling for the passage of a completely anti-democratic constitution.

Above all, I hoped he would declare that he was not willing, under any circumstance, to be appointed by someone who is suspected of criminal activity. True, Lieberman has not been charged and certainly has not been convicted, but a law professor – and surely Prof. Friedmann – is supposed to know more than the ordinary citizen about the nature of the violations Lieberman is alleged to have committed. He is also supposed to not be disingenuous, to understand precisely what he himself has done to make himself Lieberman's darling and protege.

Prof. Friedmann did not dismiss the idea, but instead accepted the offer – for now, at least, quietly, and he is apparently willing to assume the role of justice minister for hire. In 1949 Leah Goldberg published

"Room for Rent" in an effort to condemn racism. In 2009 a law professor is willing to be appointed cabinet minister on behalf of someone who openly advocates racism.

Prof. Friedmann is sure to argue that he has a clear and proper agenda, and he has an important mission that he did not complete in his previous term. Even if we allow, for the sake of argument, that he indeed has a suitable agenda and an important mission, the question still remains: In whose names, with whose support, and in the service of which agenda and intentions, overt and covert, is he being sent back to the cabinet and the Justice Ministry?

If there is a case worthy of the name "treason of the intellectuals," then the case of Prof. Friedmann is it; a case that casts a stain not only on law professors but on all of academia, shaming them and it.

And where are the heads of Likud? Why are those who stridently defended the independence of the justice system against Friedmann not being heard? Where are Benny Begin, Dan Meridor and others who returned to the ranks of Likud in order to continue the path of Menachem Begin and reinforce his heritage as a defender of the independence of the justice and law enforcement systems? From them, too, I expected to hear protest and public condemnation. After all, they know what is behind the insistent demand to retain Friedmann as justice minister. I hoped they would declare that the independence of these systems is much more important than coalition considerations and demand that the red rag of Lieberman provocation be removed from the political and public agenda. I certainly expected them not to agree to participate in it. But their voice was not heard.

Woe to us if their voice is heard only when it is too late.

The writer is a professor at the Unit for Culture Research, Tel Aviv University.