

For whom to Vote?

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ONCE A SOVIET citizen went to vote. He was given a sealed envelope and told to put it in the ballot box.

“Could I possibly see for whom I am voting?” he asked timidly.

“Of course not!” the official answered indignantly, “in the Soviet Union, we respect the secrecy of the ballot!”

In Israel, elections are also secret. Therefore I shall not tell you for whom I shall vote. Certainly I shall not be so impertinent as to tell my readers how to vote. But I shall set out the reasoning that will guide me.

WE ARE voting for a new government, that will lead Israel for the next four years.

If this were a beauty contest, I would vote for Yair Lapid. He is so very handsome.

If we had to decide who is the most likeable candidate, it would probably be Moshe Kahlon. He seems a very nice guy, the son of a poor, Oriental Jewish family, who as Minister of Communications has broken the monopoly of the cellphone tycoons. But sympathy has nothing to do with it.

If we were seeking a nice, well-mannered guy, Yitzhak Herzog would be the obvious candidate. He is honest, of good family.

And so on. If I were looking for a bar bouncer, Avigdor Lieberman would be my man. If I were looking for a smooth TV performer, both Lapid and Binyamin Netanyahu would be more than adequate.

But I am looking for a person who will at least prevent war (and perhaps bring peace closer), bring back some form of social justice, put an end to the discrimination against Arab and Jewish Oriental citizens, restore our health, education and other social services, and more.

LET ME start with the easy part: for whom I shall not vote under any circumstances.

On the extreme right there is Eli Yishai's “Beyahad” (Together) party. I never liked Yishai. Before he split from “Shas”, he was Interior Minister and persecuted refugees from Sudan and Eritrea without even a modicum of compassion.

With his new party desperate to overcome the threshold clause, which is now 3.25%, Yishai made a deal with the disciples of the late and unlamented Rabbi Meir Ka-

hane, who was branded as a fascist by the Supreme Court. No. 4 on the list is now Baruch Marzel, who once publicly called for my murder. Even a bottle of the noblest wine is spoiled by a few drops of cyanide. No sell.

Next on the list is Avigdor Lieberman, the center of whose election platform is the proposal to behead with an axe all Arab citizens who are not loyal to the state. (I am not making this up.)

Not far from there is Naftali Bennett, the smooth, baby-faced former high-tech entrepreneur with the smallest kippa on earth. After conquering the Religious-National Party in a hostile takeover, he turned it into an efficient outfit.

The Religious-National Party was once a very moderate political force, which put a brake on David Ben-Gurion's adventurism. But its semi-autonomous education system has turned out generations of extremists. Now they are the party of the settlers, and Bennett is wooing young Arab-hating, war-loving secular Jews, who otherwise would vote for Likud.

THUS WE come to Likud, the party of “King Bibi”, as Time Magazine admiringly called him.

Binyamin Netanyahu is fighting for his political life. A few months ago, when he decided to dismiss the Knesset and call early elections, he certainly did not dream of such a predicament.

It seemed that Israel's march to the right was inevitable and unstoppable. That Netanyahu's eternal reign was pre-ordained. That the Left was facing a sordid end. That the Center was evaporating. It was just a matter of Netanyahu changing his horses (or asses, some would say).

And here we are, a few days before election day, with Likud almost desperate.

Why? How?

It seems that people are just fed up with Netanyahu. They seem to be saying: Enough is enough.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a great leader in peace and war, was elected for the fourth time, the American people decided to limit the terms of presidents henceforth to two. Perhaps the Israeli people have decided the same: three terms of Netanyahu are quite sufficient, thank you.

On the internet, a very funny clip is now circulating.

Netanyahu is standing on the podium of the Congress, like a gym teacher (or like the trainer of very tame lions in a circus), commanding his pupils “Up! Down! Up! Down!” with congressmen and senators jumping at his command.

The Likud spin doctors had hoped that this sight would improve his fortunes in the election. And indeed, for a few days his numbers in the polls rose from a dismal 21 seats (of 120) to 23. But then they went down again and settled at 21, with Herzog at 24. Perhaps the senators did not jump high enough.

Where do the Likud votes go? First of all, to Bennett's party. That would not be an unmitigated disaster for Netanyahu, since Bennett, with all the hatred between them, will have to support Netanyahu in the Knesset.

BUT SOME of the votes will go to the two “center” parties of Kahlon and Lapid, whose eventual allegiance is uncertain.

Kahlon comes from the Likud. He was a typical party member, son of immigrants from Tripoli (Libya), the darling of the party's powerful central committee. A Likud member can vote for him now with a clear conscience, especially if he wants to change the social situation and ameliorate the lot of the poor.

Lapid is much the same, with one great difference: he has already been Finance Minister, while Kahlon only aspires to become one. Though Lapid has an unlimited enthusiasm for explaining his huge success in this job, the general opinion is that he was just so-so, if not a complete failure.

Nobody—not even they themselves—knows the answer to the decisive question: will they join a Netanyahu or a Herzog government? They can do either. No problem. It may be a matter for a public auction: who will pay more. More ministries, more budgets, more jobs. It will probably depend on the results of the elections.

The same is true for the two Orthodox parties—the Oriental Shas and the Ashkenazi “Torah Jewry”. They believe in God and Money, and God may instruct them to join the coalition which offers the most Money for their institutions.

So there are at least four “center” parties which can decide whether Netanyahu or Herzog will be our next Prime Minister. Lieberman's shrinking party may be the fifth.

Of course I would not dream of voting for any of them.

WHAT IS LEFT? A choice between three: Labor, now called “the Zionist Camp”, Meretz and the Joint (Arab) list.

The Arab list is composed of four vastly different parties: communist, Islamist and nationalist. It is a shotgun marriage, with Lieberman holding the gun: it was he who induced the Knesset to raise the minimum election thresh-

old, in order to evict the small Arab parties from the Knesset. In response, the four small parties formed the big united list, which now holds third place in the polls after the two large parties.

The Arabs in Israel are second-class citizens, discriminated against and sometimes persecuted. What would be more humane for a progressive Jewish citizen than to vote for such a list?

For me that would be natural, since I was instrumental in creating in 1984 the first completely integrated Arab-Jewish election list (“the Progressive List for Peace”), which won two terms. (The communist party is almost completely Arab, with some Jewish members).

But the Joint List is problematic for me. A few days ago, they upset me with a fateful decision.

It concerns the “leftover” votes. Under our election law, two lists may make an agreement, under which the “leftover” votes of both will be pooled and turned over to one of them. (“Leftover” are votes remaining after the party has been allotted the seats for which it has the full number of votes.)

The Leftist parties devised a plan under which the Joint List was to pool its leftovers with those of Meretz. This might have given to one of them—and thus to the entire leftist bloc—one more seat, which may turn out to be crucial.

The Joint List refused, because Meretz is a Zionist party. The decision may have been logical, since many Arab voters could possibly abstain from voting if they feared that their vote might go to a Jewish “Zionist” list. But it showed that faced with any important decision, the Islamists of the Joint List might bloc a united decision for peace. I have a problem with that.

So I am left with Meretz and the “Zionist Camp”. Meretz is far closer to my views than the larger list. But only the larger list can unseat Netanyahu. The problem would not have existed if my proposal for a joint list including “the Zionist Camp”, Meretz, Lapid and more had been set up in time. All the prospective parts refused.

So now I am faced with a choice: either vote ideologically for Meretz or vote pragmatically for the party whose chances of putting an end to Netanyahu's reign will be enhanced if it emerges as the largest party in the next Knesset. But this party has many defects, of which I am painfully aware.

Otto von Bismarck, one of the greatest statesmen of all times, famously described politics as “the art of the possible”.

It is now possible to stop the march of the Right and restore some sanity to our country.

So how should I vote?