

# The Shining Torch

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“SHINING TORCH” SOUNDS like the name of a Red Indian (or should I say Native American?) chief. In Hebrew, it is the literal meaning of the name of our latest political sensation: Ya’ir Lapid. This week, he announced his intention to enter politics and set up a new political party.

Hardly a surprise. For many months now, speculation has been rife. Lapid has hinted more than once about his intention, giving the impression that he would act on it only close to election time. That was clever, since he was the most popular news anchorman on the most popular TV channel. Why give up a post that gives you unique public exposure (and pays a handsome salary to boot)?

Now he has been told by his employers, probably under political pressure, to choose: either/or – TV or politics.

Some 2061 years ago, Julius Caesar crossed the little river Rubicon to march on Rome, exclaiming “*iacta alea est*” – the die has been cast. Lapid is no Caesar and does not speak Latin, but his feeling must have been much the same.

A day later, another well-known personality, Noam Shalit, threw a second die. The father of Gilad, the captured soldier who was exchanged for 1027 Palestinian prisoners, has announced that he will run for the Knesset on the Labor party list. After five years leading the immensely popular campaign for his son’s release, he has decided to put to political use his rise from anonymity to celebrity status.

A whole series of exes – ex-generals, ex-Mossad chiefs, ex-CEOs – are waiting for their turn.

What does that mean? It means that the smell of elections is in the air, though elections are officially due only a year and a half from now, and there are no signs that Binyamin Netanyahu and his far-right partners intend to bring them forward.

THE ATTRACTION of a Knesset seat is hard to explain. Most Israelis despise the Knesset, but almost everyone would sell their grandmother to become a member.<sup>1</sup>

But that’s beside the point. The question is: why do so many people believe that a new party has a good chance to win seats? Why does Ya’ir Lapid believe that a new party, headed by him, will become a major faction in the Knesset and perhaps even propel him into the Prime Minister’s office?

There now exists a gaping black hole in the Israeli political system, a hole so huge that nobody could fail to notice it.

On the right is the present government coalition, consisting of the Likud, the Lieberman party and various ultra-nationalist, pro-settlement and religious factions.

What is there on the Left and in the Center? Well, next to nothing.

<sup>1</sup>A Jewish joke tells about a stranger who comes to the shtetl and asks for directions to the home of the synagogue manager. “What, that scoundrel?” exclaims one of the passers-by. “That bastard”, “that son of a bitch”, “that miser,” respond others. When he finally meets the man and asks why he clings to the office, he answers: “Because of the honor!”

The main opposition party, Kadima, is in a shambles. It has failed miserably to establish a role for itself. Tzipi Livni is incompetent, and it seems that the only merit of her party rival, a former army Chief of Staff, is his Oriental origin (he was born in Iran). The latest polls give Kadima half the number of seats it holds now.

Labor, which seemed to rise when Shelly Yachimovich was elected chairwoman, has slid back in the polls to where it was before. Nor has the stock of Meretz gone up. The same goes for the communist and the Arab factions who vegetate on the fringes of the system, if not outside. All of them together could not unseat the Right.

The gap is glaring. It cries out for a new force that can fill the void. No wonder that the various messiahs in waiting hear an inner voice telling them that their time has come.

The trouble is that none of these pretenders comes with a message. They appear on the scene with a cookbook mentality: Take a few popular phrases, add 3 celebrities, 2 generals, 4 women, 1 Russian, and with the help of a clever PR expert and two “strategic advisers” you are on your way.

For Lapid, the three popular phrases are now: take money from the irresponsible tycoons (Who are they? Are there also responsible tycoons?), take money from bloated government departments (which ones? Do they include the Ministry of Defense?), take money from distant settlements (How distant? What about all the other settlements?).

There seems to be no one around who comes with a deeply held conviction, a message that “burns in his bones”, as you say in Hebrew. Shelly of Labor has a serious social message, but refuses adamantly to speak about anything else, especially about such unsavory subjects as peace and the occupation. Kadima is wish-washy about everything. And Lapid?

AH, WELL – that depends on the polls. Lapid is a prolific writer with many books to his credit and a weekly column in the mass circulation Yediot Aharonot. But even with a microscope one cannot detect the trace of a serious answer to any of the country’s burning national or social questions.

That may be clever. If you say something that is outside the consensus, you create enemies. The less you say, the less trouble. That is a basic political truism. But not the stuff great leaders are made of.

It has often been said of Lapid that he is the man every Jewish mother dreams of as her son-in-law. He is tall, very handsome, looks much younger than his 49 years, and has a movie-star quality. He also had a famous father.

“Tommy” Lapid was a Holocaust survivor. He was born in the Hungarian-speaking enclave of the former Yugoslavia and

spent World War II in Adolf Eichmann's Budapest. He became a feuilleton writer (though less successful than his fellow Hungarian, Ephraim Kishon), but made his name as a TV panelist who introduced a completely new style of aggressiveness, some said vulgarity. Example: when a poverty stricken woman complained about her abject condition, he shot back: "So how did you pay your hairdresser?"

Lapid Sr. had a split personality: in personal relations he was easy-going, even charming. His public persona was pugnacious and abrasive.

So was his political message. He was famous for the intensity of his hatred of the orthodox Jews. He was also a rabid ultra-nationalist, who even defended Slobodan Milosevic. But in domestic affairs he was a true liberal.

Almost by accident he became the leader of a moribund party and led it to an astounding election triumph, amassing 15 Knesset seats and becoming a good Justice Minister. The party then shrank again as rapidly as it had grown.

All this tells us little about Lapid Jr. What kind of political program will he represent, once he is compelled to provide answers? Contrary to his father's aggressiveness, he preaches conciliation, togetherness, moderation. He positions himself in the exact center and clings to the widest possible consensus. His chances seem to be excellent.

However, from now until the elections – whenever they are held – can be a very long time. Israel is a cruel country, popularity can fade quickly. The first political test of Lapid will be whether he can keep the public's interest for long without his

TV pulpit.

I believe that his entrance into the political scene is a good thing. Our political system is in dire need of new blood. And I can hardly line up with those who say that journalists should not enter politics.

WHAT ARE his chances? Impossible to foretell. It will depend on many factors: when will the elections be held, what happens before then, will there be a war?<sup>2</sup> And first of all: who else will join the fray in the meantime?

I fervently hope that a different kind of new political force will emerge – a center-left party with a clear and inclusive message: social reform, narrowing the gap between rich and poor, the two-state solution, peace with the Palestinians and the end of the occupation, equality between all citizens, irrespective of gender, race, ethnic origin and beliefs, total separation between state and religion, human rights safeguarded by strong and independent courts - all this enshrined in an iron-clad written constitution.

For this you need leaders with strong backbones, ready to fight for their convictions.

Perhaps Lapid will, in the end, fit this bill, at least partly. Perhaps he will also attract votes from Likud members who are disgusted by the neo-fascist turn some of the Likud leaders have taken – enough votes to upset the balance in the Knesset and put an end to the ultra-rightist frenzy.

The next few months will tell whether the Shining Torch will continue to shine – and on what exactly.

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<sup>2</sup>Lapid was not a combat soldier, a serious flaw in the eyes of many Israelis.