Where’s the Israeli Left—And Why

By Paul Scham

Those who have managed to follow Israeli politics amid the blizzard of improving news in this country (e.g. vaccine rollout going well; Biden pushing a strong domestic program, Republican Party imploding) and mostly bad news from abroad (Myanmar, Syria, Brazil, slow European vaccine rollouts, etc.) know we are in a waiting period. Specifically, Israel’s President Rivlin, given little or no choice, has presented Bibi Netanyahu with the mandate to form a government, which he probably won’t be able to do within the specified four weeks. That’s the somewhat good news. The bad news is that, in all probability no one else will either, and the likelihood is that Israel is headed to a new (fifth) election, perennially in search of a stable government.

The question for most people reading this article is “Where is the Israeli ‘left’ in this?” What has become of the legacy of the Labor Party, Meretz, and further back, Mapam, Ratz, and Mapai? What about the NGOs that have opposed the occupation for decades, such as Peace Now and B’tselem. Is there a left in Israel?

A few months ago, many feared that after the election, that would be the case, at least in the Knesset. But then Meirav Michaeli was elected head of the Labor Party and brought it back from very near death, and Nitzan Horowitz led Meretz to an additional seat. Now Labor has 7 seats and Meretz 6. Better than death but a long way from power, though it is possible they may join in a coalition led by Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid), possibly in a rotation agreement with Naftali Bennett (Yamina). However, this moderate left element would, at best, be a medium-sized cog in what would likely be a center-right government. This is not too bad, given that over 80 of the 120 Knesset members belong to parties of the religious and/or political right, by any definition one may choose.

How did the Israeli left get here? How can Israel return to being a country that actively seeks to implement ideals of peace, social justice, and equality? As we go to press I hear that such a debate has started; it’s welcome and necessary.

To answer that comprehensively would take a book—probably two; one to show how we got here and one to suggest ways to get out of here. Maybe I’ll write the former one day. But one of the perks of being a commentator is the right to fit the most complex of ideas into a space of more or less 1000 words. So here goes.

The number one reason is, of course, the failure to make peace with the Palestinians. I still hold to the currently slightly quaint notion that both sides were to blame, mixed with an undeserved amount of bad luck during the Oslo process. Now, however much we may cry foul, peace (with the
Palestinians, who have the actual dispute with Israel) is off the table for most Israelis. It is well and good to sign treaties with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, but they have never really been at war with Israel. It has all the impact of a couple who have lived together for 15 years deciding to get married. You may be glad that they’ve tied the knot, but a shock it isn’t. However, the parties on the moderate left are tied inextricably to a peace process that failed. The consequences of Oslo still reverberate.

I would nominate as the second reason: it’s the price of success. The left—as understood in terms of the pre-state period and the first 30 years of Israeli politics—built the country. They established the Yishuv, fought against the Nazis and the British (in that order), won the War of Independence, created the kibbutzim, managed to mass immigration of the early years, and led the government and the society in the Six-Day war. They also, probably inevitably, made a host of big mistakes along the way: from the displacement of 700,000 Palestinians, to the lackluster welcome of eastern (Mizrachi) Jews, who bear a seemingly permanent animus against the left, to managing a bureaucratic socialist/welfare state that seems absurdly outdated in hindsight. Unlike the few other lasting democratic regimes that have emerged from a violent war/revolution, the winning party hasn’t managed to reinvent itself—and the left is now held responsible by many Israelis for all of Israel’s failures along the way. Not that Israelis are unhappy where they are; Israeli ranks 12th in the World Happiness Index for 2021 (Finland is #1, the US is #19, and China is #84). For what it’s worth.

Labor has tried reinventing itself as New Labor, the Zionist Union, and choosing two Mizrachim as leaders, but nothing worked. Meirav Michaeli had to revive it from a near-fatal coma with a dose of feminism and new faces. Meanwhile Meretz has remained true to its ideals and priorities—and has been stuck at 5-6 seats for two decades. People don’t forgive their parents or their former leaders. “The evil that men [and women] do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” So has it been with the Israeli Labor movement.

Third, I would blame the zeitgeist. I can’t explain why the last decade has given us authoritarian incarnations of Putin, Erdogan, Orban, Modi, Xi, Duterte, Bolsanaro, Sisi, and Trump, but Bibi both enjoys their company and deserves it. His brand of toxic, partly religion-fueled nationalism, and neoliberal economics preceded many of them, but certainly fits. BTW, I don’t believe Israel has or will become an authoritarian country like most of those led by the preceding rum crew. It is tamping down on democracy but unlike many of my friends, I don’t think it will lose its democratic essence.

For the fourth major reason, I would choose the lack of dynamic, charismatic leadership. There is a perennial debate among historians as to whether the times make the leader or leaders make their own successes, but neither has been in evidence in Israel lately, especially on the left. The current crop (Michaeli, Horowitz, and Ayman Odeh of the Joint List) have all been successful so far, but no one sees in any of them a resemblance to David Ben-Gurion or Yitzhak Rabin (in his 2nd term).

That is my list; there are certainly others.
Finally, I should bring up the biggest positive change-maker of this election: Mansour Abbas of the (soft-Islamist) Ra’am Party. Formerly part of the Joint List, which is generally, though partly inaccurately, seen as “leftist”; Abbas’s party left the JL precisely because of that reason, remarking that, except for supporting a Palestinian state, his party had more in common with (the Haredi, rightwing, Mizrachi party) Shas, than with the Joint List or the Israeli left. Ra’am not only received four seats in the Knesset, but is being wooed by both the Lapid center and the Netanyahu right to pull their putative coalitions up to or over the magic number of 61.

While Abbas and his party are by no means my cup of tea, I tip my hat to him for already breaking the ultimate taboo in Israeli politics; creating the conditions under which an ‘Arab party’ may be invited into a coalition—and by the center and right, not the left! This is big! And it will resonate for many election cycles to come. It incentivizes Israeli Jewish parties to woo both Arab parties and voters, and incentivizes both Arabs and their parties to see themselves and expect to be treated as normal parts of the Israeli body politic.

So that is where I think “we” are. Our allies are a long way from power, but not powerless; they are in the room where it happens, i.e., the Knesset. Political parties and movements change and renew themselves, and even Zeitgeister transform.

**Coming soon: Some ideas about ‘what is to be done’!**

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