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THE FUTURE OF ISRAELI POLITICS

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Who Really Brought About The Massacre Investigations?

Nothing could have done more for Israel's tarnished world image in the wake of the tragic Phalangist massacre of Palestinians in Beirut than the massive demonstration of several hundred thousand Israelis in Tel-Aviv the week after those terrible events. Nevertheless, sophisticated observers of Israeli politics knew that what brought Menahem Begin to accept a full-scale investigation commission was not that gathering--which Begin interpreted as strictly a Labor Opposition ploy--but the opposition which he incurred within his government and ruling coalition. Not only did one minister, Yitzhak Berman, resign in what was essentially an individual act, but the National Religious Party (Mafdal) leadership in its entirety came to the threshold of resigning, extracting from Begin a promise that the right thing would be done, and in effect forcing Defense Minister Ariel Sharon to go on national T.V. and announce that he was for a full-fledged investigating commission.

Even more important in bringing about the investigation was the revolt of the Sephardic members of the government. David Levy, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Housing and Absorption, the strong man of the Herut party organization, made his outrage with the action and dissatisfaction with the Defense Minister's explanation eminently clear from the first. Indeed, he was a strong opponent of Sharon's policies during the entire summer and even before. He was joined by Aharon Uzan of Tami, the Abuhatzzeira-led party that broke away from the Mafdal to mobilize North African Sephardic voters, on a platform combining communal aspirations and Jewish tradition. Most vocal of all was Mordechai Ben Porat, who succeeded Moshe Dayan as the head of Telem and whose letter to the Prime Minister publicly calling for a proper investigatory commission stated the central questions which needed to be answered. Indeed, of the Sephardim in the cabinet, only Justice Minister Moshe Nissim remained silent, as he invariably does on all issues, speaking out only at the end in connection with the execution of the cabinet's decision.

While no one who understood the Sephardic population of Israel should have been surprised by all of this, it does help give the lie to the kind of myth propagated by certain Ashkenazim, particularly intellectuals of the Labor camp, as regards the difference in moral character between "easterners" and the Ashkenazic

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"westerners." It may be reassuring to these Labor intellectuals, who perceive themselves as having become a minority in the country, to create a self-serving myth that they are somehow superior to the new majority and that whatever problems the country is having are the result of its takeover by the representatives of the "great unwashed," but it happens to be an utterly false mythology. On the issue of the Beirut massacre, no differences could be detected between the responses of the Sephardim and Ashkenazim. The overwhelming majority of all Israelis were shocked, horrified, and desirous of a full investigation.

It has been noted that few Sephardim were visible at the demonstration. While that assumes that Sephardim look sufficiently different from Ashkenazim to stand out among hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, it is probably true that they were under-represented at what was, in essence, an Opposition rally. Given Sephardic hostility toward the Opposition, they could not bring themselves to be present. Moreover, since most of Sephardic power is with the present government, they were able to make that power felt more effectively than the more visible demonstration.

A Turning Point for the Sephardim?

Nevertheless, the way the Sephardim spoke out may indeed be a turning point in Israeli politics. This was an issue in which the Sephardim in the coalition could find an independent voice and did not need to remain deputies of Begin, Sharon and Shamir. Once found, that independent voice is not likely to be stilled on other issues. Indeed, within the month David Levy and Aharon Uzan led the opposition within the cabinet to the dissolution of El Al, against Transport Minister Corfu and Finance Minister Aridor. Moreover, they forced a compromise decision on the issue.

For the first time, David Levy is being considered seriously as a possible successor to Begin, a far cry from the public perception of him in 1977 when the Begin government took office and the country abounded with David Levy jokes similar to Polish jokes in America. Whether or not the Deputy Prime Minister is ready for such an assignment at this particular moment or could win the post, were the opportunity to present itself, is another question. But he is now something of a contender and probably will become more of a contender as time passes.

So, too, Tami has shed some of its image as a party of Sephardi boodlers. It has now reached a crossroads of its own--to continue down the road of being a spoils mechanism for hitherto outsiders or to try and develop a broad public policy appealing to a wide range of voters.

Mordechai Ben Porat, always well thought of on the Israeli political scene, has had his image reinforced, although his major problem of being a person without a real party base remains. If the Labor Party were not afflicted by its particular kind of blindness, which leads it to reject any confrontation with the new realities of Israeli politics, they would go to him and make him their No. 2 man with real power. Alas for them, nothing like that seems to be in the offing.

No Turning Point for Labor

Labor still seems to be as blind as ever. It has spent the summer confused,

continuing to wallow in nostalgia, busier propagating anti-Sephardic myths than confronting the realities of a changed electorate or its own internal conflicts. The fight between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin is barely papered over and everyone knows that behind them are three or four others ready to join the fight for position and potential office.

Peres' rapid embrace of the Reagan plan did not help him to convince the unconverted; many of those who might have agreed with his stance felt that it was unseemly for the leader of the Opposition to take that stance the way he did. Begin, in response, was able to remind the public of the way in which his party, when it was in opposition, remained loyal to the government in power on foreign policy issues like that, in contra-distinction to the Peres approach. Right or wrong, it was an effective argument.

Peres made a brilliant speech in the Knesset to open the debate over how to respond to the Beirut massacre. On that podium his best qualities shine forth, but it is not enough to overcome what happens off the platform. Moreover, his subsequent appearance in Kiryat Shmona, where he had been warned that serious heckling would try to prevent him from speaking and where he was, indeed, prevented from appearing, helped him only with his existing constituents. While everyone, led by President Navon and Prime Minister Begin, condemned the breakup of the meeting and the people who did so, among the Sephardim it was a feeling of déjà-vu--that a faltering Peres was very deliberately trying to provoke a tiny majority of the disaffected, most of whom happened to be Sephardim, to put all Sephardim in a bad light.

When all is said and done, the Labor camp have become Israel's Bourbons, learning nothing and forgetting nothing. To an American, their penchant for nostalgia for a world that never was and the program that they are advocating as a result, reminds one of the politics of so-called White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the United States in the years just prior to World War One, when, confronted by the realities of an immigrant population beginning to come to political power, they sought refuge in a distorted attempt to go back to what were presumed to be the good old days of the early republic and which ended up in Prohibition and Isolationism, as part of a moral crusade to cleanse the American "great unwashed" of that time. It brought the WASPS to political disaster in the United States of two generations ago, and it is bringing the Labor camp to disaster now.

What of Yitzhak Navon?

The President of Israel has shone forth in the aftermath of the Beirut massacre as a strong beacon to the country and the world. It is hard to overestimate the importance of what Navon did in speaking out as President to coalesce and crystallize the overwhelming opinion of the Israeli public as to what needed to be done. Indeed, this was only an additional manifestation of how he has quietly raised the presidency as a moral force on the Israeli scene. While other presidents may have been more distinguished as scholars, scientists or intellectuals, he has been best at "presidenting," and since this is perceived by one and all, he is extraordinarily popular.

Needless to say, this has brought calls from many corners, particularly in the Labor camp, that Navon be brought in by the Labor Party to replace Peres and head that party's ticket. No doubt he is weighing that alternative among others,

since his term as president expires in April, and he will either have to announce his availability for a second term, retire from politics altogether, or turn partisan. In fact, there seems to be little chance that the Labor Party will offer Navon the top position. Neither Peres nor Rabin nor any of those behind them, such as Haim Bar Lev, Mordechai Gur, Abba Eban, Eliezer Speiser, Yossi Sarid, etc., etc., has any intention of giving up their place in the party hierarchy or their chance to move to the top. Indeed, at last report, the party leadership was discussing offering Navon the position of Foreign Minister in a Peres government, a move which can only be perceived by the public as an insult to both Navon and the presidency.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that Navon can restore Labor's voting majority by magic. Those who are pushing for his candidacy are Ashkenazim, many of whom had earlier supported Yigael Yadin's ill-fated Democratic Movement for Change, who believe that Navon, as a Sephardi, will attract his Sephardic brothers to his banner. Many Sephardim outside of the Labor camp see this as a cheap shot, one that would discredit Navon and would not persuade them to abandon the Likud or Mafdal to support a still-insensitive Labor camp.

Begin and Sharon: The Crisis of Confidence

At the same time, the Government and its dominant Likud Party are also in serious trouble. The Beirut massacre has shaken public confidence in Begin and with it ended any confidence it may have had in Sharon. The Prime Minister seems to implicitly understand this; witness the fact that he has hardly appeared in public or spoken out in any way since that fateful Rosh Hashana. Sharon also understands it but his tactic is to appear everywhere to try to rebuild his shattered position. In neither case is much likely to change before new elections, elections which would enable Begin to jettison Sharon, whose defective character is now apparent to one and all, even to those who admire his talents.

This is not to say that the Government is about to fall--it is certainly not to suggest that Labor will win the next election. Quite to the contrary, while the people have lost confidence in the present government, they would vote to re-elect Begin and his coalition were the elections to be held today, principally because they do not see Labor or any other party as a reasonable alternative. For most voters, the election would rest upon negative choices, as have the last two, a vote for the least displeasing. Here, too, there is little distinction between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. There are those who vote Labor because they are repelled by Begin. Despite the TV images of many Sephardi voters (mostly teens) chanting "Begin, King of Israel," most Sephardim vote for Begin because they are repelled by Peres and Labor, not because they have any great confidence in him.

None of this is reflected in the polls because of the way the pollsters ask their questions. If one asks people for whom they would vote, or simple questions such as, "Are you satisfied with the present government?" then the answers are invariably going to show a higher level of support for it than is really the case. With regard to the first question, even largely dissatisfied people intend to vote for Begin for the aforementioned reasons. In the case of the second, satisfaction with the Government depends on more than one aspect of its performance. Even so, the public opinion poll surveys show that support for the Begin Government has dropped.

Only a new election would clear the air, and Begin will undoubtedly go to the polls as soon as he can, confident that he will be returned. He is held back by his coalition partners, who remain properly fearful that they will suffer additional setbacks, as reflected in the polls. Ironically, the "good guys" in this whole business have lost the confidence of many of their voters for other reasons, while support for the seeming culpable ones has apparently increased. Again, this is because voters make their decision at the polls in response to a whole complex of issues, including the character and personality of those for whom they are asked to vote, and in the case of the smaller parties, the party leaders do not have the confidence of sufficient numbers of their potential publics.

In the interim, Begin has maintained a dignified silence, compounded by his grief at the death of his wife and no doubt reflecting his own moral discomfort at what happened in the two camps. His appearance before the investigating commission showed him at his best--Menahem Begin, the democrat and institutionalist, playing his role in strengthening one of the legitimate and vital instruments of constitutional government.

Ariel Sharon, on the other hand, has been working frantically to restore his image and status--appearing everywhere, engineering situations in which he has to be well-received, seeking bogeymen against which only he can defend Israel, while trying to play a statesman's role in bringing peace to Israel's northern border. To this observer, he is not convincing and the more he tries, the less worthy of public confidence he seems. His talents remain formidable, but so, too, his deficiencies.

Mafdal: Conscience and Collapse

This is particularly true for the Mafdal. Its three leaders, Interior Minister Yosef Burg, Education Minister Zevulun Hammer, and Deputy Foreign Minister Yehuda Ben-Meir, have all lost the confidence of potential Mafdal voters, each in his own way. Burg is perceived as a man who will do anything to hold his cabinet seat. He, indeed, was the weakest in speaking out against the Prime Minister and on behalf of an investigatory commission, and his weak response was perceived as being part of an overall syndrome of not wanting to be out of office.

Zevulun Hammer is in an ambiguous position. He won a great deal of support from the non-religious public as well as his religious constituency for his courageous stand and for subsequently speaking out against the tendency to emphasize the land of Israel over the people of Israel. Indeed, he is considered one of those who helped restore the role of religious Jews as consciences of the nation. He also is rated as one of the best education ministers that Israel has ever had. On the other hand, over the years he has lost the confidence of his rank and file in much the same way that Shimon Peres has lost the confidence of his. The internal politics of trying to advance within the party has led him to lose credit, especially with the Sephardi voters in the Mafdal who represent a majority and who were particularly instrumental in raising him to the party leadership. Ben-Meir, as his loyal partner in all of this, has the image of a political deal-maker among all segments of the population, and to the extent that he has been publicly identified as making the deals for Hammer, suffers doubly. The party leadership is now being challenged from the right by Yosef Shapira, the son of Rabbi Moshe Haim Shapira, Burg's predecessor as party leader, and Rabbi Haim Druckman, the party's leading Land of Israel militant. It is about to be chal-

lenged by a group of Sephardim who are centrist in their political orientation and could be the strongest supporters of Hammer's new stance, were they to have confidence in him personally.

Should Hammer be able to overcome these difficulties, particularly by bringing the Sephardim into positions of real power, he could gain the ability to rebuild his party and emerge as a very strong figure in Israeli politics overall. However, there are few, if any, signs that he will be able to do so because of intraparty constraints, despite his concerted efforts to enunciate a more moderate NRP position on the foreign policy and security questions of the day. If Hammer has the strength of character to break out of his present fix, it will be a sign that he is ready for bigger and better things. If not, he will simply remain a coalition partner, perhaps on a more limited basis.

Conflicts Within Agudath Israel

Agudath Israel has also been thrown into something of a crisis as a result of the summer events, although its voting strength is not likely to decline since its rank and file vote en bloc as their leadership directs. The crisis is within the leadership itself. The party always has tended to be more compromising with regard to the future Israeli presence in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, but the Lebanon operation, Beirut massacre, and resultant world response, have led to a split between those who are in every respect "doves" and who see the present government's policies as provoking the Gentile world and thereby endangering the Jewish people, and those who would still like to see the continuation of a Jewish presence in administered territories, even if not endorsing the quasi-annexationist position of the government. This internal party fight has been featured in the Israeli press with names and dates, hence the party cannot avoid confronting it, even if it wished.

Tami and Telem at a Crossroads

As indicated above, Tami will have to make some serious choices for it to grow, and Telem, Dayan's artificial creation, is slated to disappear if the polls are to be believed. Thus, none of the four coalition parties have a desire to go to the polls in the near future. All would like as much time as possible to improve their fortunes, hence the shilly-shallying in the government with regard to calling new elections, with Begin at times indicating that he wants to move immediately in that direction, and at other times suggesting a compromise date perhaps a year away.

A New Center Party?

No doubt the most publicly courageous of the cabinet members was Minister of Energy Yitzhak Berman, a leader of the Liberal Party within the Likud. Berman actually resigned his cabinet position as a result of the Beirut massacre and voted against the government in the Knesset, for a full investigation. He was supported by his young Liberal colleague, Dror Zeigerman, and there was talk that the two of them would try to form a new center party to compete with the Likud and the Labor Alignment.

In principle, a center party should do well since most Israeli voters today are centrists by inclination. But no such party is in the offing. The best name they could come up with to lead the party is former Defense Minister Ezer Weizman,

formerly of Herut, who was cut down by Begin in the latter half of the Likud's first term of office, and who has since been out of active politics. Weizman would no doubt be delighted to make a comeback, but he is not sufficiently popular with the public, most of whom perceive him as a very pleasant, amiable fellow, but not of stern enough mettle to be prime minister and have to represent Israel in negotiations with our friends and foes alike, both of whom are pressing us forcefully to make concessions which few Israelis want to make. Moreover, Weizman has no real support among the Sephardim where he is simply perceived as another member of the old Ashkenazi establishment. True enough, some of the leaders of Tami, particularly among their anti-Begin diaspora sponsors, are pushing hard for a Weizman-Tami-Liberal linkage to create a center party and negotiations to that effect go on sporadically but they do not appear to have any visible support from the Israeli party leaders. After a brief flurry, even the talk has died down.

This does not mean that Berman, Zeigerman and others are not continuing to pursue matters quietly in the hope that something will turn up. Most recently, there are hints that Energy Minister Yitzhak Modai, another Liberal leader, has begun to think along the same lines, perhaps envisioning a scenario in which Weizman would become prime minister and he the minister of finance.

Events move so rapidly in Israel and the Middle East that it would be unwise to entirely rule out a Labor victory, were something else to happen like the Beirut massacre. Failing that, however, Labor is condemned to the wilderness by its own hand. No center party is likely to emerge, and the Likud is likely to continue dominant; therefore the real question becomes, Who will dominate the Likud for the foreseeable future?

Who Will Succeed Begin?

What of the succession within the Likud? Menahem Begin shows no signs of seeking retirement and is not likely to leave office under a cloud. Nevertheless, this question is certainly considered an important one among Israelis. Sharon obviously wants the job of prime minister desperately. His chances, in this writer's opinion, were never good since even in his salad days those who approved of his performance as Defense Minister (and he is now under attack for virtually everything he has done since assuming this position) did not see him as suitable for that job. Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir was the favored candidate until the summer, but he was so clearly shunted aside by Begin and Sharon even in matters in which the Foreign Ministry should have been engaged, such as the negotiations with the United States over the outcome of the Lebanon operation, that his status has declined. Moreover, his manner of speaking out when he does so is so similar to Begin's and so clearly "hard line" that he is even less satisfactory to moderates. Many people now recall his background in Lehi, the most extreme and terroristically inclined of the Jewish liberation movements in the latter days of the British Mandate, and the fact that he voted against the Camp David agreements. Hence, he is hardly the man for what seems to be a time calling for greater moderation.

Finance Minister Yoram Aridor also has ambitions. Since he successfully managed the re-election of the Likud in 1981, he has been on the "outs" with Begin, who has either ignored or publicly insulted and embarrassed him time after time. The Prime Minister has rejected Aridor precisely because of the latter's success. This is a typical response for Begin, who has never liked

successful competitors among his lieutenants, for fear that they might compete with him. But Aridor's response, in turn, has been to suffer everything in silence and hold on to his position, a tactic which he has used in the past when things have seemed to go against him and which has enabled him to survive and rise. If he is able to continue in this way and add to his already strong party base, he may indeed have a very good chance to succeed Begin when the time comes.

A name being bruited about with greater frequency is Moshe Arens, Israel's Ambassador to the United States. Arens is a more visible figure than Aridor and is generally perceived as doing a good job in his present position. He does have a stronger base in the party than many perceive and would probably come back to contend for the succession were the possibility to open up. It is unclear whether or not he has a sufficient base to do so, and of course he has no cabinet-level experience. Moreover, he, too, voted against the Camp David agreements. Nevertheless, he is to be reckoned as a competitor.

Finally, there is David Levy, just now emerging as a possible contender for the succession. He still has a long way to go to acquire the public image necessary, but he may be strong enough within the party to make a run for it, if he so chooses. One of his difficulties is likely to be that he has been quarrelling with the younger Sephardi leaders within the Likud, obviously fearful that they might challenge him for the role of principal Sephardi in the government. While in the narrow sense one can sense his fears, in the larger sense by alienating them he weakens his position within the party and the country.

Up until now, Aridor and Levy may have been allies within the Herut Party but that alliance may now be foundering on the rocks of conflicting ambitions. As Levy becomes more of a contender, the two are likely to come into conflict as they have over the El Al issue. As of now, Aridor has the advantage within his power position as finance minister which gives him great control over the state budget, real influence on the economy, and ready access to the media. But to this observer, every time one sees Levy on television he seems to have grown in self-confidence and "presence." He now looks like a contender and that is no small thing.

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