

Jewish Democracy at World Zionist Congress

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The 37th World Zionist Congress has come to an end. Can we talk about two Jews, three opinions? First-time Diaspora delegates called it a disillusioning and frightening experience in Israeli incivility. Seasoned Congress attenders called it business as usual.



The final morning began at 6:30 AM—before breakfast was open in our hotel—with my faction (Labor-Meretz-Reform-Ameinu--PPI-Habonim Dror-Hashomer Hatzair-Green) going painstakingly over 94 resolutions to be presented to the plenary. This represented about half of all the resolutions originally submitted. Some resolutions were defeated in committees but many were just never raised in their respective committees.

After about 2 1/2 hours of slogging through these resolutions and forming a faction position on each one them, we had our first plenum speech with Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon. Interestingly, all wi-fi in the building was apparently blocked for his speech, but there were no extra physical screenings. I thought it was a glitch but someone who has heard him speak before said it happened then too. So I guess it was a feature. He gave a very predictable speech. I will give you the keywords (Iran, ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, Gaza, wave of terror, security, only democracy in the middle east) and you can figure out for yourself what was said. Then the main event began.

Each delegate was issued a palm-sized voting machine. This is not the first time these have been used at a Congress. To say many people were fundamentally uncomfortable with the technology would be a vast understatement. Considering that aside from the 35 percent of "youth" (under 35) delegates, the average age of the remaining delegates is probably at least 70-75 years old, you can understand that there were a large number of delegates who are not tremendously comfortable with new technology, especially technology that requires a fair amount of dexterity to operate.

As each resolution was called, people had 20 seconds to vote. There were about 550 delegates in the room. On some resolutions, 350 votes registered. On another 525 votes registered. This was not confidence building. Most of the early resolutions were fairly uncontroversial so results were not in doubt. But then came a very controversial resolution (#6) referring to all Jews as the "indigenous people" of the Land of Israel, using this factoid as

a way to lay claim to all of land "from the Jordan to the Sea". That vote was carried by about 5 votes and with an overall low vote total. All hell broke out. People on the left were screaming and they claimed their machines weren't working correctly. People on the right stormed the stage to protect their win.

Storming the stage has a long a ugly history at the WZC. 9 years ago the Congress was gavelled to a close when the right wing stormed the stage and physically attacked an Ameinu delegate as he presented an anti-settlement resolution sure to pass. At some WZC before that, flower pots were used as weapons. At the WZC 5 years ago, there was a rising tide of emotions with delegates storming out, coming back, storming out, demanding re-votes and that led to the premature closure of the voting session. Thus, charging the stage is rather a serious matter.

The leadership refused calls for a re-vote and then took about 20 minutes to conduct test votes and counts (Vote YES if you agree that today is Thursday!).

Satisfied that people now understood how to use their machines, the voting time was increased to 30 seconds and the resolutions were brought to the floor one after another. By and large, the votes were not close. When there was disagreement, the factions on the left almost always beat the factions on the right by wide margins—sometimes by hundreds of votes.

Then there was another very very close vote—this vote was one that the right lost—with the total just around 550, so the likelihood of widespread machine malfunction seemed unlikely—and dozens of right wing delegates stormed the stage claiming the system had not registered their votes. Amazingly, the leadership restored calm.

Delegates need to stay in the room to vote. The entire Congress finally got into a rhythm of voting. 500+ people could at last mostly get their finicky little machines to register and they could tell when they registered and when they didn't. Voting time was set for 30 seconds.

43 resolutions had been considered, with 50 left to go, when the leadership announced that the Congress was out of time. And the session was adjourned, in order to preserve time for the closing session. The remaining resolutions will some day be considered by the General Counsel, which is a much smaller body.

I have no idea who attended the closing session because I left with hundreds of other deeply dissatisfied delegates. To end the Congress with no time to vote on half of the resolutions, due to very poor scheduling and time lost to technical difficulties—unfathomable.

Among the successes of this week: the WZC passed a resolution extending the Israeli freedom of information law to the KKL-JNF, requiring transparency in all their funding decisions. At Partners for Progressive Israel (formerly known as Meretz USA), we are committed to making sure that JNF-USA also

commits to transparency, by letting us know how much of U.S. donor money goes into the settlements that block peace.

Also passed were two critical environmental resolutions titled "[Preserving a Healthy Climate for Israel's Future](#)" and "[Protecting Israel's Water Supply from Pollution](#)". The passage of these two resolutions is an important step towards a sustainable future for the State of Israel through the work of the KKL-JNF. Protecting water sources in Israel and ensuring a vital, vibrant climate are both necessary for the fulfillment of our Jewish obligation to serve as stewards of the environment.

Other approved resolutions are important for a fair and just state and we can be proud they were adopted...such as state of Israel's relationship with USA Jewry, development of young Zionist leadership, young leadership, absorption of Ethiopian Jews, egalitarian prayer space at western wall, refining Israel's existence as a Jewish and Democratic State, democracy in Israel, separation of church and state, opposition of hate crimes, and most important is both Transparency resolutions were adopted...

Is this a constructive way to act? I'm not entirely certain... And still we need to be here. Liberal Zionists have historically opted out these institutions because of such practices. Yet the only way to change anything is to show up, exercise your votes, and insist on accountability and transparency in addition to our substantive demands of a commitment to religious equality in Israel, women's rights and gender equality, shared society, and working toward a just and secure peace through a two-state solution.