

Who to vote for?

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THE ELECTIONS WILL take place in three days, and they are boring, boring, boring.

So boring, indeed, that *even to think* about their boringness (if there is such a word) is boring.

For lack of any debate about the issues, media pundits are reduced to discussing the election broadcasts. Some are good, some indifferent, some atrocious. As if this were a contest between spin doctors, copywriters, “strategists” and such, with the public just a bystander.

WHEREVER I meet people, I am told with real worry: “*I don’t know whom to vote for! There is no party I really like!*” and then the question I dread: “*Whom do you advise me to vote for?*”

I have closely followed all the past 18 Knesset elections, except the first, when I was still a soldier. In several of them I was a candidate myself. I have always written about my preferences, but I have never told my readers how to vote.

I shall follow the same rule now.

FIRST OF ALL, there is an absolute imperative to vote, more than ever.

It is not about the “feast of democracy”, “civic duty” and bla-bla-bla. This time it is a vital necessity.

A non-vote is a vote for Binyamin Netanyahu and his allies, pure and simple. As it looks now, more than half the members of the 19th Knesset will belong to the extreme right and beyond, at least a dozen of them honest to goodness fascists.

Not to vote means to strengthen them even more.

This is especially true for Arab citizens. The polls predict that almost half of them will not vote at all. The reasons are many: a general protest against the “Jewish” state, protest against discrimination, despair of any change, disapproval of the “Arab” parties and more. All good reasons.

But abstention means that the Arab citizens are shooting themselves in the foot. If their situation is bad now, it can still become much, much worse: The Supreme court, which generally protects them, cowed into impotence. Discriminatory laws proliferating.

Some on the far right want to deprive them of the right to vote altogether. Why grant them their wish voluntarily?

LET’S PROCEED to the actual choice.

My method is to write down all the competing election lists in a random order.

Then I strike out all those I would not vote for if my life depended on it. That’s the easy part.

First of all, there is Likud-Beitenu. Likud alone was bad enough. The addition of Avigdor Lieberman’s Israel Beitenu makes it even more destructive.

I agree with President Barack Obama that Netanyahu is leading us to certain disaster. His total rejection of peace, the obsession with the settlements, the deepening of the occupation—all these are turning Israel (Israel proper, not just the occupied territories) inexorably into an apartheid state. Already in the outgoing Knesset, abominable anti-democratic laws have been passed. Now that all the moderate Likud members have been purged, this process will be accelerated.

With Lieberman and his acolytes joining the Likud, things look even more dangerous. Netanyahu will have to posture and act even more extremely, for fear of losing the leadership to Lieberman, who is now No. 2. It is quite probable that Lieberman will still succeed in replacing him somewhere along the road.

The emergence of Naftali Bennett as the star of the elections makes matters even more desperate. It seems to be a rule on the Israeli right that nobody is so extreme that another cannot be found who is even extremer.

THE NEXT group to be struck off the list is the religious one. It consists mainly of two parties: the Ashkenazi “Torah Jewry” and the Sephardi Shas.

Both used to be quite moderate in matters of peace and war. But those days are long gone. Generations of a narrowly ethnocentric, xenophobic education have spawned a leadership of rabid nationalist rightists. Bennett, too, was brought up in this camp.

As if this was not enough, these parties want to impose on us the Jewish Halacha, much as their Muslim counterparts want to impose the Sharia. They oppose almost automatically all progressive ideas, such as a written constitution, separation between synagogue and state, civil marriage, same sex marriage, abortion and what not. Off the list.

OF A different caliber are the self-styled “Center” par-

ties.

The largest is the Labor Party under Shelly Yachimovich, which now stands at about 15%.

I must confess that I have never liked Shelly very much, but that should not influence my vote. She can (and sure does) boast of several achievements. She has taken a moribund party and turned it into a live force again. She has found new and attractive candidates.

The trouble is that she has helped to eradicate peace from the national agenda. She has made overtures to the settlers and their allies. Although she has paid the obligatory lip service to the “two-state solution”, she has done absolutely nothing to further it. Her sole concern is with what she calls “social justice”.

She has promised not to join a Netanyahu-Lieberman government. Experience has taught us not to take such pre-election promises too seriously—there is always a “national emergency” lurking round the corner—but even as head of the opposition, a peace-denier can do a lot of damage. Sorry, not for me.

Shelly’s main competitor is Tzipi. On the face of it, Livni is the exact opposite. Her main and almost sole election plank is the resumption of negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas.

Fine, but Tzipi and her former boss, Ehud Olmert, were in power for almost four years, during which they started two wars (Lebanon II and Cast Lead) and did not come even close to peace. Why believe her now?

I have never heard Tzipi utter a single word of sympathy or compassion for the Palestinian people. My suspicion is that she is really interested in an endless Peace Process, not in peace itself.

AN INTERESTING character in these elections is Ya’ir Lapid.

What does he stand for? Well, he looks great. A former TV personality, he is good on TV, the only battleground in these elections. His program equates to the American “motherhood and apple pie”.

He reminds me of Groucho Marx: “These are my principles. If you don’t like them, I have others, too.”

For me he is “Lapid Lite”, compared to his late father, “Tommy” Lapid, who also moved from TV into politics. Father Lapid was a much more complicated character: very likeable in personal contact, very offensive on TV, an extreme rightist in national affairs and an extreme enemy of the religious camp. His son just pleads: Vote for me because I am a nice guy.

He makes no secret of his yearning to become a minis-

ter under Netanyahu. Sorry, not for me.

IGNORING THE Arab national lists, which are not interested in Jewish votes, and those which cannot be expected to make the 2% hurdle, there remain only two candidates on the list: Hadash and Meretz.

Both are close to what I believe in: they are actively engaged in the struggle for peace with the Palestinian people and for social justice.

How to choose?

Hadash is basically the public face of the Communist party. Should that deter me?

I have never been a Communist, or even a Marxist. I would define myself as a social-democrat. I have many memories concerning the Communist party, some positive, many negative. It is not easy for me to forget their orthodox Stalinist past. But that is not the point. We are not voting for the past, but for the future.

Hadash, to its credit, defines itself as a joint Arab-Jewish party—the only one (since the party I helped to found in 1984 lost momentum after eight years and disappeared.) However, for the vast majority of Israelis it is an “Arab party”, since more than 95% of its voters are Arabs. It does have a Jewish Knesset member, the very active and commendable Dov Hanin. If he had headed a list of his own, he could have attracted many young voters and conceivably changed the election landscape.

ON THE whole, I prefer Meretz, though without much enthusiasm.

There is something old and dreary about this party, which was founded in 1973. It says all the right things about peace and social justice, democracy and human rights. But it says them in a weary voice. There are no new faces, no new ideas, no new slogans.

A large number of leading intellectuals, writers and artists have come out for Meretz. (The party took great pains not to list leftists without clear “Zionist” credentials.) But, as a Labor minister said long ago about the intellectuals: “The don’t fill half a refugee camp.”

All in all, it is still the best choice in the circumstances. A significant increase of their presence in the Knesset would at least encourage hopes for the future.

AND IT is the future that counts. The day after these disastrous elections, the effort to create a different landscape must begin. Never again should we be faced with such a dilemma.

Let’s hope that next time—which may be quite soon – we shall have the chance to vote with enthusiasm for a dynamic party that embodies our convictions and hopes.