

President's Message – October 2019

During the last few years, many on the left have darkly warned that Israel is moving towards “fascism,” or at least joining the [Visegrad countries](#) and others which have embraced rightwing populism. Now, a few weeks after the election, with a new government still likely weeks or months in the future, we can already see that that movement, if it indeed even existed outside of Bibi and the rightist fringe, has been stopped.

There are real questions regarding what “centrism” is, and if it can hold up till the next election (previous Israeli centrist parties have usually collapsed quickly), but the belief, relied on by Bibi in his last frenzied days of campaigning, that rightward was the inevitable path to victory, have been stopped cold.

That is the “good” news. We on the progressive pro-Israel left may feel we have dodged a bullet when the ‘right bloc’ failed to get a majority, but our own policies are not doing much better. The “Democratic Union,” led by new Meretz chair Nitzan Horowitz, former Labor star Stav Shaffir, and former Prime Minister and born-again leftist Ehud Barak, received only 5 seats, making it the smallest faction in the Knesset. The venerable labor Party, which many of us had hoped would run together with Meretz, instead chose to amalgamate with former Likudnik Orly Abekasis-Levy, and achieved a marginally better total of 6 seats. Hardly a vote of confidence for the progressive agenda of peace, equality, and social justice.

Nevertheless, we are right to be relieved, if not exactly happy at this result. Whatever happens in the coalition negotiations, Bibi's political career is finally on a downward slope and will likely end fairly soon. Like most authoritarian wannabees, he avoided grooming a successor, so there is no obvious candidate to succeed him. Ayelet Shaked, thought of as the fresh new face of the farther right, has consistently disappointed her supporters in 3 elections, and her bloom has faded. While the center now seems ascendant, those who remember the fates of Yigal Yadin, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, Ronnie Milo, Ehud Olmert and others who attempted to form centrist parties, some of them former Army Chiefs of Staff, may wonder how long Benny Gantz's star will remain ascendant.

This should provide an opening to the left, if we are bold and creative enough to seize it. It is time to rid ourselves of the failure of Oslo and the horrors of the Second Intifada, which the Israeli public has held against us. There is new generation of progressive leaders, both in politics and in NGO's, who are providing solutions to current problems, such as extreme income inequality (second only to the US), environmental degradation, and, of course to the ongoing occupation and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which even if Israelis prefer not to think of it, is still holding Israel back in so many ways. Benny Gantz, if he indeed becomes prime minister, is unquestionably an improvement on Bibi, but is unlikely to solve Israel's fundamental problems.

The Israeli left needs to take advantage of the current near- deadlock, support the center as appropriate, and wait till Gantz's government, as is likely, fails to deal effectively with Israel's most serious problems: the occupation and increasing inequality. If the Left (and its allies in most things, the Arab Joint List) plays its cards right, it will have leverage over the new government by being indispensable for its majority, though not part of the coalition. Then, from an inside/outside position, it can put forward serious solutions to these problems, with an eye towards the next electoral cycle, presumably in 3-5 years.

As of this writing, President Rivlin gave Bibi the "mandate" to form a government. This surprised many, but it's rumored Gantz wanted Bibi to try and fail to form a coalition. Also, Bibi's indictment hearing began on Oct. 2 and it's almost certain he'll be indicted. That may precipitate either defections from the Likud or infighting to choose a successor, even if Bibi doesn't step down. The result will likely be either a Gantz government or (horror of horrors!) a third election. If there is a Gantz-led government, the Left should make every effort to support it, whether from inside or outside the coalition, while trying to push its own agenda to the extent possible.

It is to be hoped that Gantz's highly public militaristic stands, especially during the first (April) campaign, were primarily in order to burnish his military credentials and not be seen as a 'soft leftist'. This seems to have worked well. Now we will have to figure out whether he is actually flexible on Israeli-Palestinian issues. That is simply unknown, and cannot be ascertained unless and until he succeeds in becoming prime minister, as his primary job until then will be inducing rightwingers, whether from Likud or Yisrael Beiteinu (or Haredi parties?), to support him.

Likewise, for us on the pro-Israel Left, I hope that we will be able to take a less critical stand toward Israeli policy, assuming a Gantz premiership, without sacrificing our values and insistence on an end to the Occupation. Whether we can do that, of course, will be unknowable if and when Gantz becomes premier and can actually formulate and influence policy.

To summarize, my hope is that our comrades in Meretz will be able to work in the context of semi-support for a Gantz-led governing coalition and try their hardest to make it clear that the Left has have a viable plan for changing Israel's course. Meanwhile, we in Partners are fortunate to be working within the context of the Progressive Israel Network ('PIN'-see p.15) – and to be co-leading the campaign for the Hatikvah slate (see the article by Hadar Susskind on p.10).

Best wishes for the new year and for a joyous Sukkot.



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