

A Move to the Center

Uri Avnery

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IT WAS THE night of the optimists.

Tuesday at 10.01 pm, a minute after the ballot boxes were sealed, the three TV news programs announced the results of their exit polls.

The dire predictions of the pessimists were scattered to the winds.

Israel has not gone crazy.

It has not moved to the right. The fascists have not taken over the Knesset. Binyamin Netanyahu has not been strengthened. Far from it.

Israel has moved to the center.

It was not a historic turning moment, like the takeover of Menachem Begin in 1977, after two generations of Labor Party rule. But it was a significant change.

All this after an election campaign without content, without excitement, without any discernible emotion.

On election day, which is an official holiday, I repeatedly looked out of my window, above one of Tel Aviv's main streets. There was not the slightest indication that anything special was going on. In previous elections, the street was crowded with taxis and private cars covered with party posters, carrying voters to the polling stations. This time I did not see a single one.

In the polling station, I was alone. But the beach was crowded. People had taken their dogs and children to play in the sand under the brilliant winter sun, sailing boats dotted the blue sea. Hundreds of thousands drove to the Galilee or the Negev. Many had hired a Zimmer (curiously we use the German word for a bed-and-breakfast room).

But by the end of the day, almost 67% of Israelis had voted—more than last time. Even the Arab citizens, most of whom did not vote during the day, suddenly awoke and thronged the ballot stations during the last two hours—after the Arab parties cooperated in a massive action to get the voters out.

WHEN THE exit polls were published, the leaders of half a dozen parties, including Netanyahu, hastened to make victory speeches. A few hours later, most of them, Netanyahu included, looked silly. The real results changed the picture only slightly, but enough for some to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

The great loser of the election is Binyamin Netanyahu. At the last moment before the start of the campaign he

united his list with that of Avigdor Lieberman. That made him seemingly invincible. No one doubted that he would win, and win big. Experts gave him 45 seats, up from the 42 the two lists had in the outgoing Knesset.

That would have put him in a position where he could pick coalition partners (or, rather, coalition servants) at will.

He ended up with a mere 31 seats—losing a quarter of his strength. It was a slap in the face. His main election slogan was “*A strong leader, A strong Israel*”. Strong no more. He will still become Prime Minister again, but as a shadow of his former self. Politically he is near his end.

What remains of his faction makes up a quarter of the next Knesset. That means that he will be a minority in any coalition he may be able to put together (which needs 61 members at least). If Lieberman's people are deducted from the number, Likud proper has just 20 seats, only one more than the real victor of this election.

THE REAL VICTOR is Ya'ir Lapid, who amazed everyone, especially himself (and me), with an astounding 19 seats. That makes him the second largest faction in the Knesset, after Likud-Beitenu.

How did he do it? Well, he has the handsome, youthful look and body language of a TV anchorman, which indeed he was for many years. Everyone knows his face. His message consisted of platitudes, which upset no one. Though now almost 50 years old, he was the candidate of the young.

His victory is part of a generational change. Like Naf-tali Bennett on the right, he attracted young people who are fed up with the old system, the old parties, the old, hackneyed slogans. They were not looking for a new ideology, but for a new face. Lapid's was the most handsome face around.

But it cannot be overlooked that Lapid in the center beat his nearest competitor for young votes—Bennett on the right. While Lapid did not propagate any ideology, Bennett did everything possible to disguise his. He went to Tel Aviv's pubs, presented himself as everyman's (and everywoman's) good guy, wooed secular, liberal youngsters.

Throughout the campaign, Bennett appeared to be the rising star on the political firmament, the great surprise of

this election, the symbol of Israel's fatal move to the right.

There was another similarity between the two: both worked hard. While the other parties relied mostly on TV to carry their message, Lapid "plowed" the country all through last year, building an organization, talking to people, attracting groups of faithful followers. So did Bennett.

But in the end, when a young person had to choose between the two, he or she could not overlook the fact that Lapid belonged to a democratic, liberal Israel and was committed to the two-state peace solution, while Bennett was an extreme advocate of the settlers and of Greater Israel, an enemy of the Arabs and of the Supreme Court.

The verdict of the young was unequivocal: 19 for Lapid, only 12 for Bennett.

THE GREATEST disappointment was in store for Shelly Yachimovich. She was absolutely certain that her rejuvenated Labor Party would become the second largest faction in the Knesset. She even presented herself as a possible replacement for Netanyahu.

Both she and Lapid profited from the huge social protest of the summer of 2011, which pushed war and the occupation off the agenda. Even Netanyahu did not dare to bring up the attack on Iran and the extension of the settlements. But in the end, Lapid profited more than Shelly.

It appears that Shelly's single-minded concentration on social justice was a mistake. If she had combined her social platform with Tzipi Livni's peace negotiation agenda, she might well have fulfilled her ambition and formed the second-largest faction.

Tzipi's defeat—just 6 seats—was pitiable. She joined the fray only two months ago, after a lot of hesitation, which seems to be her trademark. Her single-minded concentration on the "political arrangement" with the Palestinians—not "peace", God forbid—ran against the trend.

People who really want peace voted (like me) for Meretz, who can boast a resounding achievement, doubling their strength from 3 to 6. That is also a striking feature of this election.

It appears also that quite a number of Jews gave their vote to the mainly-Arab communist Hadash party, which was also strengthened.

THE WHOLE thing boils down to two numbers: 61 for the Right-Religious bloc, 59 for the Center-Left-Arab bloc. One single member could have made all the difference. The Arab citizens could have easily provided that

member.

I noticed that all three TV stations sent their teams to the headquarters of every single Jewish party, including those who did not surmount the 2% hurdle (like, thank God, the religious-fascist Kahanist list) but not to any of the three Arab parties.

By tacit agreement, the Arabs were treated as not really belonging. The Left (or "Center-Left, as they preferred to be called) relegated them to membership in the "Blocking-Bloc", those who could block Netanyahu's ability to form a coalition. The Arabs themselves were not consulted.

Lapid disposed of the "blocking bloc" rapidly. He made short shrift of the idea that he could be in the same bloc with Hanin Zuabi (or with any Arab party, for that matter.) He also squashed the idea that he had ambitions to be Prime Minister. He was not prepared for such an advance, having no political experience at all.

EVEN THOUGH the "blocking bloc" will not materialize, it will be very difficult for Netanyahu to form a coalition.

The prospect of a purely right-wing coalition has disappeared. It is impossible to govern with just 61 seats (though Netanyahu could initially try to form such a small coalition, hoping to add more factions later). He will need Lapid, who would become a central figure in the government. Indeed, Netanyahu called him an hour after the ballots closed.

In any case, Netanyahu will need one or more of the center parties, making the next government much less dangerous.

WHAT IS the lesson of this election?

The right-religious bloc lost the election, but the "center-left" did not win it, because they could not put forward a credible candidate for prime minister, nor a credible alternative governing party with a solid, comprehensive blueprint for the solution of Israel's basic problems.

To create such a new force, it is absolutely vital to integrate the Arab citizens in the political process as full-fledged partners. By keeping the Arabs out, the Left is castrating itself. A new Jewish-Arab left, a community of outlook, political language and interests, must be created—and this act of creation must start right now.

The battle for Israel is not lost. Israel's "move to the right" has been blocked and is far from inevitable. We Israelis are not as crazy as we look.

This battle has ended in a draw. The next round can be won. It depends on us.