

Can Two Walk Together?

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“ COMPARED TO THE KNESSET *it could have been, this is a very good Knesset!*”

I heard this, in so many words, from at least ten former Knesset members and others, as we were drinking orange juice in the Knesset foyer. I could have said it myself (and probably did).

It was the opening session of the new Knesset, and former members were invited to a reception with the new ones. Then we were seated in the plenum hall.

I did not attend the last few times, but this time I was curious to see the new members—49 out of 120, an unprecedented number—some of whom I had never even heard of before.

It was really a good sight. Some of the new people were leaders of the social protest movement of summer 2011, some investigative reporters from the media, some social workers. Some fascists remained, but the worst were gone.

The change was not large enough to make me jump into the air from sheer joy, but enough to be glad. Beggars cannot be choosers.

IT WAS a ceremonious occasion, with trumpets and all. Up to a point.

Unlike the British, Jews have no talent for pomp and circumstance. Real Jewish synagogues—not the Western European copies of Catholic churches—are quite chaotic.

In my ten years in the Knesset, I took part in many “festive” sessions, in honor of this or that historic event or personality, and not one of them was really uplifting. We just haven’t got it.

This one was no exception. The President of the State, Shimon Peres, who enjoys much respect abroad but very little in Israel, arrived with an escort of motorcyclists and horse riders, trumpets sounded. He entered the building, made a dull speech full of platitudes. So did the oldest Knesset member (a youngster of a mere 77 years, 12 years younger than I).

Many members were dressed casually, in shirt sleeves or sweaters. Few wore ties. Very Israeli. During the speeches, members wandered in and out. All the Arab members left immediately after being sworn in, with Hanin Zuabi in the lead, before Hatikvah, the national anthem, was intoned.

FOR THE new members it was, of course, a day of deep emotion. I remember my own first day. It was exciting indeed.

Looking at Ya’ir Lapid, I could not refrain from thinking about the superficial similarity between him and myself at the time. We were both elected as heads of completely new parties we had founded. I was 42, the youngest member at the time, and he is 49. We were both journalists by profession. Neither of us has a matriculation certificate. Our voters came from exactly the same sector of the population: Israeli-born, well educated and well positioned Ashkenazi young people.

Yet there the similarity ends. I represented a tiny faction, his is the second largest. I brought with me a revolutionary new outlook for Israel—peace, a Palestinian state next to Israel, separation of religion and state, equality for Arab and Eastern Jewish citizens. He brings a cocktail of pious slogans.

Nevertheless, the first day in the Knesset is like the first day at school. Exciting. Every new member brought with him his whole family, with the children in their best clothes, to gaze down from the gallery at father or mother sitting below in this proud company.

In this first meeting, members old and new are not allowed to say anything, except the two words “I undertake” (to serve the State of Israel). If I may be permitted to indulge for a moment in memories: I was determined to make my mark and present my message on the very first day. Studying the Knesset statutes, I discovered a loophole. I demanded to move a motion for the election of the new speaker, and had to be called to the rostrum. So I made my first speech right there: a proposal to appoint an Arab speaker in order to symbolize the equality of all citizens. David Ben-Gurion, who, as the oldest member, served as temporary speaker, looked at me with wonderment mixed with distaste, an expression immortalized in a rare photo.

WHEN IT was over and Binyamin Netanyahu stood up, like all of us, a curious thing happened: Ya’ir Lapid jumped from his seat, ran up to him and embraced him. It was more than a casual gesture.

As I have said before, Lapid’s future depends on his now making the right decisions regarding his role in the new coalition and his terms of joining. Tension is in the

air. The minimum Lapid needs to satisfy his voters is well beyond the maximum Netanyahu can politically afford to give him.

To strengthen his hand, Lapid has ganged up with Naf-tali Bennett, in order to keep the orthodox factions out. The manifest aim is to compel the orthodox to serve in the army.

This raises the ancient question voiced by the prophet Amos (3:2): “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

Bennett is an ultra-rightist. Some of his detractors call him fascist-lite.

He is totally committed to a Greater Israel, the expansion of the settlements and opposition to any contact with the Palestinians – except, perhaps, an offer for negotiations on terms the Palestinians could not possibly accept.

True, Bennett has a knack for hiding his real ideology behind a façade of bonhomie. He pretends to belong to the same social sector as Lapid: White, Ashkenazi and liberal, the Israeli equivalent of the American WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant). The small size of his kippah serves the same purpose.¹

But Bennett really belongs to quite a different sector: the “national-religious” camp of the fanatical settlers. The nationalist part of his ideology is far more important to him than the religious one. With him in the cabinet, any substantive movement towards the two-state solution would be impossible.

If Lapid doesn’t care, what does that tell us about him? He chose to start his election campaign in the capital of the settlers, Ariel. He emphasized that Jerusalem, “*the eternal capital of Israel*”, must remain undivided. That already is a non-starter for peace.

When my friends and I first brought up the two-state solution in the aftermath of the 1948 war, we insisted that the borders between Israel and Palestine must be open for the free movement of people and goods. We had in mind a close and friendly relationship between two sister-states. What Lapid preaches is the very opposite: the two-state solution as a final and total “divorce”.

WHEN LAPID chooses Bennett as his favored bedfellow, he implicitly declares that the issue of the Orthodox serving in the army is more important to him than peace.

If he preferred peace to the service issue, he would choose the religious Shas party instead of Bennett. That would be very unpopular, but make peace possible.

Shas is a hawkish party, though it started out dovish. But like its Torah-Jewish sister party, it really doesn’t care about anything beyond the narrow interests of its community.

On the evening of the Labor Party’s victory in the 1999 elections, tens of thousands of delirious voters spontaneously streamed to Tel Aviv’s Rabin Square to celebrate what was seen as a liberation from Netanyahu’s (first) government. When the victor, Ehud Barak, appeared on the balcony, the shout went up from the thousands: “*Anything but Shas! Anything but Shas!*”

A few days later, at the opening session of the new Knesset (the last one I attended until this week) I went up to Barak and whispered in his ear: “*Take Shas!*”

Four years ago, when Tzipi Livni could have set up a government instead of going to elections, she needed Shas. Shas, as is its wont, demanded a lot of money for its clientele. Instead of paying up, Tzipi kept her virtue and refused. The result: Netanyahu back in power.

This is the same dilemma we are facing now. Pay the Shas-man and have a go at peace, or take Bennett and talk about “service equality”. (It’s just talk anyhow. A law to ensure real equality of military service would mean civil war.)

WHAT ABOUT the real boss? No, I don’t mean Sara’le Netanyahu, who also starred at the opening session. I mean Barack Obama.

Without warning he announced this week that he is coming to Israel. Immediately after the formation of our new government. He will go to Ramallah, too.

Should we be happy or not?

Depends. If it is a consolation prize for Netanyahu after his election setback, it is a bad sign. The first visit of a US President since George Bush jr. is bound to strengthen Netanyahu and reinforce his image as the only Israeli leader with international stature.

But if Obama is coming with the intention of exerting serious pressure on Netanyahu to start a meaningful peace initiative, welcome.

Netanyahu will try to satisfy Obama with “*opening peace talks*”. Which means nothing plus nothing. Even Bennett can agree to that. Not to mention Lapid and Livni. Yes. Let’s talk. “*Without preconditions*”. Which means: without stopping settlement expansion. Talk and go on talking, until everyone is blue in the face and both Obama’s and Netanyahu’s terms are over.

But if Obama is serious this time, it could be different. An American or international blueprint for the realization of the two-state solution, with a strict timetable. Perhaps an international conference, for starters. A UN resolution without an American veto.

If this happens, the new Knesset with all the fresh, young faces will be called upon to hold a real debate and take fateful decisions. And—perhaps, perhaps, perhaps—make history.

¹It always reminds me of an admonition a British judge in Palestine gave to aspiring lawyers: “*Let your summing-ups be like a lady’s skirt: long enough to cover the matter and short enough to be attractive.*”