

A New Start

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ONE DAY THE Israeli Labor Party felt that it needed a new leader.

That happens to this party every couple of years. The party is in bad shape. It looks more like a political corpse than a living organism. Wanted: a new leader, charismatic, energetic, enthusiastic.

So they found Avi Gabbay.

Why him? Nobody is really sure.

Avi Gabbay has no visible qualities of political leadership. No charisma at all. No special energy. No enthusiasm himself and no ability to inspire enthusiasm in others.

After serving as a government employee dealing with the mobile phone industry, he himself became the successful director of the largest mobile phone concern. Then he went into politics and joined a moderate right-wing party, and was appointed Minister for the Protection of the Environment. When the extreme right-winger Avigdor Lieberman was appointed Minister of Defense, Gabbay resigned from the government and his party and joined Labor. That was only a year ago.

He has one significant asset: he is a Mizrahi, an oriental Jew. His parents are immigrants from Morocco, he is the seventh of eight children. Since the Labor party is considered a Western, Ashkenazi, elitist grouping, these passive attributes are important. Up to a point.

GABBAY DID not waste time in presenting his political identity card.

First he made a speech asserting that he will not sit in the same government with the "Joint List".

The Joint List is the united (or disunited) list of the Arab community in Israel. It joins together the three very different "Arab" parties: the Communist party, which is overwhelmingly Arab, but includes some Jews (including a Jewish member of parliament), the Balad party, which is secular and nationalist, and a religious Islamic party.

How come these diverse parties created a joint list? They owe this achievement to the genius of the great Arab-hater, Avigdor Lieberman (see above), who saw that all three parties were small and decided to eliminate them by raising the electoral threshold. But rather than perish separately they decided to survive together. There is no doubt that their list represents the vast majority of Israel's Palestinian citizens, who constitute more than 20% of the

population. Strange as this may sound, every fifth Israeli is an Arab.

The simple numerical fact is that without the support of the Arab members in the Knesset, no left-wing government can exist. Yitzhak Rabin would not have become prime minister, and the Oslo agreement would not have come into being, without the support "from the outside" of the Arab bloc.

Then why did they not join Rabin's government? Both sides were afraid of losing votes. Many Jews cannot envision a government including Arabs, and many Arabs cannot envision their representatives sharing "collective responsibility" in a government mainly occupied with fighting Arabs.

This has not changed. It is highly unlikely that the Arabs would join a Gabbay government if invited, and even more unlikely that they would receive such an invitation.

So why make such a declaration? Gabbay is no fool. Far from it. He believes that the Arabs are in his pocket anyhow. They could not join a Likud government. By making a blatantly anti-Arab declaration, he hopes to attract right-wing voters.

His predecessor, Yitzhak Herzog, publicly complained that too many people considered the Labor party to consist of "Arab-lovers". Terrible.

IF ANYONE hoped that this was a one-time anomaly, Gabbay put them right. After the first blow came more.

He declared that "we have no partner for peace". This is the most dangerous slogan of the populists. "No partner" means that there is no sense in making an effort. There will never be peace. Never ever.

He declared that God promised the Jews the entire land between the sea and the Jordan. That is not quite correct: God promised us all the land from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt. God never made good on that promise.

Last week Gabbay declared that in any future peace agreement with the Palestinians, not a single Jewish settlement in the West Bank would be evacuated.

Until now, there has been tacit agreement between Israeli and Palestinian peace activists that peace will be based on a limited exchange of territories. The so-called "settlement blocs" (clusters of settlements near the green-

line border) will be joined to Israel, and an equivalent area of Israeli territory (for example, along the Gaza Strip) will be ceded to Palestine. This would leave some dozens of “isolated” settlements in the West Bank, generally inhabited by fanatical religious right-wingers, which must be evacuated by force.

Gabbay's new statement means that after a peace agreement, these islands of racist extremism will continue to exist where they are. No Palestinian will ever agree to that. It makes peace impossible, even in theory.

In general, Gabbay agrees to the “two-state solution”—but under certain conditions. First, the Israel army would be free to act throughout the demilitarized Palestinian state. The Israeli army would also be positioned along the Jordan River, turning the Palestinian “state” into a kind of enclave.

This is a “peace plan” without takers. Gabbay is much too clever not to realize this. But all this is not devised for Arab ears. It is meant to attract right-wing Israelis. Since a Labor-led “center-left” coalition needs rightist or religious votes, the reasoning looks sound. But it isn't.

There is no chance whatsoever that a significant number of rightists will move to the left, even if the left is led by a person like Gabbay. Rightists detest the Labor party, not since yesterday, but have done so for generations.

THE LABOR party was born a hundred years ago. It was the main political force that led to the creation of the State of Israel, and led it for almost thirty years. Its power was immense, many (including me) accused it of dictatorial tendencies.

During all these years, the main occupation of the Zionist leadership was the historical fight against the Palestinian people for the possession of the country. Except for a tiny minority, the party was always nationalist, even militaristic. It was left-wing only in its social activities. It created the Jewish workers movement, the powerful trade union (the “Histadrut”), the Kibbutzim and much more.

This social network has long since degenerated. Corruption became endemic, many scandals were uncovered (mainly by my magazine). When the right-wing under Menachem Begin finally took over, in 1977, the Labor Party was already a living corpse. It has changed its name

many times (its current name is “the Zionist Camp”) but it has dwindled from election to election.

Avi Gabbay was called in as a savior. His nationalist declarations are conceived as patent medicines. No chance.

CAN THE Labor Party be saved at all? I doubt it.

In the last elections, after a powerful, spontaneous social upheaval, there seemed to be a new chance. Some of the young leaders, female and male, who had appeared from nowhere, joined the Labor Party and entered the Knesset. They are genuine leftists and peace activists. Somehow, their voices became quieter and quieter. Instead of inspiring the party, the party subdued them. It seems to be beyond repair.

A question never asked is—does the party really, really want to assume power? On the face of it, the answer is yes, of course. Isn't that the supreme prize of politics?

Well, I doubt it. The existence of a parliamentary opposition is a cozy one. I know, because I was in that situation for ten years. The Knesset is a good place, you are coddled all the time by the ushers, you get a good salary and an office, you have no responsibilities at all (unless you create them for yourself). You must, of course, make an effort to be re-elected every four years. So, if you are not particularly keen on becoming a minister, with all the work and responsibilities and public exposure that this entails, you just stay put.

WHAT IS the practical conclusion? To forget the Labor Party and create a new political force.

We need new leaders, young, charismatic and resolute, with clear-cut aims, who can energize the peace camp.

I do not subscribe to the picture of a public divided between a right-wing majority and a left-wing minority, with the orthodox on one side and the Arabs on the other.

I believe that there is a right-wing minority and a left-wing minority. Between the two there is the great mass of the people, waiting for a message, desiring peace but brainwashed into believing that peace is impossible (“there is no partner”).

WHAT WE NEED is a new start.