

Can Progressive Americans Contribute to a Revival of the Israeli Left?

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The following is an edited transcript of a discussion in our “Conversations with Israel and Palestine” series of webinars, and took place on Dec. 18, 2019. It is a very rich discussion by three people deeply knowledgeable about and committed to the Israeli moderate left – and who speak frankly about what they think is needed. While it took place before the recent electoral alliance concluded between Meretz and Labor, many of the same concerns that American Jewish progressives have about that alliance surface here as well. It is worth reading and pondering by anyone concerned with the parlous state of the Israeli left.

David Myers: Hello My name is David Myers. I’m a professor of Jewish history at UCLA in Los Angeles. I’m also the board president of the New Israel Fund. I’m delighted to welcome you all to this latest installment of “Conversations with Israel and Palestine,” hosted by Partners for Progressive Israel. I’ll be moderating a conversation with two prominent Israeli activists, Yael Patir and Uri Zaki.

Yael Patir is the Israel director for J Street, which she joined in 2012, after six years at the Shimon Peres Center for Peace. Yael also helped establish the Palestinian-Israeli peace NGO forum which is a network of some 100 Palestinian and Israeli peace and dialogue organizations. She is a certified mediator and a group facilitator specializing in dialogue between groups in conflict.

Now Uri Zaki, who has focused his career on promoting peace and democratic values. He was a senior advisor to former Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, and was part of the negotiating team of the Geneva Initiative. Uri was the founding director of B’Tselem USA and later director of Zionist enterprises at the World Zionist Organization. He is a leading figure in the Meretz party where he held the position of President of the governing Assembly. Today, Uri leads the front for the protection of democracy which acts as an assertive attack dog against the Israel alt-right.

Let’s set the stage for the conversation. Later today, the United States House of Representatives will vote on two articles of impeachment against Donald Trump. Trump and his allies represent, in the eyes of many of us on this call, the United States version of the global scourge of illiberal democracy. A political ideology and practice that rests on an ethnocentric, xenophobic form of nationalism based on exclusion rather than inclusion, intolerance rather than tolerance, and power rather than justice.

Israel, as we know. is a link in this chain of global illiberalism. The last decade, which I often think of simply as the Netanyahu decade, has drawn aptly from this playbook of illiberal democracy. Attacks on the rule of law,

on an independent judiciary on the free press, on political opponents, on the rights of minorities, on the rights of the most vulnerable like asylum seekers.

It's important to note that pushing in this direction towards the Israeli version of illiberalism has been a motley assembly of right-wing American Jewish, and for that matter, Christian actors. They have infused huge amounts of money in the direction of the settlement project and have, in that regard, really perpetuated and dug deeper roots for the occupation.

They have supported organizations intent on attacking institutions of democracy in Israel as well as progressive social justice actors. That's something that we at NIF and J Street know very well. A central figure of course in that particular aspect of right-wing support is Sheldon Adelson who has bankrolled, among many other things, Israel's most widely disseminated newspaper *Israel Hayom* (Israel Today) which I think of as Israel's version of *Pravda*.

Right-wing actors from America have also played a key role in generating, disseminating, lobbying for, and legislating ideas that support the ethnocentric vision. The classic example is Israel's nation's-state law, passed by the Knesset in July 2018, which was the product of a concerted and, I have to say, enviably successful decade of work by right-wing think tanks funded by American Jewish philanthropists.

If there is a global network of illiberal democrats, there's also a global network of progressive liberal democrats. We may be at present less organized or less well-funded, but we exist and in considerable numbers.

We must now marshal our resources and fortify our collaborations. In this regard, it seems to me that the divide that is emerging, or that has emerged, is not so much between Israel and America as, for example, Daniel Gordis has recently argued. Rather, it's between liberals and illiberals, both of whom are found in substantial numbers in Israel, in the United States, and in many places around the world.

This brings me now to our two distinguished panelists, Yael and Uri, who can help us understand what they think needs to be done in this challenging era. Challenging indeed, but we begin to see, at least in the Israeli case, some glimmer of hope, or at least some glimmer of change on the horizon.

I'll open by asking Yael and then Uri, where are we today? Donald Trump faces imminent impeachment and then likely subsequent acquittal in the United States. Boris Johnson won a smashing victory in the United Kingdom. These two developments push in the direction of that further movement toward the illiberal side of the spectrum. Now Israel goes to a third set of elections in which Netanyahu seems to be hanging on by a thread.

I'm curious to hear your thoughts about where we are in this global moment of illiberalism, of xenophobia, of ethnocentrism, and more particularly, where Israel is within that wider settings. We'll begin with Yael. Welcome and thank you for agreeing to be with us.

Yael Patir: Thank you. Let me first start by thanking the organizers for putting this call together and for giving me the honor of sharing the conversation with David and Uri who I very much appreciate and learn from. The good news from Israel is that we are definitely at the end of the Netanyahu era. While it's not clear how the clock is exactly going to run and how much time we do have, it is clear that the Netanyahu decade, as David described, is coming to an end.

That does not mean that illiberalism in Israel is coming to an end. That will be a political consequence and has to do a lot with how politics will unfold. I think one of the things that we are seeing with much disgust is the way in which the Likud Party is behaving. We're seeing the same kind of developments happening within the Republican Party. There is this tendency to form one cohesive front, which usually people on the right are much better at doing than we on the left, uniting behind the leader.

The question is whether the end of Netanyahu will also mean the end of these trends that have penetrated throughout institutions and have been legitimized. I do see a lot of hope and I see the pendulum shifting.

Uri Zaki: Yes, we are in an era that somehow in Israel started earlier than the rest of the world. Netanyahu has gotten gradually worse in the way he acts as a populist leader. At the beginning of his tenure he had some respect for the rule of law, democracy, and such, but since he got into power, he has had this divisive manner to him. Since 2015, when he won the election against all odds, he got rid of his old establishment direction and went into a truly populist, divisive mode, attacking the infrastructure of democracy.

That came with a hubris that is at the core of the indictments against him. Most of these things he's charged with happened either very close to or just after his victory in 2015, which for him was a signal that he can do whatever he wants. He's famous as King Bibi on the cover of *Time Magazine*. He's felt like he has no restraints; he can do whatever he wants.

That was also a time when in the rest of the world, not long after Trump won in the United States, you saw an unleashing of the legitimacy of this authoritarianism. The effect of Trump's election was enormous. You can't compare the world and those populist leaders before and after Trump was elected because it affects everything. It affects what you're allowed and not allowed to say on social media, what is acceptable language, how you treat your rivals: making them enemies, that's how you treat your rivals and this whole notion of the deep state, which has penetrated so deeply into the discourse.

Bibi is in close contact with Trump and with the Trump infrastructure, whether it is the fake news media or the moguls who financed both Trump and Netanyahu. Of course, also evangelical Christians. It's also keeping in very close touch with Orban from Hungary, with Modi from India, and the others.

All of them are connected with Putin, who is, at the end of the day, the source of all these developments because he proved that you can win autocratic power in a democracy. I think he's the inspiration for many of

these other leaders.

David: Okay. Thank you, Uri. I want to take up the question of what the progressive camp looks like, what state it's in Israel, and where you think it's headed. What do you see in the intermediate-term? I agree with Yael that we're at the end of the Netanyahu era and one can see that sense of desperation.

One of the possible benefits of the immediate aftermath is that it will bring a helpful measure of instability to the system because Netanyahu brought, over the course of the decade, tremendous stability in terms of his personal stranglehold over institutions of government.

I'm wondering what you anticipate, assuming Netanyahu will be gone and that a coalition or unity government of some sort may take power?

Yael: My honest answer is that I really don't know. My analysis has to do a lot with the narratives I see and whether I choose to be more fearful about things or more hopeful.

I look at the way in which the settlement movement has managed to penetrate the main venues of power in the media, in the army, in the public sector, and to advance its ideology and its interests. It's a very narrow interest and then indeed it is scary. I can also look at the more hopeful reality because our public sector, unlike in the US, is not political. We have people in very senior positions and it has nothing to do with their political affiliation or with their ideology, and we see it in our security establishment and with many different organizations, and we see it in the ministries.

I think that once Netanyahu is out, people will breathe again. There is the sense of suffocation, of self-censorship, that if I am a proud lefty, nobody can not know that about me, and I would not consider trying to get a job in the public sector because I know that nobody will take me because of my views. I don't know if it's true if it's not true, but it's my psyche. The sense of being silenced, of not being able to express yourself, of being afraid of being exposed as a lefty in your workplace; that will absolutely be erased very quickly with a different leadership. Even with a unity government in Israel, just without having that Haman as a leader.

I think that Bibi's removal from public stage will have a very great impact by itself, and the idea that our democracy and its institutions are stronger than the individual will send a very strong message.

At the same time, the systems are already in a way rigged. It's hard for me to give a scenario with full confidence, but I know that the important thing is not what we predict but what we do about it. One of the things we've realized is that we lack people in public sector. There are now programs to train people and to push them to take these positions. That's just one example of the actions that we're seeing.

Also, I think our political system currently is not organized in a way that is representative of where the people are. Because of Netanyahu, we are going

to elections again and again and the elections are about whether or not we impeach Netanyahu. People, for example, who are Meretz voters, will vote for the alternative to Netanyahu because it's more important to them to get rid of him than to have a party that represents their ideology. The struggle against him is dominating everything. Israel has a very strong center which is represented by the Blue-White Party, but we will also have major changes regarding how our left is organized.



David: Thank you. Uri, I want us to move directly to the heart of our matter, which is what we can do and what the state of play is with the progressive liberal left organizations in Israel which seem, at some level, to be absolutely decimated. We often labor under the belief that there's no substantial progressive voice. If we look around the world, we see worrisome signs as well.

What do you see in Israel in terms of the current state of affairs and also what needs to happen in order to effect the kind of change Yael was intimating in her response?

Uri: There is a very developed, very impressive progressive infrastructure in Israel. It's a source of envy in a sense. We have organizations that, despite the ongoing occupation and the security threats, that have been able to build a chain of organizations focusing on human rights, on civil rights, on rights of minorities. All this impressive infrastructure was supported throughout those years by the NIF. I'll also mention NIF itself, was caught by surprise by the brutal attacks it suddenly faced.

All of a sudden, you saw Naomi Chazan and the NIF itself flogged as traitors. We're talking about a concentrated and organized effort to break the resources of the progressive network in Israel. The two main attacks were against the NIF and against the European countries that supported the Israeli civil society organizations. They knew that by attacking NIF and the European governments' aid to Israeli civil society organizations, they could really weaken this progressive infrastructure, dry up the resources, their ability to function. By the way, they were more successful with the European governments, I think, and less successful with the NIF because the NIF started understanding what we progressives need to do. For many of us, those organizations established in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, aren't equipped to fight this fight.

We're talking about a fight that from our side is heavily funded, that has facts and truth, much like you know from the Trump era now. Now people understand because they know about fake news and fake truth culture. You are being attacked by smart people who are able to use very eloquent, very vicious populist statements and attacks, and you need to defend yourselves.

The way to do it, the way that I adopted is to fight back and attack them across the line. You need to be on the attack constantly because, first of all, once you attack them they have to pull the resources from attacking you into defending themselves, much like we've been doing in the last decade. Second, there is a lot of material to attack them with.

These are organizations that have dark money behind them. They attacked us on the so-called foreign funding, but they don't say who's funding them. The reason is because they have many things to hide. Unveiling those interests that stand behind their resources is an important way to shame them.

That won't go away after Netanyahu. Some may be silenced, but there's an infrastructure that is very strong, well-funded, and that is not going anywhere.

At the Forum for Protection of Democracy we're showing how the American right is trying to implant American rightwing theories that are not part of the Israeli discourse at all into the discourse in Israel. For example, the right to bear arms and abortion, which aren't part of our discourse here. Of course, they have also libertarian concepts that are foreign; Begin was not a libertarian! The Israeli right was not socially liberal, but never libertarian.

David: Okay. An important way in which Uri understands the needs of the day is through his particular "attack dog" model, opposition research, and hitting back at the other side. I'm wondering how you see both the lay of the land in terms of the progressive world in Israel; what's the state of affairs and what do you think is important to build?

Here, I want to draw on an issue you haven't yet spoken about, but that seems to me the operational credo of progressive Israel for the next half-century, the idea of an Arab-Jewish partnership. I'm wondering what alignment of progressive organizations can lead to the implementation of an alternative vision to the one reflected in the nation-state law?

Yael: I'll highlight a few things, there are probably many more. One of them was what I was referring to when I said that our political system, or our political parties, do not reflect necessarily our progressive views surrounding this idea of a Jewish-Arab progressive partnership. One of its expressions would be a party. I say this with hesitation because I think that both Meretz and Hadash look at themselves as parties that have that partnership at heart in a way. At least that's what they would like to represent themselves as, but neither is really a party formed to promote this idea that there is a camp of left people in Israel that is both Jewish and Arab.

More important than having a political party is to have partnerships and to have the possibility of progressive Zionists and the Arab minority working together, because there's no way to see an Israel center-left government without opening up this space and legitimizing this sort of partnership.

It can happen in many spheres, not only between politicians but also in civil society and education. This is one of my greatest sources of optimism because I think what we've seen in the last few months in Israel has been incredible, in terms of the reaction to Netanyahu. The way in which the Joint List, and mainly Ayman Odeh, reacted in the last two cycles has brought people to really discuss this idea.

The nation-state law is also part of it, it has been brought to the center of public debate; something that we didn't talk about for a while which is: how do we live together here? What are the boundaries of what we want to accept, how equal we are, how liberal we are, how democratic we really are. You hear in coffee shop conversations people saying, "Why shouldn't we have Arab ministers in our government?" People who aren't political animals but start to ask, "Why are Arabs a problem? Why can't they have equal status in our institutions?" There are more polls being conducted on it. I think the figures that we see both from the Arab minority in Israel as well as from the Jewish majority are quite surprising.

There's still a lot of bad things that I can highlight in terms of people's willingness to accept the Palestinian minority in Israel as equal partners in running the country. We're not there at all, but the discourse is years ahead of where it was just a few months ago. We have a blooming civil society; it's amazing!

We have wonderful organizations dealing with human rights and with other issues but we've neglected the politics. Also, as a generation, I'm saying this being critical of ourselves. We go to work in NGOs, we fight in legal ways, we fight in advocacy but we're not pushing the politicians enough. I see this in J Street. I see the way organizing is happening around the political sphere.

It's not happening enough but I think there's a realization that the political sphere has been neglected and there's more organizations that are thinking in advocacy terms, are thinking in mobilizing political power, of how to gain political power, and how to influence power, which is very different than how to win a case in court or how to fight against the daily abuses of the occupation. That also has to do with training people into being either politicians or taking positions of political responsibility.

David: It seems also important to think of the *pikudim*, the civil service sector, as an important site in which to implement an alternative vision given what you said, how it would be unimaginable today that you would be a candidate for a senior professional position in a ministry. The electoral sphere as well as the professional functionary class.

Yael: The other thing I will say is the importance of building an international infrastructure. Particularly from where I stand, the Israeli-

American one, because the infrastructure on the right is so powerful and it's so organic and the echo chambers are amazing. I see the reactions that are coming from members of Congress in the US and from members of Knesset in Israel on the right and they're using the same arguments, they're using the same language.

I saw it just recently on our side with the decision of the High Court in the EU to label settlement products and they used the same arguments. I was asking myself, "How come? Who is sending them talking points about Tibet and Crimea and Western Sahara?" There is now this natural connection and relationship that was built through years of engagement and trust-building. That's really something that we need to invest much more both to counter them and to be more effective in what we do.

David: Great, okay, we'll go to something else. We're now going turn, in the last 15 minutes of our conversation, to some of the questions that have come up. I want to return to a point that both you made, Uri and Yael and combine it with David Abraham's question. What tangible change can we expect in March, especially with regard to Arab participation in the vote?

We saw between April and September a very significant rise in Arab voter participation from 48-49% to 60%, which is still far below the high of 75% in 1999. This was something which NIF grantees Zazim and Omdim B'yachad were working on assiduously and there were tangible, meaningful results. What's a reasonable expectation in terms of increased Arab participation for the March vote and how might that alter the outcome? How do you see it?

Uri: I think we should expect another rise in Arab participation and turnout. I think Netanyahu was the best campaigner for Arab participation for the joint list.

Ayman Odeh and Ahmad Tibi and others played their cards very well in the last round between September and the dissolution of the Knesset showed that they are pragmatic and willing to participate., Blue-White has different factions within it but Benny Gantz should get good, if not excellent, marks on the way he acted as well.

Unlike April where he totally ignored, sometimes dismissed, and almost incited against the Arab voters and their representatives, this time he was very respectful. He mentioned them in all of the speeches he made, he met with them and took pictures with them.

In that sense, it was the well-played game of Odeh, and Tibi and the rest of the Joint List and also the understanding of Gantz. That was a flow of events. I do think that in April 2019, Meretz got many Arab votes, because we had a glimpse of what could be the future. Meretz in April was very different than Meretz in September, a few months later. Meretz in April had a very left-leaning list with two Arabs out of the first five. That's for the first time in Israel's history where you have almost a balanced representation of Jews and Arabs; Arabs reacted and 40,000 voted for Meretz.

When Meretz pulled away from that, lowering the list position of Issawi Frej

and also joining forces with Barak, who has a dreadful record with the Arabs, it lost some 60% of the votes it got in April. Right now as a Meretz activist I can say I hope we're on the eve of changing the way we're going to be presented to the public, I think it would be somewhere in between April and September. It won't be as good as in April but it won't be as bad as in September. I totally agree that the future is for progressive Jewish-Arab cooperation.

By the way, if you take the Arab Joint List, some elements there are conservative. If they would have been Jews they would have been part of Shas, part of Likud, and even maybe part of the extreme right. There is a division within the Arab society, but because of the assault on them they unite, and I think that's what they should do, but in a more healthy future progressives should form together a big left-wing party that will be Jewish-Arab.

David: What do you see in March 2020? There is tangible progress. Is it conceivable that the Joint List will support a government and be an important player in the aftermath of the March election?

Yael: I wish.

David: Are we still far away from that?

Yael: Yes. I think we're still far away from that.

David: Okay, Yael, I want to give you an opportunity to ask the question directed to you from Michael Farrow. Would you care to make a response to the recent *Intercept* article criticizing J Street's effectiveness and influence? It includes the claim that you advised against conditioning military aid because it might diminish J Street's influence on the Knesset.

Yael: Thanks for the opportunity. It's a very long article. One of the things that was highlighted was this dynamic. I will say that we have, in J Street, discussions on issues and one of my jobs as the Israel Director is to represent the position of who are our partners in Israel with regard to the positions that we take. How much we are in line, how much we are out of line, how it will affect our ability to not to influence the Knesset? I think that's the thing that was, for me, the most annoying about that representation in *The Intercept*. J Street does not influence the Knesset. J Street seeks support from Israelis.

One of the greatest things we did when we supported the Iran Agreement was bring Israeli security ex-officials to support the deal and it was extremely helpful in getting the deal through and something that I'm very proud of doing despite the fact that the deal did not get support across the Israeli political spectrum.

I think we had to not only discuss the issue of aid because it's on the table, but also to have a position. The current position of J Street is that we call for transparency and we want to make sure the security aid benefits Israeli's security and not Israel's occupation. That's a position I feel very comfortable with.

David: Okay, so we have time for one final question from Tyler Grassi. I want to preface it by saying that we at NIF often imagine that we're confronting in the current moment two major crises. One is the crisis of democracy in Israel, which we've talked a lot about. The other is the crisis of a prospective lost generation of young American Jews in particular who feel increasingly detached and alienated from the Jewish community, the established Jewish community, and from Israel.

The question that Tyler asks is "What is the most practical way for Progressive American Jews to be involved? To let Israelis know that we're standing behind them." I would say, not only what is the most effective way that American progressives, Jewish and non-Jewish, can manifest their support for Israel, but what potential is there for that support to double back and have a reinvigorating effect on progressives, particularly, progressive Jews in America?

Uri: I would advise first and foremost to be active in both these wings of how to promote policies through J Street and how to promote the actual work that Israeli nonprofits operate in Israel through the NIF. I think that's the best way to do it.

Second, it's not about the specific individual, but rather, if you take a lesson from what's going on with the American right and understand that it is using Israel as a kind of testing ground for many of its notions. Progressives should also use Israel as a testing ground on how you counter them. It's not like any other foreign country to any progressive American, by the way, not only for Jews, because there's no equivalent to the kind of cooperation between the American right and the Israeli right.

David: Thank you. Yael, the final word. Small question. What can American Progressives, American progressive Jews do?

Yael: I think that things are changing. There is now much more reciprocity and an opportunity because we have a shared struggle. It's not only about Israel and occupation. It's also about what is happening in the US and it's also about the global rise of liberal democracies or liberal leaders.

Second, building trust between us. Not a competition on who's progressive and who's not. There shouldn't be conditions for what is considered progressive and what is not, which I often think happens in this relationship. Again, we should do our best to be able to form a line.

Then there are very practical ways of echoing each other, of providing support, providing accountability for positions that are taken in each of the sides. Better echo chambers to do that, opportunities to meet, sharing experiences, sharing lessons learned, sharing the tools, legitimizing each other's positions, as I said, and really encouraging ourselves to educate ourselves about the other. I think, in many way, Israelis have much work to do in learning about Americans.

Uri: Just one more comment that I forgot about it, and we're hosted by Partners for Progressive Israel. In 2020, there will be elections to the

Zionist Congress. Another way to influence is to vote for the joint progressive HATIKVAH faction that has J Street, NIF, PPI and others. Voting for that, we can start the revolution from there. It's a great way to bring together American and Israeli progressive Jews into action.

David: Thank you. You have exemplified, really, what I think is perhaps the ultimate source of salvation which is this kind of people-to-people contact, getting young Israelis and young American progressives together to talk about issues of mutual concern. Whether it be the conflict or global warming, we will advance the cause in both countries.

Unfortunately, there's much more to be said but no time, so we're going to have to bring this conversation to an end. I want to thank Yael Patir and Uri Zaki for a really stimulating hour. Thank you to all who were viewing and listening to this Conversation with Israel-Palestine. I want to thank the staff of Partners for Progressive Israel for their work in making this discussion happen, especially Dinesh. You can go to progressiveisrael.org to learn more about Partners for Progressive Israel and its future programs. Thank you Uri, and thank you Yael.