

Ms Tantalus

TANTALUS IS punished by the Gods for reasons that are not entirely clear. He is hungry and thirsty, but the water in which he stands recedes when he bends down to drink from it and the fruit above his head continually evades his hand.

Tzipi Livni is now undergoing a similar torture. After winning an impressive personal victory at the polls, the political fruit keeps slipping from her grasp when she stretches out her hand.

Why should she deserve that? What has she done, after all? Supported the war, called for a boycott of Hamas, played around with empty negotiations with the Palestinian Authority? OK, she has indeed.. But such a terrible punishment?

HOWEVER, THE results of the elections are not as clear as they might seem. The victory of the Right is not so unambiguous.

Central to the election campaign was the personal competition between the two contenders for the Prime Minister's office: Livni and Netanyahu (or, as they call themselves, as if they were still at kindergarten, Tzipi and Bibi.)

Contrary to all expectations and all polls, Livni beat Netanyahu. Several factors were involved in this. Among others: the masses of the Left were terrified by the possibility of Netanyahu winning, and flocked to Livni's camp in order to "Stop Bibi!" Also, Livni – who was never identified with feminism – remembered at the last moment to call Israel's women to her banner, and they hearkened to her call.

But it is impossible to ignore the main significance of this choice: Netanyahu symbolizes total opposition to peace, opposition to giving back the occupied territories, to the freezing of the settlements and to a Palestinian state. Livni, on the other hand, has declared more than once her total support for the "Two-Nation-States" solution. Her voters opted for the more moderate line.

True, the big winner in the elections was Avigdor Liberman. But his triumph is far from the fateful breakthrough everyone foresaw. He did not win the 20 seats he had promised. His ascent from 11 to 15 seats is not so dramatic. His party is indeed now the third largest in the Knesset, but that is less due to its own rise than to the collapse of Labor, which fell from 19 to 13. By the way, not one of the parties won even 25% of the vote. Israeli democracy is now very fragile indeed.

The Liberman phenomenon is ominous, but not (yet?) disastrous.

HOWEVER, THERE is no way to deny the most significant message of these elections: the Israeli public has moved to the right. From Likud to the right there are now 65 seats, from Kadima to the left only 55. One cannot argue with numbers.

What has caused this shift?

There are several explanations, all of them valid.

One can consider it as a passing phase after the war. A war arouses strong emotions – nationalist intoxication, hatred of the enemy, fear of the Other, longing for unity and for revenge.. All these naturally serve the Right – a lesson sometimes forgotten by the left when it starts a war.

Others see in it a continuation of a historical process: the Zionist-Palestinian confrontation is becoming wider and more complex, and such a situation feeds the Right.

And then there is, of course, the demographic factor. The rightist bloc attracts the votes of three sectors: the Oriental Jews (a majority of whom vote for Likud), the religious (who mostly vote for the fundamentalists) and the Russians (most of whom vote for Liberman). This is a group vote, almost automatic.

Two sectors in Israel have an especially high birth-rate: the religious Jews and the Arabs. The religious vote almost unanimously for the Right. True, the Orthodox and the National-Religious parties have not increased their strength in the elections, probably because many of their natural voters chose Likud, Liberman or the even more extreme National Union. The Arab citizens almost completely abstained from voting for Jewish parties, as many of them used to in the past, and the three Arab parties together gained one more seat.

The demographic development is ominous. Kadima, Labor and Meretz are identified with the old-established Ashkenazi sector, whose demographic strength is in steady decline. Also, many young Ashkenazis gave their votes – at least four seats worth – to Liberman, who preaches a secular fascism. They hate the Arabs, but they also hate the religious Jews.

The conclusion is quite clear: if the "center-left" does not succeed in breaking out of its elitist ghetto and striking roots within the Oriental and Russian sectors, its decline will continue from election to election.

NOW MS TANTALUS must choose between two bitter options: to retire to the desert where there is neither water nor fruit, or to serve as a fig-leaf for an obnoxious coalition.

Option No. 1: to refuse to join Netanyahu's coalition and to go into opposition. That is not so simple. The Kadima party came into being when Ariel Sharon promised its members – refugees from right and left – power. It will be very hard for Livni to hold the lot together in opposition, far from the seat of power, far from the posh ministers' offices and from luxurious official cars.

That would give us a rightist government which includes open fascists, pupils of Meir Kahane (whose party was banned because of his racist teachings), the advocates of ethnic cleansing, of the expulsion of Israel's Arab citizens and the liquidation of any chance for peace. Such a government would inevitably find itself in confrontation with the United States and in worldwide isolation.

Some people say: that's good. Such a government will necessarily fall soon and break apart. Thus the public will be persuaded that there is no viable rightist option. Kadima, Labor and Meretz will stew in opposition, and perhaps a real center-left alternative will come into being.

Others say: too risky. There is no limit to the disasters that a Netanyahu-Liberman-Kahanist government can bring upon the state, from the enlargement of the settlements that will torpedo any future peace, to outright war. We can't stake everything on one card, when the chip is the State of Israel.

Livni's option No. 2: to swallow the bitter pill, give in and join the Netanyahu government as a second, third or fourth wheel. In that case, she must decide at once, before Netanyahu establishes a fait accompli with an extreme-right coalition which Livni would then be invited to join as a junior partner.

I shall not be surprised if President Shimon Peres takes the initiative unofficially and promotes this option – before starting, in a week's time, the official process of consulting with the Knesset factions and entrusting one of the candidates with the task of forming a government.

Could such a government move towards peace? Conduct real negotiations? Agree to the dismantling of settlements? Accept a Palestinian state? Recognize a Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas?

Hard to imagine. In the best case, it will go on with the charade of meaningless negotiations, quietly enlarge the settlements, lead Barack Obama by the nose and mobilize the pro-Israel lobby in order to obstruct any real American moves towards peace. What will be.

CAN ISRAEL change course? Can a real peace-oriented alternative arise?

The two "Zionist Left" parties have been decisively beaten. Both Labor and Meretz have collapsed. Their two leaders who called for the Gaza War and supported it – Ehud Barak of Labor and Haim Oron of Meretz – have received the punishment they richly deserve. In a normal democracy, both would have resigned the day after the elections. But our democracy is not normal, and both leaders insist on staying on and leading their party to the next disaster.

Labor is a walking corpse – the only "social-democratic" party in the world whose leader's sole aim is to stay on as

war minister. When Barak spread the mantra "there is no one to talk with" he overlooked the logical conclusion "therefore we don't need anyone to talk with them".

The Labor Party has no party, no members, no political program, no alternative leadership. It will fail in opposition as it failed in government. Barring a miracle, it will end up in the junkyard of history.

It will find Meretz already there. A socialist party that lost its way a long time ago: a party without any roots in the classes at the foot of the socioeconomic ladder, a party that has supported all our wars.

Some believe in easy solutions: a union of Labor and Meretz, for example. That is a union of the lame and the blind. No reason to expect that they would win the race.

THE REAL task is far more difficult. A completely new building must be erected in place of the one which has collapsed.

The need is for a new Left that will include new leaders from the sectors that have been discriminated against: the Orientals, the Russians and the Arabs. A new Left that will express the ideals of a new generation, people of peace, advocates of social change, feminists and greens, who will all understand that one cannot realize one ideal without realizing all of them. There can be no social justice in a military state; no one is interested in the environment while the cannons are roaring, feminism is incompatible with a society of machos riding on tanks, there can be no respect for Oriental Jews in a society that despises the culture of the Orient.

The Arab citizens will have to leave the ghetto in which they are confined and start to talk with the Jewish public, and the Jewish public must talk with the Arabs on equal terms. The Liberman slogan "No Citizenship Without Loyalty" must be turned around: "No Loyalty Without Real Citizenship".

As Obama has done in the US, a new language, a new lexicon must be created, to replace the old and tired phrases.

Much, much must be changed if we want to save the state.

AS FOR Ms. Tantalus: she can contribute to this process of change, or her torture will continue.

Echoing Pyrrhus, king of Epirus and Macedon, she can well say: Another such victory and we are undone.

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