

The Messiah Hasn't Come

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THE MESSIAH HASN'T COME and Bibi hasn't gone. That's the sad outcome. Sad, but not the end of the world. As the American saying goes: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

I would say: "Today is the first day of the battle for the next elections!"

The battle for the salvation of Israel must start right now.

SOME PEOPLE say that the best course now is a so-called National Unity Government.

Looks like a nice idea. Unity always sounds nice.

I can muster some good arguments for it. The combination of the two major parties creates a bloc of 54 seats (of 120). Such a coalition needs only one other party to form a majority. There are several possibilities, headed by Moshe Kahlon's 10 seats.

The advocates of this choice have one good argument: it's the Lesser Evil. The only other possibility is an extreme right-wing-religious government, which will not only stop any step towards peace, but also expand settlements, enact more laws to choke democracy and impose reactionary religious laws.

It's a good argument, but it has to be rejected outright.

The Unity Government would be dominated by the Right. At best it would be a government of total immobility. It would be unable and unwilling to make even the slightest move towards ending the historic conflict, terminating the occupation and recognition of Palestine. Settlements would expand at a frantic pace. The chances of an eventual peace would move even further away.

It would do a lot of harm. The Labor Party would be obliged to justify and beautify this disastrous course, disarm the Obama administration and progressive Jewish forces throughout the world. It would be a huge fig leaf for evil.

It would also leave Israel without an effective opposition. If the government coalition broke up somewhere along the way, the Labor party would be too besmirched to constitute a credible alternative. The initial success of Yitzhak Herzog in rousing the old party from its comatose state cannot be repeated a second time. Labor would become a spent force, a vegetable.

Fortunately for the Labor Party, this possibility died almost immediately after the election. Netanyahu killed it with one stroke.

BY THE way, a curious side effect of a National Unity Government would have been that the leader of the (Arab) Joint List, Ayman Odeh, would have become Leader of the Opposition.

By law, the title is bestowed automatically on the chief of the largest opposition party. It confers on its holders many of the privileges of a cabinet minister. The Prime Minister is obliged to confer with them regularly and share government secrets with them.

But even if there is no Unity Government, and Herzog becomes Leader of the Opposition, one outstanding result of the election is the changed situation of the Arabs in the Knesset.

There is a certain humor to this. It was Avigdor Lieberman, the almost pathological Arab-hater, who induced the Knesset to raise the minimum threshold to 3.25%. This was intended to eliminate the three small Arab parties (including the Communists, who also have some Jewish voters), who responded by overcoming their mutual disagreements and animosities and forming the joint list. Lieberman had great difficulties in crossing his own threshold, and Eli Yishai's party, which includes the heirs of the fascist Meir Kahane, was—thank God—left outside the Knesset.

It is to be hoped that the Joint Arab List will not break up. Odeh represents a new generation of Arab citizens, which is much more willing to integrate in Israeli society. Perhaps next time the old taboos will at long last disappear and the Arab citizens will become a real part of Israel's political life. This time, Labor did not yet dare to accept it as a full-fledged member of a Leftist coalition.

I DON'T like to say "I told you so". It does not make one more popular. This time I cannot avoid it, because there is a lesson to be learned.

At the beginning of the election campaign I wrote two articles in Haaretz, suggesting that the initial momentum created by the Herzog-Livni union should be continued and intensified by creating a much larger Unity List, including the "Zionist Camp" (Labor), Meretz, Lapid's Yesh Atid and, if possible, even Moshe Kahlon's new party.

The response? None whatsoever. None of the parties even took official notice.

The idea was that such a united front would create an irresistible momentum and attract voters who would not vote for any of these parties individually (or not vote at all). Together with the joint Arab list they would have created a blocking force that would have made a Likud comeback impossible.

I added that if the proposal was not accepted, all the parties involved may come to regret it. I am very sorry that I seem to have been right.

THE MORNING after the elections, Meretz leader Zehava Galon resigned. It was the honorable thing to do.

Meretz barely overcame the threshold clause and shrunk to four seats, though many voters (including me) rallied to its help at the last moment.

The party has suffered from a long line of lackluster leaders. But its malaise goes much deeper. It is existential.

From its very beginning, Meretz was a party of the Ashkenazi intellectual elite. It says the right things. But it is resented by the masses of the Oriental community, hated by the religious, pushed away by the Russian immigrants. It lives on an isolated

island, and its members give the impression of being quite happy to be among themselves, without all the riff-raff.

Zehava Galon is a very good person, honest and well-meaning, and her resignation (immediately after the first results came in and it seemed that Meretz had shrunk to 4 seats) does her credit. But the party has become—well—boring. Nothing new from it for a long, long time. Its message is right, but stale.

Meretz needs a leader—an inspiring person who arouses enthusiasm. But most of all it needs a new attitude—one that allows it to come out of its shell and actively appeal to voters who shun it now. It needs to work very hard to appeal to Orientals, Russians, Arabs and even the moderately religious.

BUT IT is unfair to demand this only of Meretz. It applies to the entire social and liberal part of Israel, the camp for peace and social justice.

The election results have shown that the dark prophecies about a decisive, irreversible shift of Israel to the right are unfounded. The dividing line runs through the middle, and can be shifted.¹

But in order to effect this, there must be a readiness to start from the beginning.

The present setup of the Israeli left will not do. That is the simple truth.

The most outstanding fact of this election is that the outcome reflects exactly the demographic composition of Israeli society. Likud won decisively within the Oriental Jewish community, which includes the lower socio-economic strata. Likud also retained its partial foothold in the Ashkenazi community.

The Zionist Camp and Meretz won decisively within the well-situated Ashkenazi public—there, and nowhere else.

The attitude of the Likud people to their party resembles the attitude of football fans to their team. It has a big emotional content.

I was always convinced that election propaganda and all the media hullabaloo of the election carnival have little, if any effect on the outcome. It is the demographic facts that are decisive.

The left must invent itself anew according to this reality. Otherwise it has no future.

IF ONE of the existing parties can do it, fine. If not, a new political force must be formed. Now.

Non-party organizations, with which Israel is lavishly endowed, cannot do the job. They can, and do, try to remedy many existing faults. Their activists fight for human rights, propagate good ideas, highlight abuse. But they cannot do the main job:

change the policy of the state. For this we need a political party, one that can win elections and set up a government. That is the most important requirement. Without it, we are heading for disaster.

First of all, our failures must be clearly analyzed and admitted. The fateful failure to win over a large part of the Oriental Jewish community, even the second and third generation. This is not a fact ordained by God. It must be recognized, analyzed and studied. This can be done.

The same, and even more so, goes for the immigrants from the former Soviet Union. They are totally estranged from the Left. There is no reason for that in Israel today. The second and third generation can and must be won over.

The taboo that prevents the Jewish left from uniting with the Arab political forces must be broken. It is an act of self-castration (on both sides) and dooms the left to impotence.

There is no reason for the complete break between the secular left and even moderate religious forces. The provocative anti-religious stand that is typical for some parts of the center and left is plain stupid.

SO WHAT to do?

First of all, a new leadership must be encouraged to emerge. Zehava Galon's (first) laudable example should be followed by others and by herself. Really new leaders must come forward, who are not a replica of the old.

The greatest danger is that after the first shock, everything will settle down again to the old ways, as if nothing had happened.

A determined effort must be made to pinpoint the frictions between the Left and the estranged sectors. Test groups must be set up in order to get to the roots—conscious and unconscious, practical and emotional—of the estrangement.

Overbearing attitudes must be shed. No one sector has an exclusive right to the state. Everybody has a right to be listened to and to express their deeper feelings and aspirations. Exclusiveness, often unconscious, must be replaced with inclusiveness.

To my mind, it is a mistake to try to hide our convictions. On the contrary, the fact that the words “peace” and “Palestine” were not mentioned at all in the campaign did not help the Left. Honesty is the first requisite for convincing people.

In short, if the Left wants to win next time—which may come much sooner than expected—it must start to reform itself and overcome the reasons for its failure.

It can be done. The time to begin is right now.

¹The general picture has not changed. The right-wing (Likud, Bennet, Lieberman) has gained only one single seat: from 43 to 44. The center-left (Zionist Camp, Meretz, Lapid) has lost 8 seats: from 48 to 40, but most of them went to Kahlon, who gained 10. The orthodox went from 17 to 14. The Arabs gained 2—from 11 to 13. The false impression of a huge change was created by the advance polls with their artificial dramas.