

# Yair Lapid and The Elections in Israel

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am pleasantly surprised by the results of the latest elections in Israel. Not because anything has significantly changed, but precisely because, other than superficially, it hasn't.

The Jewish vote in Israel is divided, roughly speaking, between three major groupings of opinion: secular liberal center to left, secular right-wing, and the religious vote which supports whichever government gives them more money. Of course there are overlaps, such as religious parties that are against ceding an inch of territory for peace and those who don't care what the State does so long as they get their payoffs. The secular center wants the religious world to take on more responsibility for the nation, but is not as anti-religious as the secular left. And let us not forget the Arab vote which sadly falls between all the stools.

Over the years I cannot count the number of changes in names, splits, realignments, one-man parties that mushroom, see the light of day, and soon wither, transform themselves, or merge. And politicians hop skip and jump between them. Does anyone remember how many parties Tzipi Livni has stood for?

The big news before the election was that the rabid national religious Naftali Bennett would command the right. He certainly revived a moribund party, but he became no king-maker. The news after the election was that Yair Lapid's new party Yesh Atid (There Is A Future) was the big winner. If Netanyahu's Likud party aligns with the religious parties, he will form a government in which he will be in hock to them and nothing changes. If he aligns with Yair Lapid, as he tried and failed to do with Livni's Kadima last time round, we might actually see some changes in Israeli society.

I am a great believer in balance, in the Golden Mean, in avoiding extremes. I also believe that the saving grace of democracies is that one can get rid of the old and in with new. But forgive my skepticism if I reiterate that I believe that nothing much will change, simply because of the way the system works and because no one has an agenda to change it for fear that they might lose out next time round.

Until this election, no one in power had a stake in peace negotiations, a desire to try to avoid provocation with the Palestinians or the Americans, or a vision of how to avoid occupation. No one had the power to tell Netanyahu and his thankfully diminished Russian Mafioso foreign minister that braggadocio gets you nowhere and the longer a Palestinian minority is oppressed the more you lose any vestige of moral authority or hope for a normal life.

The question is what power might do to Lapid if he gets into bed with Bibi. I like Lapid's agenda and, unlike his father's brief grab at power, he has

included some religious personalities in his party. Unlike Livni, I think Lapid might just be prepared to sit at the same table as Netanyahu. But his room for maneuver is limited. Because Netanyahu can always wave the red (or white) flag of the religious block that refuses to countenance any change in the internal status quo. They are adamantly set against community service, if not the army, for Charedi men, or any curb on the coercive excesses of the rabbinate as it veers further and further to the lunatic fringes.

I desperately want to see the secular parties stand up to the religious parties and sideline them and their blackmail. Will Lapid achieve this and also help move towards making Israel a more just society, one that is not dominated by a handful of families and oligarchs who control most of the wealth? I doubt it, but I can hope can't I?

I should add that I am also pleased with Yachimovich's reviving the fortunes of the old left-wing Eastern European Mapai. The electorate has shown that it is divided and no group has the right to monopolize power. It is the sign of a healthy democracy that there is this religious, social, and political variety and balance that can prevent any one side from hijacking the state altogether.

When one looks around at the disasters unfolding in the states around Israel, one can understand the feeling that there is no one to talk to and no hope for a peaceful solution. Many Israelis are proud of the differences between their state and the surrounding disasters, even if there is a fierce battle going on for its soul. I want Israel to have a religious dimension. I want to see a sector of its society passionately defend Israel's existence. I also want to see a stout defense of civil liberties, freedoms, and equalities. I want to see a supreme court with both sides represented, but without either one being completely in control. In disagreement lies health. In unanimity lies suffocation. This election highlighted once again the rich and frustrating varieties of Israeli and Jewish life.

Avishai Margalit writes, in the latest New York Review of Books, about the impact of the British Mandate. He quotes the pro-Arab Sir Harold Beeley that the British encouraged the Arabs not to accept partition in 1947 and convinced them that they, with British support, would win the war against the new state and drive the Jews out. A similar mood of malevolent self-deception prevails in much of the Arab world today. The PLO is and has always been too scared of agreeing to a genuine settlement for fear that the Arab street would decimate them as quislings. But also because everyone else in the Muslim world, Europe, and beyond keeps whispering that if they hold out they'll get a better deal.

At the same time, right-wing Israelis delude themselves that they can defy the rest of the world. I pray that Lapid can perform a miracle, get Tzipi Livni, Shelly Yachimovich, and the rest of the secular moderates to join him and Bibi to recalibrate Israeli society, end the occupation, and stop further settlement expansion. Allow the Palestinians to declare their own state and leave them to make a success or a mess of it (with fences, drones, and electronic surveillance Israel can still keep its tabs on security). It is pointless to wait for negotiations that cannot work. Hamas would never

concede what Abu Maazen might, in his dreams; and Abu Maazen will not concede anything that might get him assassinated. But to hold ordinary people hostage on either side is no solution either.

If Lapid (with or without Bibi's help) could achieve these three goals of conciliation with the Arabs, refusing to concede to the Charedi world, and facing up to corruption, I might even declare him the Messiah. I would certainly institute a new Jewish holiday, the Festival of Sanity, and promptly break open the best single malt I could lay my hands on.