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## Dirty Socks

"I have some good news and some bad news," the sergeant in the joke tells his men. "The good news is that you are going to change your dirty socks. The bad news is that you are going to exchange them among yourselves."

I am not the only person who is reminded of this old British army joke by the current elections.

We are faced by a sorry lot of politicians, some of them documented failures and some completely free of any past achievements. There is no meaningful discussion between them about the issues. Not one of the main contenders offers real solutions to our basic problems. The differences between them are invisible without a magnifying glass.

The instinctive reaction: "To hell with the lot of them. Let's not vote at all!"

But that is childish. We cannot afford not to vote, or to vote out of spite or as a protest. Even if the differences are tiny – they may turn out to be important.

Therefore, let's hold our nose and vote. If necessary, let's take some medicine against nausea. If all of them are bad, let's look for the lesser evil.

FOR ME, the greatest evil is Binyamin ("Bibi") Netanyahu.

If he gets one vote more than his rivals, the President will entrust him with the task of setting up the next government. Netanyahu has already committed himself to inviting Avigdor Liberman, the pupil of the fascist Meir Kahane, as his first partner, as well as Shas, which has now become an extreme right-wing party. Perhaps he will also take in the "National Union", which is even more extreme, and the remnants of the National Religious party, together with the Orthodox.

If this is to be the core of the next coalition, we shall have an extreme nationalist-racist government, a government that will reject outright any possibility of ending the occupation, setting up a Palestinian state and evacuating the settlements.

After that, Netanyahu could invite Kadima and Labor, but that would not matter anymore. Since he will be able to set up a government without them, he will get them for next to nothing. In such a government, their only function will be to serve as fig leaves, camouflage for the Americans.

One must also remember who would come with Netanyahu: types like Limor Livnat, Benny Begin and Bogie Yaalon.

Some people have brought up a Machiavellian idea: let the Likud come to power. That way, the entire world will see the true face of Israel and boycott it. The government will fall, and we can start all over again.

Sorry, that is too risky a bet for me. I am not ready to gamble with the future of Israel. To use an old catchphrase: I don't have another country.

Some try to cheer us up with another thought: Netanyahu is a weak person. If the Americans exert pressure on him, he will give in. In the end he will do whatever Obama tells him to do.

I am not so sure. I am not ready to bet on that either. His

partners will not let him submit. For me, the first decision is: No Netanyahu.

TZIPI LIVNI has one enormous advantage: she is not Bibi. It may seem that this is also her only advantage.

At this moment, she is the only person who could – perhaps, perhaps – block the road to a coalition headed by the Likud. For many, that is reason enough to vote for her.

Is there any other reason? Hard to see one. She could have risen above the murky waters and presented a clear and focused message: peace with the Palestinian people and the Arab world. That would have separated her from Netanyahu and also from Ehud Barak and given her the status of a statesperson. It would have turned the elections into a referendum on war and peace.

She has missed this opportunity. Like all the other candidates, she is afraid of the word "peace". Her advisors have probably warned her that the shares of peace in the stock exchange of public opinion are way down.

If she were a real leader, if peace had been burning in her bones (as we say in Hebrew), she would have ignored the advice and stood up as a woman of principle.

Instead, she is trying to be more macho than all the machos, "The Only Man In The Government". She cries to high heaven against any dialogue with Hamas. She objects to a mutually agreed cease-fire. She tries to compete with Netanyahu and Liberman with unbridled nationalist messages.

That is bad. That is also stupid. Someone who is looking for a he-he-man will not vote for a woman. Someone who is longing for a brutal warlord will not vote for a female civilian who, in the words of Barak, "has never held a rifle in her hands".

It was a test of leadership. And Tzipi flunked it.

True, here and there she has voiced some vague ideas about "two nation-states", but in all her years in office she has not taken the smallest real step in this direction.

Therefore, there is no reason to vote for her, except one: if she gets one vote more than Netanyahu, the President will call on her to try to set up a government. Such a government will surely include Netanyahu, and probably Liberman too. Yet it will be different from a government headed by Netanyahu. Under heavy American pressure, it might even move towards peace.

I CANNOT vote for Ehud Barak. Even if my head wanted to, my hand would not obey.

The inhuman Gaza War was a reflection of Barak's own inhuman character. He waged the war as a part of his election campaign. When the anti-war demonstrators marched through the streets of Tel-Aviv and shouted: "Don't buy votes / with the blood of babies" they were not so far off the mark.

Like Netanyahu, Barak is a documented failure. I was among the masses who celebrated his triumph in Rabin Square in 1999 when he was elected Prime Minister, and, hardly a year later, I sighed with relief when his

government collapsed. In his short term of office he convened the Camp David conference and sabotaged it, spread the poisonous and mendacious mantra “We have no partner for peace”, provoked the second intifada and destroyed the peace camp from within.

Contrary to Livni, Barak does not even pretend to have a perspective of peace. He sees before him an endless landscape of mountain chains of war, mountain after mountain, stretching well beyond the horizon.

Unlike the Kadima and Likud lists, the Labor election list does include some good people. But these will have no influence at all on things to come. Effectively, it’s a one-man list, and that one man is deeply flawed.

FOR A MOMENT it seemed that Meretz was going to transform itself into something bigger. They included in their list some attractive new people. Men of letters recommended them warmly.

And then something happened to them, the same thing that happened to them the last time. A war broke out, and Meretz supported it enthusiastically. Their three literary musketeers - Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua and David Grossman - went out of their way to call for the war and laud it, each one in his turn. Exactly as they had done in Lebanon War II.

True, after some days the three - together with Meretz and Peace Now - called for the end of the attack. That call was not accompanied by an apology for the preceding one. This showed a lot of Chutzpa. After helping in breaking the dam, they thought that they could stop the flow with their fingers. But after they had legitimized the war of atrocities, no one listened to them anymore. Every woman and child who was killed in that war, up to the very last day, should weigh on their conscience.

Of course, some will say: you don’t vote to punish and take revenge. In spite of the crime, one has to vote for Meretz because among the “Zionist” parties they are the lesser evil. They speak about peace and social justice, and some of their representatives, like Shulamit Aloni and Yossi Sarid, did a good job in the Rabin government. Meretz also did some good parliamentary work for the right causes.

QUITE ANOTHER problem is posed by the three so-called “Arab” parties, one of which is the communist Hadash, which has a small Jewish component.

The Hadash program is closer to the consistent peace camp than any other. Some would say: That’s close enough. I vote according to my beliefs, and not tactical considerations. Hadash should also be credited for advancing some positive causes in the Knesset.

The problem of the “Arab” lists is that they have not succeeded in playing a meaningful role in the political arena, which has remained an exclusive fiefdom of the “Zionist” parties (“Zionist” in this context means “non Arab”). In order to break into the Jewish street, Hadash could have put at the head of its list, or at least in the No. 2 slot, Dov Khenin, who has risen to stardom in the recent Tel-Aviv municipal elections. By not doing so, they have lost at least some of the votes that could have strayed from

Meretz and Labor.

The impact of the “Arab” parties on Israeli policy is next to nil. It is limited to one point in time: on the day after the elections, the question will arise whether all the center/left parties together, from Kadima leftwards, can muster enough votes to block a right-wing government. In this context, and only there, the “Arab” parties do play a role.

THERE REMAINS the Liberman phenomenon.

Liberman has created a party that is simply and thoroughly racist. Its election campaign is centered on the demand to annul the Israeli citizenship of “non-loyal” people. Meaning: the Arabs, who constitute 20% of Israel’s citizens. In every other country, Liberman’s program would be called fascist, without quotation marks. Nowhere in the Western world is there a large party that would dare to advance such a demand. The neo-fascists in Switzerland and Holland want to expel foreigners, not to annul the citizenship of the native-born.

The core of the party is made up of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of whom have brought from their homeland an utter contempt for democracy, a desire for a strong leader (a Stalin or a Putin), a racist attitude towards brown-skinned citizens and a taste for brutal, Chechnya-style wars. They have now been joined by young, native-born Israelis, who have been radicalized by the recent war.

When Joerg Haider was taken into the Austrian cabinet, Israel recalled its ambassador from Vienna in protest. But compared to Liberman, Haider was a raving liberal, and so is Jean-Marie le Pen. Now Netanyahu has announced that Liberman will be “an important minister” in his government, Livni has hinted that he will be in her government, too, and Barak has not excluded that possibility.

The optimistic version says that Liberman will prove to be a passing curiosity. Every Israeli election campaign has featured a trend-party that reflects a passing mood, achieves a resounding success and then disappears. In 1977 it was the Dash party, which rode the horse of “changing the system”. It won 12.5% of the vote, broke apart and disappeared before the next elections. Later it was the Tzomet party of Rafael Eitan, on the horse of uncorrupted purity. Another was the Shinui (Change) party, which rode the horse of anti-religious hatred and disappeared without leaving a trace. In the last elections it was the pensioners’ list, with tens of thousands of youngsters voting for it as a prank. In the current elections, Liberman’s party has caught the trend, riding on the primitive emotions of the masses which broke free in the Gaza War.

There is also a pessimistic version: Fascism has become a serious player in the Israeli public domain. The three main parties have now legitimized it. This phenomenon must be stopped before it is too late.

SO, HOW shall I vote this coming Tuesday?

I intend to draw up a list that will start from the worst down to the least evil. The last one on the list gets my vote.