

Jerusalem Letter

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

ISSN: 0334-4096

JL:64--7 Heshvan 5744/October 14, 1983

A SURFEIT OF DEMOCRACY: THE MULTIPLICITY OF CANDIDATES AND PARTY LISTS IN THE ISRAELI MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

by Avraham Lantzman

Political opportunities on the local plane. The mayors fight for independence. Cases in point: Jerusalem; Rishon Lezion; Ramat Gan; Tel Aviv; Haifa. Fine points of the Gahal Agreement. Confusion within Likud. Opportunities created by the local press. The liberation of local government.

On October 25th, the citizens of Israel will go to the polls in municipal elections, which are being conducted independently of the Knesset elections for the second consecutive time. Despite the fact that so little time remains before election day, the public, caught up in a myriad of other problems, simply has not assigned a high priority to the campaign.

In spite of public apathy, there is one aspect of the municipal elections that needs to be noted as representing a significant development, namely the unprecedented, 'inflationary' increase in the number of candidates and party lists that have entered the race. In the Jewish municipal sector, which involves some one hundred local councils and city governments, no fewer than one thousand lists are vying for the voters' support. This means an average of ten lists for every local authority election. This phenomenon is not limited to a particular geographic area or to a certain size and type of community; rather it covers the length and breadth of the country.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES ON THE LOCAL PLANE

The first of these factors stems from the nature of local politics in Israel. Since the local electoral reform which went into effect in the 1978 municipal elections, local elections in Israel have involved two simultaneous votes. Local voters cast their ballots directly for the mayoral candidate of their choice -- the only officeholder in Israel directly elected by the voters -- and also vote for the party list of their choice for the local council, in the same manner as for Knesset. Thus mayors, no matter what their party designation, are elected *ad personum* and councils by proportional representation on the basis of pre-filed lists of candidates.

The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israel public policy.
Subscriptions: Individual: \$35 per year; Institutions: \$50 per year. © Copyright. All rights reserved.

12 Moshe Hess St., 94185 Jerusalem. Tel: (02) 225874, 249441

Local government constitutes the broadest base for grass roots political recruitment, and offers a relatively easy way to gain entry to Israeli political life. In most of the big parties the upper echelons are filled with veteran party activists and functionaries who are loathe to relinquish the positions of power and influence that they have spent years consolidating. The result is that the influx of rejuvenating forces from below is blocked. Municipal politics serve as a springboard for entry into the center of political action, circumventing the obstacles erected by the party elites. The political profiles of those elected to the 10th Knesset bear this out: thirty-four have risen from the local political arena. No doubt this trend will continue.

THE MAYORS FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE

A second factor in the multiplicity of candidates stems from the anomalous situation created by the conflict of interest between the mayors, elected by personal, direct ballot, and the municipal councils, chosen proportionally in a separate vote. The lists for City Council are particularly open to the influence and pressure of the state-wide parties, whose central leadership will often court and try to co-opt individuals or groups who are in sympathy with them.

Conflict between the mayors and state party circles had already surfaced during the 1978 elections -- the first in which the mayor was elected by direct ballot. Indeed, those elections only sharpened a decade-old trend. This time around, the contest has become even sharper. Mayors who consolidated their personal following among the voters during their first term are now insisting on their right to construct the lists of council candidates as they see fit, and are resisting the efforts of the state parties to determine the slots for candidates of their choice in a bid to affix their own stamp on local political affairs. The state parties are interested in promoting specific individuals as a form of patronage, in return for support in internal party struggles.

Another aspect of this encroachment by state parties on municipal politics is linked to the fact that Israel, unlike other parliamentary countries such as England or Germany, does not have by-elections that might serve to gauge the public temperament between major election campaigns. Consequently, the parties tend to look upon the local elections, rightly or wrongly, as an index of voter opinion at the grass-roots level. According to this view, the success or failure of a candidate who is clearly identified with either the Likud or the Alignment serves as an indication of where things are headed. This gives party secretaries an added motivation for interfering in the construction of lists for local elections, and in general in local electoral matters.

This view held by the big party leaders does not in fact reflect the actual situation. Since 1973, when elections to the Knesset and local government were still held jointly, the trend has been toward more split-ticket voting. This trend testifies to the maturity of the Israeli voter who has learned to differentiate between Knesset and local elections. This new sophistication is based on a perception of the vast differences in the nature of the issues at stake at each level.

CASES IN POINT:

The pioneers in the struggle for independent city government, free from the political burden of the big parties, were Teddy Kollek and Hananiah Gibstein.

Jerusalem

Teddy Kollek first became mayor of Jerusalem in 1965, when he ran as a candidate on the Rafi list -- the party that, under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion, split from Mapai. In 1973, Kollek ran on a Labour Alignment ticket. Already then distinct signs of conflict between him and the party were apparent, particularly in the area of the mayor's political prerogatives. It was this dispute, and Kollek's desire to break from the party machine, that prompted him to run in the 1978 election on an independent ticket. By this drastic step, Kollek succeeded in overpowering the Labour movement, which was forced to retract its ultimatums with regard to the composition of the electoral list for City Council and its right to interfere on an ongoing basis in municipal affairs.

Rishon Lezion

Hananiah Gibstein, mayor of Rishon Lezion, has remained a member of the Herut central committee. In 1969 he ran for the first time for City Council at the head of the local Gahal branch, and succeeded in demolishing the Alignment machine that had held unchallenged sway in the town until then. In 1978, Gibstein ran on an independent ticket, "to avoid," in his words, "having to accept the dictates of the party and being dependent on heads of party institutions."

Ramat Gan

In the present campaign we have witnessed an increasing tendency among candidates confident of victory to cut the umbilical cord to the party leadership. Among the better-known public figures involved, it is worth mentioning Ramat-Gan mayor Dr. Israel Peled, a member of the Likud-Liberals. Dr. Peled took his fellow party members by surprise when, just before the closing deadline for lists of candidates, he presented an independent list of his own for Ramat-Gan City Council. The list bears the name "Ramat-Gan," without mention of the Likud. Dr. Peled explained his action at a news conference, in which he said:

I was being pressured to change the list against my own judgement. I was told to remove people whom I had chosen because I believed they were fitting candidates, and to replace them with others of whom I knew nothing and with whom I was not sure I could work in council....In the last analysis, the people on the (party's) municipalities committee are not responsible for running the city. The people on the committee simply are not familiar with local problems. The mayor needs a team with whom he knows he can work and on whom he can depend.

After the lists were submitted, the Likud gave in and asked Peled if he would agree to add the word "Likud" to the name of his list.

Tel Aviv

Another mayor who has tried to flex his political muscle against the party establishment, though with less success, is Tel Aviv mayor Shlomo Lahat. During the last weeks prior to the closing of lists for City Council, Lahat threatened on several occasions to bow out of the campaign unless he were given a major say about the composition of the Likud list. Lahat, whose relations with his own Liberal Party and its sister party, Herut, are shaky, tried to advance three Herut people to realistic slots in the Tel Aviv list. These were people whom Lahat saw as dependable, as "doers" who would be able to get things moving, with whose help he hoped to make the problems of Israel's biggest metropolitan city more manageable. The powers that be in Herut believed otherwise, and gave their support to veteran party figures, relegating Lahat's candidates to unrealistic slots on the list. In the end, Lahat was forced to capitulate.

Haifa

A similar "mayor's revolt" took place in Haifa. Mayor Aryeh Gurel, resisting party dictates, refused to run at the head of a list which he did not approve. The problems in putting together a list of candidates came about when representatives of the Rabin faction in Labour -- Haifaite's Almogi, Uri Agami and MK Shevah Weiss -- tried to force the mayor to place some of their people in realistic slots. Here, factional calculations were transferred to the local level and aroused a certain natural resentment.

FINE POINTS OF THE GAHAL AGREEMENT

A third reason for the explosion of candidates can be traced to internal party disputes on the local plane, primarily within the Likud -- despite its more unified image state-wide. True, one can point to a few examples of internal splits and the fielding of separate candidates even in the Alignment, such as the separate Mapam race for the Ashdod mayoralty. In the vast majority of cases, however, the Alignment is running locally as a solidly united ticket.

What accounts for the splits and bitter strife that seem to characterize the lists identified with the Likud? The root cause may be the growing obsolescence of the parity formula reached in 1965 at the formation of Gahal. This was the agreement which provided for political cooperation between Herut -- until then kept outside mainstream Israeli politics -- and the Liberal Party. The Gahal agreement, in turn, paved the way for the establishment of the Likud several years later.

The Gahal agreement is now eighteen years old -- a very long time in politics and especially in Israeli politics. On the national level this problem is less conspicuous, due to the efforts of the elites of both parties to keep it off the agenda. As far as municipal affairs are concerned, the Gahal agreement provided for the freezing of the status quo of 1965; i.e., the Liberals were to retain their primacy in those local jurisdictions which were until then considered their bailiwicks. In such cases it was to be the prerogative of the Liberals to field a candidate for mayor on behalf of the joint list. The same would apply to Herut on its home ground. Since then, however, the Liberals have lost much of their electoral appeal as Herut's stock among voters has risen. The resulting imbalance has aroused the resentment of Herut activists who see the Liberals as a parasitic group, clinging to Herut's coattails. This year in particular the issue has become one of

primary importance. The declaration by Deputy Knesset Speaker MK Meir Cohen-Avidov that "the Gahal agreement is dead" has been repeated in many local contexts.

CONFUSION WITHIN LIKUD

What happened in Haifa, for example, provides a particularly interesting episode of political musical chairs. The candidate for mayor ought to have come out of Liberal ranks, according to the 1965 pact, and the Liberals were quick to field Mordecai Tikotsky (Haifa and northern region chairman of the General Merchants Association, Haifa) as their man. Tikotsky lacked popular support, however. He initiated a vigorous campaign and his picture began to appear in media advertisements, but his candidacy aroused a storm of opposition among Herut Party faithful who proceeded to block his campaign. The Liberals failed to come up with a viable alternative candidate, and the ball passed into Herut's court.

In Herut itself a rivalry ensued between two old antagonists: MK Meir Cohen and the colorful Yael Rom (whose husband is MK Yosef Rom). The two factions waged an especially bitter struggle, and the efforts to achieve a conciliation between them -- on the part of both Herut's municipalities committee and of Likud ministers Aridor and Levy -- proved fruitless. The vote held by the Haifa party branch gave MK Meir Cohen the nod, and he became the designated Likud candidate. The Liberals now took their revenge, refusing to back Meir Cohen and throwing their support to Yael Rom, who decided to run on her own ticket together with certain well-known figures such as City Council member, lawyer Yom-tov Elkayam. Soon afterward, Elkayam returned to the party fold, explaining how impressed he had been at the way Herut had gone about selecting a candidate for prime minister -- what he termed one of the party's finest hours. The next move in this extraordinary game was Meir Cohen's withdrawal from the race in favor of Yom-tov Elkayam!

Ashdod

The confusion that attended the submission of candidates' lists was not limited to Haifa. In Ashdod, Mayor Zvi Tsilker was unsuccessful in his bid to stand for a fourth term as the Likud candidate for the office of mayor. He was defeated in a vote of the local Herut branch by his rival, Yosef Avitan. Zvi Tsilker decided to run on an independent list, "For Ashdod." Avitan's selection as the Likud candidate did not meet the approval of the Liberals, and on the eve of the list-closing deadline two separate Likud lists were submitted: one by the Liberals, headed by Nissim Haddad, and the other by Herut, headed by Avitan. The elections commission invalidated Avitan's list, and he proceeded to file a court petition against the election commission's decision.

Similar incidents took place in Beer Sheva, Petah Tikva and Rehovot, where parallel Likud lists were submitted. In Rehovot, because of inner party feuding, five (!) separate lists were submitted by politicians identified with the Likud, some of whom had represented the Likud on the outgoing City Council.

OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY THE LOCAL PRESS

The fourth and last factor in the pluralization of local campaigns is a relatively new phenomenon in Israeli politics that has developed out of the "media revolution" that is sweeping Israeli society. During the past decade, over three hundred local newspapers of all types have begun to

publish -- including those integrally associated with country-wide papers, syndicated newspapers, and privately-owned independent papers. Their economic, political and social impact cannot be analyzed here. Suffice it to say that this local media revolution has had a tremendous effect in enhancing the political and social standing of local institutions within the state. The local press enhanced the ability of candidates and lists to mount independent campaigns and cut their ties to party financing. Treasury Minister Yoram Aridor's policies also left their mark here, leaving the party coffers bare. This has minimized the parties' power to bend local candidates to their will. During the last local election, the country-wide press was filled with colorful slogans, advertisements and electioneering more than two months prior to election day. This time, the electioneering has by and large been confined to the local press. Here the candidates were assured not only of far less expensive and more effectively targetted advertising, but also of detailed coverage of their programs, personalities, and the progress of the campaign. This phenomenon serves to encourage a relatively large number of candidates who were not previously known in the dominant, leading circles of local political life. Such candidates, in particular, reaped the benefit of the inexpensive publicity provided by local newspapers. What did they have to lose?

THE LIBERATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

One last factor is the waning of the established parties' influence. In contrast to local campaigns of the not-so-distant past, the parties are no longer able to dictate to the local-echelon politicians. This is a positive trend, insofar as it liberates local government from a suffocating dependence on the state political leadership. Local political problems ought to be solved on the local plane, and not through solutions imposed from above.

On the other hand, this "blossoming of a thousand flowers" (as in Chairman Mao's cultural revolution), or, to put it another way, this surfeit of democracy, carries with it certain dangers. The excess of pluralism, the inflation of the number of candidates and lists, the squabbles and disputes, may bewilder the voter. Even worse, they may breed a contempt for elections in general that would express itself in uncast ballots. Whether or not that happens will become apparent after October 25.

Avraham Lantzman has just completed a study of Israel's local press and its influence on Israeli society which the Center will be publishing this year.