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THE MEANING OF THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS FOR THE WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

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With the re-election of Menachem Begin many Americans (both Jewish and Gentile, supporters and opponents of Israeli policies) are scratching their heads in wonderment. In the United States and Europe Begin is the most unpopular Prime Minister in Israel's history. His television image is regarded as disastrous; his defense of Israeli policies, tedious; his lectures of foreign leaders, annoying. Many disagree with individual policies he has pursued such as the expansion of settlements on the West Bank or the increased commitments to the Christians of Lebanon. Particularly perplexing, how could a leader who has presided over the world's highest inflation rate and the continuing international isolation of his country be re-elected, and with a higher percentage of the total votes cast than in 1977?

In order to better understand the phenomenon, we must look not only at domestic politics in Israel, but also at the pattern of leadership emerging within key countries in the 1980's. In the early and mid-1970's with the energy crisis and world-wide economic recession, western electorates turned to pragmatic leaders, men and women who offered mastery of techniques and detail, "can do" politicians who could master fine points of difficult problems confronting their countries. Thus, Callaghan in Britain, Giscard d'Estaing in France, Helmut Schmidt in West Germany, Yitzhak Rabin in Israel, Jimmy Carter in the United States all offered expertise and efficiency to electorates starved for answers to complex technical problems. Today all of these leaders and their parties are out of power - except for Schmidt in West Germany who is currently hard pressed by the left wing of his own party and who - despite his recent election - may not survive the year in power.

What happened? None of these leaders inspired a vision of where their country was heading or how it would deal with the economic and political dilemmas of current politics. All they offered was problem-solving techniques; when unemployment, inflation and international crises grew worse, their *raison d'être* in the eyes of their voters disappeared. Since the technocrats' appeal depended upon a continued reputation for competence and highly proficient performance, when any major problems developed they were particularly vulnerable because they had no alternative argument with which to claim a right to con-

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tinue in power. Typical of the problem was Jimmy Carter's litany of the difficulties in resolving any single issue.

Begin in 1977 was actually the first of a new breed of leaders who spoke to the deeply held values and faith of individual societies. In a period where traditional roots have been broken and television focuses on personality and only the broadest of themes, the man of belief and ideas - no matter what his ideology - seems to triumph over the man of practice. Thatcher in Britain; Mitterand in France; Reagan in America all share with Begin an approach rooted in a sweeping program which claims to be applicable to many levels of foreign and domestic policy. Each has understood that to be elected and to govern in the 1980's demands the continuing assertion of a global vision.

The advantage of the visionary leader is that he does not base his own legitimacy on competence or immediate results. Thereby, his own expectations and those of his followers are not as high as that of the technocrat and the failure of at least some of his programs does not necessarily lead to defeat. He can actually substitute inspiration for achievement, even if his "position in the polls" drops temporarily. When people pessimistically conclude that no one can resolve the terrible contradiction societies confront in the 1980's, they are opting for leaders who offer a different avenue entirely - faith and aspiration instead of detailed accomplishment.

Begin is the epitome of the new style -- the first to be elected and re-elected. The peace treaty with Egypt, the defense of the Christian Lebanese, the vigorous assertion of Jewish rights in the wake of the Holocaust and the decades-old conflict with the Arabs all appeal to a sense of renewed Jewish destiny. By contrast, Begin's opponent, Shimon Peres, epitomized the 1970's style of leadership in his offer of pragmatism and his timid conduct of the election campaign. It was a style that could not overcome Begin's dynamism.

Begin is also typical of the new leaders because he is far less popular abroad than at home. This characteristic of the new order is not surprising because the new style demands an attempt to speak to the fundamental values and mores which govern a particular society. By appealing to the deep yearnings of his own people, the new leader will frequently disappoint and confuse other statesmen and foreign elites. Simply put, technocrats tend to be more universalistic and visionaries, more particularistic. In the case of Begin, the phenomenon is most acute and the contrast between position at home and abroad most stark for several reasons. Begin rules the smallest country of those conforming to the new pattern but one which is constantly under the microscope of the world's press and media. He is also the most intense of these leaders - in personality and ideology. Leaders like Thatcher, Reagan and Mitterand also speak in terms of national revival, but because of Israel's size and insecurity Begin's assertions appear more shrill and defiant than the others who lead larger, more secure and diverse nations. Furthermore, foreign policy is more central to Begin's ideology, whereas the others concentrate relatively more attention on their own societies - thereby deflecting the effect of their positions on other countries.

Finally, if Begin's recent political career has become an ironic model for other political developments in the West, it also presents a prophecy of the future. The new 1980's-style leader is deceptively difficult to unseat, no matter how unsuccessful his programs may appear, especially abroad. The opposition is also faced with difficult choices in countering the new appeal. Israel's Labor Party relied on the old style and failed. Britain's Labor Party has become as ideological as its conservative opponents and is being torn asunder.

It is still too early to tell how the Democrats in the United States or the right in France will react but their respective task for regaining power will not be easy. Indeed, in both Israel and Britain the new political forces have already hinted at a realignment of traditional patterns. This development is suggested by the bipolarization of Israeli politics for the first time around two major parties and the weakening of the smaller political units. In Britain it means an evolution in the opposite direction as the Social Democratic - Liberal alliance threatens to become a major third force and even possibly the new leading party.

As for Menachem Begin, he is likely to continue as a model of the new order -- basking in the support of many of his countrymen and the agonizing mystification of opponents and friends alike abroad.

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