The fact that Israel’s Kachol-Lavan (Blue-White) party is in the process of finalizing a government led by Bibi Netanyahu, contrary to innumerable promises it made never to do exactly that, reminds us of Israel’s repeated bad experience with aspirational centrist parties – at least from a perspective on the left. All have either collapsed within a couple of election cycles – or else toppled over to the right, as Kachol-Lavan is doing. And, interestingly, they are usually led by prominent ex-generals, often even former IDF Chiefs of Staff, an office whose importance in Israel is not far from that of the President and Prime Minister. An incomplete list includes Yigal Yadin (Democratic Movement for Change-1977), Moshe Dayan (Telem-1981), Amnon Lipkin-Shahak (Center Party-1999), Ariel Sharon (Kadima-2005), and now Benny Gantz, along with his fellow ex-Chiefs of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi and Moshe Ya’alon. Ya’alon, a genuine and unapologetic rightist, interestingly enough, has broken with Gantz and is now semi-united with Yair Lapid in another centrist party in opposition, Yesh Atid-Telem.

All of these parties owed a large part of what success they had (sometimes considerable, if fleeting) to a large contingent of leftist (i.e., mostly Labor) voters who were seeking “change” and believed a centrist party could achieve it, as Yadin’s party promised in its very name. They were rarely, if ever, content with their choice, as proved by the fact that they usually returned to Labor in the next election. Now the Labor refuge seems gone, apparently about to be folded into Kachol-Lavan, and it’s not yet clear if Labor will keep its identity. Meretz is left (so to speak) as the only representative of the Zionist Left, trying to find its way amid the corona crisis and a new political reality. At least it has the Passover holiday as a brief respite.

A centrist party would seem to make logical sense but in a practical sense it never works, which is why the dustbin of Israeli history is so full of them. But why are they invariably captured by the right? Perhaps because what has passed for the “Left” in Israel is not really left, while the Right is most definitely right? Leftist ideals may appeal to a voter’s head but the right appeals to their heart. That is an unequal contest where the heart invariably wins.

Neoliberalism has been Israel’s economic creed, starting in the mid-1980s, when Labor’s Shimon Peres was Finance Minister and used it to extract Israel from its disastrous period of hyper-inflation. During the next 35 years, neoliberalism, under both Likud and Labor, also extricated Israel from its welfare state, destroyed the Histadrut, and built the gleaming skyscrapers of Tel Aviv over the shabby Bauhaus city it had been. In the process, it brought Israel from among the two or three most egalitarian societies in the world to vying with the US to be the most inegalitarian. The process was helped immensely by the discovery of the huge Leviathan natural gas field,
even if ordinary Israelis benefitted far less than they should have.

At this point, only the Left can offer real change, but it needs to sell itself significantly better than it has, ever since it lost its base in the Histadrut and allied institutions. It indeed has sterling values, high ideals, and even good ideas to offer. But it seems to be lacking the political institutions that can successfully translate those ideals into movements that will produce votes.

During the last two bleak decades, the Left has taken a tip from the Right’s successes in creating think tanks and other institutions that incubate ideologies and turn ideals into programs. We in Partners for Progressive Israel have featured many of them in our Kolot program; there are hundreds more doing important work. There are unions, programs working with Haredim, with Mizrahim, in foreign policy, in economic policy, and of course with Palestinian citizens of Israel.

The last group is most important. It is clear that there cannot and will not be a leftwing movement that can win an election in Israel without an Arab component. The Joint List, uneasily and uncomfortably containing “Communists,” Arab nationalists, and Islamists, has performed a great service by flexing the muscles of the 21% of Israelis who are Arab. But the Joint List, or at least part of it, eventually has to see itself as a means to an end, namely of Jewish-Arab political cooperation. Not all Israeli Arabs will want to be part of that, just as many Israeli Jews will abhor it. But until a basis can be found for political cooperation, the Left will not be able to come to power. That may not be for years, but it can happen, with ideas and with leadership.

Israelis, I hope, have seen again that the center cannot hold, and perhaps the lesson will stick this time. But the Left has to find itself leadership and structures that will induce movement towards it, rather than towards the center. Ironically, it is the Israeli Arabs who have successfully organized themselves, with 15 Knesset seats, while Meretz only has three (seven in the current polls).

This is a hard time for everyone – and not a good time to make political decisions, though they have to be made, of course. Let’s fervently hope the new government will succeed in containing the coronavirus. Let’s hope just as fervently that it won’t succeed in annexing the West Bank settlements, though that seems to be a Netanyahhu priority that Gantz and Kachol-Lavan have swallowed without gagging. Only after the virus has departed, or been defeated, can the real political work commence to build a successful Left and a better Israel. Inshallah, b’ezrat hashem.

I would like to wish all our friends and supporters and all of Beit Yisrael a joyous and safe Passover, whether alone or online or however you are celebrating Hag Herutaynu, the holiday of our liberation. We hope you will support our programs like Kolot and Conversations with Israel and Palestine, read our online magazine Israel Horizons, and keep the faith.

L’shanah haba’ah b’yerushalayim ha’b’nuyah.
Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem – wherever and whatever your Jerusalem may be.

Keep safe.

Paul Scham

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