Tel Aviv & Jerusalem: A Tale of 2 Cities

The following is by Hillel Schenker, co-editor of the Palestine-Israel Journal and a contributing editor of Israel Horizons. He lives in Tel Aviv, and commutes to Jerusalem where the Journal’s office is located.

Considering all the media attention given to secular mayoral candidate Nir Barkat’s victory in Jerusalem, I wanted to throw in a few comments about Tel Aviv. For the first time in my life, I found myself voting for a registered member of the Communist Party (Hadash), i.e., MK Dov Henin for mayor. For the first time in my life, I found myself voting for a registered member of the Communist Party (Hadash), i.e., MK Dov Henin for mayor.

I wasn’t the only one, since he got an impressive 34% of the vote to Mayor Ron Huldai’s 50%. I think that kibbutz-born Huldai (Amos Oz’ step-brother) has been the best mayor Tel Aviv has had in a long time, doing a tremendous amount of necessary infrastructure work, but he has his flaws, like allowing too many high-risers to be built, and not paying enough attention to public transportation and the environment. If it was a closer race, I might have voted for Huldai. Henin who headed an umbrella environmental organization, has a doctorate in political science and is a very good parliamentarian, was the mayoral candidate of Ir l’kulanu (A City for All of Us), a non-partisan group mainly of young people and artists, which was the buzz of this year’s election.

They got five seats for the council, tied with Huldai’s list – Huldai is a Labor man but ran as an independent. Meretz got three seats, as did the Greens, the Pensioners and another young people’s group [aside from Henin’s Ir l’kkulanu–ed.]. And an Animal Rights party got one seat, as did a Jaffa-based joint Jewish-Arab party.

Huldai got the message of Henin’s showing, and declared that he will be more attentive to the concerns raised by Ir L’kulanu, and would be happy to cooperate with them during the next term.

For the council I voted Meretz, since I have no intention of voting for Hadash in the national elections, and many people I know split their vote that way. I also think it’s important that Meretz have a strong municipal base throughout the country towards the national elections – and they also got three seats in Jerusalem, far beyond the actual Meretz membership, because they are considered the most outspoken and committed defenders of secular interests in the city. The head of the Meretz list Peruvian-born Pepe Alalu, whose very impressive beard was featured on many city busses during the campaign, has become one of Barkat’s deputy mayors. Incidentally, number three on the Meretz list is American-born Laura Wharton.

Meretz in Tel Aviv was led by Meital Lahavi, a graduate of the WIZO women’s political leadership training course, who is very capable, but in my view shouldn’t have overthrown Yael Dayan as head of the list. Dayan joined Huldai, and also got in as #5 on his list.
By the way, #2 on the Meretz list is 32 year old Tami Zandberg, who served as Ron Cohen’s very capable parliamentary assistant. She also happens to be the older sister of Beitar Jerusalem soccer star Michael Zandberg, who has publicly admitted that he supports Meretz (another one of the Beitar Jerusalem club Russian oligarch owner Gaydamak’s ingrates who didn’t support him in the Jerusalem elections). That’s a real case of Daniel in the lions den.

We in Tel Aviv had the luxury of two good candidates, a fair reflection of the demographics of the city. I can only commiserate with my Jerusalem colleagues and friends about their selection of candidates, Barkat, the right-wing secular entrepreneur, Gaydamak, the strange Russian oligarch who is accused of having made his money from gun-running in Angola, and Rabbi Meir Porash, the extreme ultra-Orthodox candidate.