Meretz is not Lost

President’s Message
Meretz is not Lost

The essay below tries to unravel the political calculations made before the March 2 election, and the necessary post-election reflection that the Israeli Left should engage in. However, ultimately, Israeli citizens in Israel will make those decisions and there’s a limited amount we in the US can do to affect their choices.

Nevertheless, as other articles in this issue of IH explain, there is an election that we as American Jews can participate in and make our voices heard. That would be the World Zionist Organization (WZO) elections held every five years; this year from Jan. 21 through March 11. Partners for Progressive Israel is a primary originator of the HATIKVAH Progressive Israel Slate. The “polls” are open and you can simply click this link and vote in 5 minutes from your phone or computer. VOTE!

Days before the deadline for submission of electoral lists for Israel’s March 2 election (the 3rd within 11 months) Meretz and Labor announced an election “partnership” (shutfut) under Labor’s banner. It was a shotgun marriage of sorts; despite the rhetoric, everyone involved knew that the arrangement was not particularly appealing, but was arrived at in order to stave off a not unlikely disaster. Without running together on one slate, very possibly one, or conceivably both of the parties might fall below the 3.25% threshold. Not only might that party disappear (most likely Meretz, which scraped through the last election with a bare 4 seats, the smallest party in the Knesset), but its votes would be irretrievably wasted. It brings little solace that the identical process was taking place simultaneously on the far right; with half a dozen grouplets and would-be parties struggling to align themselves so as to let no vote be wasted, and to maximize their influence on Likud, should it be able to form a coalition.

The pathos of the Left’s frantic struggle to merge before the deadline was not lost on anyone, though none spoke of it publicly. Meretz and Labor, with a combined total of 10 seats in the outgoing Knesset, are all that politically remains of the once-proud Labor movement that literally built the state and governed it for its first 29 years. A Jan. 14 poll showed the combined party receiving the same 10 seats; not great, but at least comfortably distant from the 3.25% threshold, below which looms political oblivion.

Although it was Meretz that had pleaded, cajoled, and demanded the merger, some of its leaders – and many American supporters – were unhappy with its result. They felt the “Zionist Left,” whose mantle they lay claim to, had given up too much, and what remained might not be worth salvaging. Many want Meretz to become an explicitly Jewish-Arab party, a rare (though not totally unique) actor on the Israeli political stage. This, they felt, was an
opportunity to attract Arab voters – 40,000 of whom had voted for Meretz in the April 2019 election, though most switched to the reconstituted Joint List in the September vote. The situation was compounded by the combined list lacking an Arab candidate below 11th place, unlikely to make it into the Knesset.

I sympathize but disagree with this critical analysis, on both tactical and strategic grounds. I support the compromises that made it possible, – but I also believe strongly that after the election, whatever the results, the Left has to take a long, hard, and overdue look at itself, and remake itself so it becomes relevant for the future, which it is not now, despite its ideals and programs, both of which are appealing.

These are the reasons I support the compromise on which the partnership was based:

• It is essential to maintain Meretz as a parliamentary party. The Knesset needs a Left Zionist presence, even as a shadow of what it was.
• Meretz has not sold its soul by aligning with Labor. While Labor has wandered in the wilderness for two decades now in search of an ideology and/or an effective leader, its core principles are by no means foreign to Meretz. Amir Peretz, now titular leader of the list as a whole, comes out of the Labor left, not very different from Meretz.
• Meretz cannot become a Jewish-Arab party by simply choosing a few Arab members for realistic slots (of which there are only 4-5 under its control). The decision about what the party should become is one that has to be made soberly, not in the frenzy before a deadline.
• A certain percentage of Meretz’s Jewish and Arab voters will choose to vote for the Joint List. That is not at all bad. With Ayman Odeh as its leader, the Joint List (10 out of its 13 MK’s) chose Benny Gantz as their preferred prime ministerial candidate after the last election, a major step towards mainstreaming itself. While Meretz is “Zionist” and the Joint List is not, that makes little difference for most aspects of day-to-day politics.
• Given the current unity of the Joint List, there is no chance that a large number of Israeli Palestinians will come to Meretz, as they did in April, when the JL was split. Meretz will have to do some deep soul-searching before it can attract a significant number of Arab voters.

As pointed out by Yael Patir and Uri Zaki in the “Conversations” transcript in this issue of IH, the Israeli Left has been growing and strengthening itself in many areas – but not in electoral politics. It is time that those who have been working in unions, NGO’s, think tanks, human rights organizations, and a variety of other institutions come together and create a new party, building on the idealism of the old Israeli Left, but speaking in the idiom and setting out an agenda of the 21st century. This party must be Jewish-Arab at its core; not “anti-Zionist” but one that rests squarely on and accepts the paradox that Israel is – and should remain – both a Jewish and democratic state.

This party – it should go without saying – must demand equal rights and opportunities for all citizens and reject the Occupation. However, what that
means in actual political and territorial terms has to be considered carefully, probably over time. What contours an Israel free of Occupation would take are not clear. This is not 1993 anymore and the “solution” – which must recognize Jewish as well as Palestinian rights to the land – must also connect the collective rights of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples to today’s reality.

Those of us who stand behind the principles of the Left must be pragmatic when necessary and idealistic when possible. It is better to rebuild from somewhere than from nowhere.

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