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SHABBAT SHALOM

COMING JAN. 22 ELECTION

AS ISRAEL, REFLECTING STATUS QUO, SHIFTS TO RIGHT, OUTLINE OF EMERGENT “TWO-PARTY SYSTEM” DISCERNABLE

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WHY ISRAEL HAS SHIFTED TO THE RIGHT

Jonathan S. Tobin

Commentary, Dec. 20, 2012

If liberal American Jews weren't already dismayed about the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is a shoe-in to be re-elected in next month's election, the latest political news out of Israel may give them conniption fits. The results of new polls show that Netanyahu's Likud and its coalition partners are set to exceed the strong governing majority they had in the current Knesset. But the really interesting numbers are those that show that the main party to the right of the Likud—the Habeyit Hayehudi or Jewish Home Party—is on track to be the third largest in the next parliament with only Likud and Labor (set to finish a distant second) ahead of it.

This will give residents and supporters of the settlement movement an even louder voice in the next Knesset than their already healthy contingent in the current one. This will be interpreted by some on the left as a sign of Israel's depravity or indifference to peace. But the reason for it is clear.

Whereas in Israel's past it could be asserted that the Likud represented Israel's right-wing constituency, it has, to the shock and dismay of many in the left-wing Israeli media, become the center. That is not because more Israelis are supporters of increasing settlement throughout the West Bank. They are not. Rather it is due to the fact that the Israeli center as well as even many on what we used to call the Israeli left, have given up on the Palestinians. They know that neither Fatah in the West Bank nor Hamas in Gaza will ever recognize Israel's legitimacy no matter where its borders are drawn. So they have abandoned those parties that hold onto the illusion of peace in favor of those with a more realistic vision while those on the right are now embracing parties like Habeyit Hayehudi in order to hold Netanyahu's feet to the fire and prevent him from making concessions that will neither entice the Palestinians to the negotiating table nor increase its popularity abroad.

Habeyit Hayehudi is the beneficiary in part of the merger of the Likud with Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu. Rather than polls showing Likud getting as many seats as the two parties got in the last election, it is registering a loss of several places as some nationalist voters abandon the new conglomerate for its more ideological rival to the right. Though the enlarged Likud will still gain several seats from the mark it won in the 2009 vote that brought Netanyahu back into power and make it by far the largest in the Knesset with 35, Habeyit Hayehudi is set to get 12 with another pro-settlement party getting another two. That will double the number of seats those smaller parties won four years ago. Combined with the Orthodox religious parties, that will give Netanyahu nearly 70 seats out of 120 next year even before any of the centrist members join him as some undoubtedly will do.

Habeyit Hayehudi also has the advantage of a new leader in the 40-year-old Naftali Bennett. He is the son of American immigrants who is a former chief of staff to Netanyahu and who earned great wealth through the sale of his Internet security firm. In him, Israel's nationalist camp now has an articulate and savvy figure who can say things about the Palestinians that Netanyahu, who, as David Horowitz of the Times of Israel pointed out in an insightful analysis, cannot utter for fear of worsening relations with the United States.

Bennett's powerful position, which will be enhanced by a Cabinet portfolio that he will demand and get, will make the next Knesset harder for Netanyahu to manage. The absence of several Likud moderates who have been replaced by more nationalist and younger figures on the party's Knesset list will also ensure that the prime minister will not be straying far from the wishes of his voters the way some of his predecessors have done.

This won't necessarily mean that Netanyahu will move to build throughout the West Bank the way Bennett would like. But it will strengthen his resolve to continue to do so in Jerusalem and its suburbs as well as the major settlement blocs that Israel will hold onto even in the theoretical scenario where

the Palestinians finally give in and accept a two-state solution. That will lead to much gnashing of the teeth on the part of liberal Jews who are uncomfortable with Netanyahu, let alone those to his right. But those who lament this development should understand that the Israeli people are making this choice with their eyes wide open.

Even Labor, the party that is historically associated with the peace process, has more or less abandoned the issue of reconciliation with the Palestinians in this election and instead is concentrating on economic and social justice issues. Those lists that are still devoted to the peace process, including the new party led by former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, have been thoroughly marginalized.

Unlike most Israelis, many if not most American Jews and many non-Jewish friends of Israel haven't drawn conclusions from the last 20 years of failed peace processing. They cling instead to the fables about the Palestinians that once fueled the post-Oslo euphoria in Israel but which have now been discarded there.

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ISRAELIS: NO MORE 'BIG IDEAS TO ALTER STATUS QUO'

Evelyn Gordon

[Jerusalem Post Magazine](#), Jan. 3, 2013

Writing in *The Jerusalem Post* on Friday [Dec. 28], Donniel Hartman lamented the lack of “new ideas” in this election campaign. Campaigns, he proclaimed, should be a time for politicians to put forth “noble and naïve ideas,” to compete over “new ways to change the status quo;” a campaign that doesn't do this is “dangerous for Israel and its future.”

Hartman's plaint is a perfect snapshot of the thinking that has made Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu the unchallenged king of Israeli politics. Because for 20 years, Israelis have suffered through a succession of prime ministers who not only produced, but implemented, “noble and naïve ideas” to “change the status quo.” And what Israelis discovered is that such ideas are frequently far more “dangerous for Israel and its future” than the cautious conservatism Netanyahu epitomizes.

This isn't to imply that Netanyahu has no ideas. He actually has quite a few, and many are even good ones. But none are of the big, radical, “noble and naïve” type. What he has consistently proposed, over two terms of office, is cautious, incremental change that will hopefully leave the country a bit better than he found it, but probably won't affect a major revolution. And Israelis confidently expect the same from a third term.

Ironically, Netanyahu's discomfort with big, radical ideas led him to a landslide loss in 1999, when Israelis opted for a rival who promised a host of them: unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, a final-status agreement with the Palestinians, a socioeconomic revolution that would finally “get the old woman out of the hospital corridor,” and more.

Yet that very same aversion to big, radical ideas is why he enjoys massive margins of support today. A Haaretz poll last week, for instance, asked respondents which party leader they trusted most on security, economics and diplomatic negotiations. On all three issues, Netanyahu outpolled his nearest rival by more than 2:1; on security, the margin was more than 4:1.

If you look merely at what Netanyahu has done, these numbers seem almost incomprehensible. After all, he hasn't won any wars or thwarted any major security threat; the high cost of living and other economic problems sparked the biggest socioeconomic protests in decades last year; and not only has

he failed to negotiate any major diplomatic agreements, but much of the world holds him responsible for this failure.

Yet if you look at what Netanyahu hasn't done, his popularity becomes instantly understandable. He didn't sign a breakthrough "peace" agreement that created a terrorist quasi-state in the West Bank, from which Palestinian suicide bombers and gunmen proceeded to slaughter over 1,300 Israelis in a little over a decade. He didn't unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon or Gaza, thereby abandoning them to the rule of terrorist organizations that have subsequently fired more than 16,000 rockets at Israel. He didn't launch a grand diplomatic summit that ended up sparking a terrorist war. He didn't conduct any failed wars, in either the military or the public-relations sense. He didn't propose any sweeping territorial concessions that, had they been accepted, would have proven as detrimental to Israel's security as every previous such concession has.

In short, unlike his predecessors, he produced no big ideas for changing the status quo – no "peace agreements," no unilateral withdrawals, no sweeping final-status proposals, no failed wars "to destroy Hezbollah or Hamas once and for all" (a wildly inappropriate aim if you're unwilling to do what's necessary to achieve it). And Israelis, battered and shell-shocked by the disastrous consequences of all these previous big ideas, are grateful for the quiet his cautious, risk-averse policies have produced. But it's not just that his aversion to grandiose ideas has prevented any major new disasters. It's that by eschewing such big ideas, he has managed to implement modest but significant improvements.

On the security front, he has a laudable track record on counterterrorism. During his first term, he reduced terrorist deaths by 70 percent, from 211 in 1993-96 to 63 in 1996-99. During his current term, he kept terror at the relatively low level inherited from his predecessor.

Economically, for all the real problems that sparked last year's socioeconomic protests, Israel is doing well compared to the rest of the West. Its 7% unemployment rate is vastly better than the Eurozone average of 11.7%; in some Eurozone countries, like Spain and Greece, unemployment has soared to over 25%. The Eurozone has also experienced zero or negative growth for the last four quarters; Israel, by contrast, posted growth of about 3.3% this year.

And diplomatically, Netanyahu succeeded in getting the world to impose much tougher sanctions on Iran, something all his predecessors signally failed to do. Indeed, even his most bitter opponents find themselves forced to acknowledge his achievements. Here, for instance, is what columnist Ari Shavit of the far-left *Haaretz* wrote in October: "Netanyahu's government ... correctly focused on the Iranian nuclear challenge and acted against it with skill and ingenuity, most of the time. It led a necessary reform of higher education and an important reform of preschool education, paved roads and built railway lines."

And here's *Haaretz* editor-in-chief Aluf Benn, writing two weeks ago: "[Netanyahu] said he'd mobilize international public opinion to escalate the sanctions against Iran and prepare the Israel Defense Forces for attack, and he did. He said he'd act to raise the Palestinians' standard of living, and it rose. He spoke out against unilateral withdrawals, and he didn't withdraw. He promised that Israel's students would reach the top 10 in international exams, and their performance has improved. He wrote he would take care of the crime families, and they've dropped out of the public agenda."

Like many Israelis, I think Netanyahu could and should have done far more to address Israel's numerous domestic problems, and I'm disappointed that he didn't. Nevertheless, one could do far worse than making some modest improvements while avoiding any major disasters. And after two decades of "noble and naïve" ideas that left the country battered and bloody, Israelis understand this quite well. That's why most are breathing a quiet sigh of relief at the prospect of four more years without them.

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ISRAEL'S NEW TWO-PARTY SYSTEM: A FORCE FOR EXTREMISM

Donniel Hartman

[Jerusalem Post](#), Jan. 3, 2013

A new feature has emerged in Israeli politics this election season: the evolution of our political culture into a de facto two-party system similar to the Republican and Democrat divide in the US, referred to here as the Right and the Center-Left. There are indeed two sectorial groups outside this divide – haredim and Arabs. The former, however, will join either of the two “parties,” depending on which is willing to greater serve the interests of its sector, while the latter always remains in the opposition.

It is true that these two parties are divided into multiple mini-parties. However, the fact that the two major parties (the Likud and Yisrael Beytenu) on the Right have amalgamated, and the third (Bayit Yehudi) is running on the platform of being their coalition partner, while on the Left, politicians are jumping from sub-party to sub-party, avoiding a formal unification primarily because of ego, are all evidence of the fact that the old multiple party system is dead.

Voters and politicians are no longer loyal or bound to a sub-party but to the larger party bloc, and shift their affiliations freely within this bloc without feeling any remorse or nostalgia. The sub-party is but a means and a platform to serve them without any ability to generate sustained loyalty. Thus, for example, Amir Peretz can wake up in the morning as one of the leaders of the Labor Party and go to sleep at night as one of the leaders of The Tzipi Livni Party (Hatnuah), itself formed by Livni, the former leader of the Kadima Party. Those who see all of this as opportunism fail to realize the profound shift within Israeli political culture from the multiparty to the two party system.

Similarly, the dramatic growth in popularity of the heretofore religious-Zionist sectorial party, the Bayit Yehudi, with the support of secular former Likud loyalists, the significant infiltration into the Likud Knesset candidates list of individuals and ideologues who are using the Likud base to mainstream positions which in the past were the domain of the extreme Right, and on the Left, with the disintegration of the popular base of Kadima, the largest party in the last Knesset, and its redistribution within the Center-Left “party,” are again evidence of the fact that the electorate is thinking within the context of a two-party model, with the sub-parties being merely the vehicle du jour to best represent their core commitments.

While this emergence of a two-party system generates greater clarity for the electorate and promises stability for the government, the fact that, as distinct from the United States, it is based on sub-party components, creates a foundation for a particularly toxic and destructive phenomenon. Because most voters are already clearly aligned within one of the two blocs, the main campaigns of the sub-parties are not against those within the other bloc but within their own. This reality generates a move to unnecessary radicalism, as each sub-party attempts to brand itself as unique.

In the current election season, the right-wing “party,” which will win the next election, is plagued by a competition amongst its sub-parties as to who is more “pro-settlement,” more “anti-Mahmoud Abbas” and more vociferous in protecting and caring for the “Jewish Israel.”

In the past, the conventional wisdom was that you could only win an election in Israel from the Center. While Binyamin Netanyahu, from the perspective of those on the Left, is clearly on the Right, the cornerstone of his political success was his laying hold to the position of the Center- Right. His embrace of Bennie Begin, with his steadfast commitment to democracy and liberalism, and Dan Meridor, a longstanding supporter of both of these values, as well as moderation in foreign policy,

together with his 2009 Bar-Ilan University speech and ongoing vetoes of most of the anti-democratic legislation put forward by the Knesset, all served to make Netanyahu both electable and acceptable to a broad spectrum of Israelis on both sides of the political divide.

In this campaign, however, not only is Netanyahu going into the electoral battle without the above allies, but more and more of his party members believe that the most effective way to combat the Bayit Yehudi is to outflank it on the Right. In this context, the Bar-Ilan speech accepting a two-state solution in theory is now a liability, and spokespeople for the heretofore center-right Likud allow themselves to vocalize a nationalistic, xenophobic and at times even anti-democratic rhetoric that in the past never would even have been considered.

One of the lessons of the recent US election is that you cannot win the country from either extreme, and the Republican Party, if it wants to return to power, will have to look carefully at the consequences of a platform that represents the radical Right within the party. The advantage that the Republican Party has is that it lost the election. There is nothing like the harsh reality of failure to generate reevaluation and refocus.

In the Israeli dual-party, sub-party system, however, such a corrective does not exist. The right-wing party will win on the basis of a center-right majority within Israel. However, this center-right will be governed by individuals and platforms which represent extreme sub-party ideologies. There are some who find comfort in the belief that election rhetoric does not represent day-after Election Day policies. This is the case only when there are moderating forces at the table. In our frenzy to win the sub-party battles, however, we have stacked the deck against moderation, and I am fearful that we lack the internal forces to heal ourselves.

As we move toward the end of the election season it is critical that Center-Right voices emerge with moral and ideological clarity, compelled by a vision of what will be good for the country, regardless of its significance in the sub-party conflict. It will be a mistake if these voices remain silent, waiting to emerge in the safety of the day after the elections. A culture, rhetoric and public discourse about policy are taking root in these elections which will not be easily uprooted. As our rabbis teach us, if not now, when? Every day that this discourse is allowed to rule dramatically changes not the outcome of this election but the future of Israeli society.

Finally, sub-parties on the Center-Left must enter into the fray, not as voices in the opposition but as unabashed coalition partner aspirants. The cynics will say that in doing so they are expressing a void of values and a commitment to power over ideology. Nothing could be further from the truth. Politics is about using power to actualize ideology. In the new Israeli two-party system, we don't need a national unity government. We need sub-parties from both "parties" to join together to save us from ourselves.

Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman is president of the Shalom Hartman Institute.

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ON TOPIC

A Dose Of Nuance: Not Just France With Humour: [Daniel Gordis, *Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 13, 2012](#)— What Jewish vision animates your social goals for Israel? If you've got nothing to say about that, why should any of us vote for you? Are you saying anything about your vision for this country that you couldn't say if you were running for office in France, or Sweden or Denmark? Anything at all about the Jewish nature of this country? If you did, I might just vote for you.

Say No To Hallucination Dealers: [Dan Margalit, *Israel Hayom*, Jan. 4, 2013](#)—A voice is needed that combines bravery, prudence, strength and cool-headedness. A voice is needed that warns the young, engaged in

their own personal problems, against false prophets. A voice against those who promise everything for free. A voice against those who prattle on in the language of charlatans about how, if we just let them, they can bring peace now or redeem the entire land.

Shamir: If Convicted, My Party Leader [Lieberman] Must Leave Politics: Ron Friedman, *Times of Israel*, Jan. 4, 2013—Rookie politician says public servants who've faltered should make way for those who haven't; accuses Netanyahu of flip-flopping on Palestinian state

Friday Polls Show Jewish Home Surge May Have Been An Outlier: Joshua Davidovich, *Times of Israel*, Jan. 4, 2013—Right-wing party seen getting 13-14 seats, and not 18 predicted by Israel Radio poll a day earlier. Both polls show the joint Likud-Yisrael Beytenu joint list leading the pack, with 36 seats according to Maariv, and 34 according to Israel Hayom. The ruling party had been predicted to get over 40 seats in early preelection polling, but recent polls have shown it bleeding voters on the right to Jewish Home.

Likud Rises as Leftists Vow No Coalition: Maayana Miskin, *Israel National News*, Jan. 4, 2013—Likud Beytenu regains losses in the polls, ending with enough support to win 36 Knesset seats, according to a new poll released Friday by Maariv/nrg. Left-wing parties say they will try to thwart a coalition.

A Labor-Habayit Hayehudi Alliance?: Mati Tuchfeld, *Israel Hayom*, Jan. 4, 2013—Habayit Hayehudi Chairman Naftali Bennett isn't ruling out the possibility of joining forces with Labor Chairwoman Shelly Yachimovich • In the meantime, he is trying to keep Eli Ben-Dahan and Orit Struck, fellow party members that he views as too extreme, under wraps.

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