

# JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 369 2 Heshvan 5758 / 2 November 1997

## THE WZO ELECTIONS — A NEW BEGINNING?

Daniel J. Elazar

**An Astounding Victory and a Great Opportunity / Representing the Other Face of Organized Jewry — Just What the Jewish People Need / Unanticipated Change — Unanticipated Consequences / Energizing the System / Postscript**

### **An Astounding Victory and a Great Opportunity**

The outcome of the elections to the forthcoming World Zionist Congress that will mark the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the World Zionist Organization astounded just about everybody. After waging a very active campaign, ARZA, the Zionist party of the Reform movement in Judaism, won 47.7 percent of the total vote, coming within a hair's breadth of winning half in a decisive victory (Table 1). Its nearest rival, Mercaz, the Zionist party of the Conservative movement in Judaism, won 26 percent or more than a quarter of the total. Together, the two non-Orthodox religious movements won an astounding 74 percent. No doubt, this smashing victory was a result of American Jewish anger over the stance of the Orthodox religious parties in Israel on behalf of changing the law defining "who is a Jew" to insist on *halakhic* conversion through the Israel rabbinate exclusively in Israel, and a general opposition to allowing Reform and Conservative Judaism any recognized standing in Israel. I would suggest that it is also symptomatic of a long-term trend that,

handled correctly, could be very positive indeed.

First of all, the fact is that the World Zionist Organization is moribund. Its nakedness was revealed for all involved in world Jewish affairs by the failure of the recent committee to reorganize the WZO to achieve anything of substance and the transfer entirely to the Jewish Agency of the former jewel in the WZO crown, its education function, earlier made a joint WZO-Jewish Agency "Joint Authority for Jewish and Zionist Education." Then, through these elections it was demonstrated that in the largest diaspora community by far, the old Zionist parties could not win even 10 percent of the votes. Once again we see how a democratic election, with all its flaws, can bring about decisive change if the voting constituency wants to do so.

Beyond that, the message was clear that in the United States, at least, where elections are open, the old Zionist parties just do not count. Indeed, one can and should look at the 10.8 percent vote for the religious Zionist parties in the United States as a vote for the Orthodox stream, just as the 73.7 percent was for the Reform and Conservative

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-5619281, Fax. 02-5619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 507, Philadelphia, PA 19103; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Table 1

VOTING FOR AMERICAN DELEGATES TO THE WORLD ZIONIST CONGRESS  
ELECTION RESULTS — 1997

|   | Votes  | %    |
|---|--------|------|
| American Friends of Meretz                | 4,810  | 4.5  |
| Revisionist Zionists of America           | 59     | 0.5  |
| ARZA (Reform)                             | 51,469 | 47.7 |
| Religious Zionist Movement                | 11,664 | 10.8 |
| American Zionists for<br>Unity/Tolerance  | 1,599  | 1.5  |
| Labor Zionist Movement                    | 3,653  | 3.4  |
| MERCAZ (Conservative)                     | 28,001 | 26.0 |
| Zionist Organization of America           | 3,085  | 2.9  |
| American Friends of Likud                 | 2,018  | 1.9  |
| World Confederation of United<br>Zionists | 942    | 0.9  |

Source: *Jerusalem Post*, 12 October 1997

streams, leaving all of 15 percent for parties representing other interests. No one of the old Zionist parties received as much as 5 percent of the total vote, a clear confirmation of what we all have known, that even among the small minority of American Jewish activists interested in voting in a Zionist election, those parties have no constituency.

#### Representing the Other Face of Organized Jewry — Just What the Jewish People Need

What this means is that the WZO in the United States now represents the American religious movements whose voices have not been heard except marginally on the world Jewish scene in the past. Although the world strength of these movements is exaggerated and outside of the United States the vast majority of identified Jews are at least nominally Orthodox, this has always been a distortion since in North America it is the synagogues, and, indeed, Conservative and Reform synagogues, that have the “troops” of the Jewish community. It is in the synagogues that whatever exists in the way of popular Jewish activity takes place, for better or for worse, and it is those religious movements which give voice to that activity. Moreover, while it may be difficult for the Israeli religious establishment to come to grips with this, the truth is that in the United States on a “one person, one vote” basis, 90 percent of Jews do not identify with Ortho-

doxy. Their voices should be heard on the world Jewish scene and now the WZO has provided a vehicle through which they can be heard.

Since shortly after the Caesarea process of the 1970s, I argued that this inclusion of the synagogue movements is the direction that the WZO should be taking. The reconstitution of the Jewish Agency provided the community federations and their instrumentalities (CJF, UJA, UIA) with representation on the “fund-raisers” side of JAFI. Indeed, they were becoming the dominant elements there, partly because of the weight of American Jewry and partly because the American federation pattern was in one way or another finding echoes in the diaspora. On the other side of the equation, the WZO had not sufficiently expanded to include representatives of the other ways and means of identifying with Jewish life — namely, the religious movements and other ideologically-oriented organizations and institutions — as serious players. Until now, the traditional Zionist parties have prevented that development and the WZO has continued as their virtual monopoly. Now we have taken a major step toward changing that situation.

This step not only changes the balance in the WZO itself but could give the WZO a new *raison d'être*, a real representative function within the organizational pentagon that constitutes the organized world Jewish polity (the Government of Israel, JAFI, the WZO, the

Joint Distribution Committee, and the World Jewish Congress), and most particularly within JAFI itself, which is the closest thing to a functional umbrella organization that we have in world Jewry. Rather than representing a group of moribund or niche parties, the WZO has the possibility of beginning to represent the current major forces in Jewish life to give JAFI as a whole a second face that is equally needed to make it the comprehensive body that it has been on the road to becoming since its reconstitution in 1970.

### Unanticipated Change — Unanticipated Consequences

As in most cases where great changes occur, the immediate issue that has caused this upheaval is not based on any such grandiose ideas or plan. At best it is defensive, designed to defend the status of those Jews who do not accept religious Orthodoxy as their point of religious identification. At worst it is a grab for more dollars on the part of the non-Orthodox religious movements. Neither of those are illegitimate goals by any means, and indeed it is from such stuff that political transformations are made.

Nor is it a foregone conclusion that the movement will take place in the direction I have suggested would be most positive. That requires those who are active in the JAFI framework to take wise steps in a wise manner. Some of those steps will be painful to some of the present partners, not only the secular Zionist parties but most especially the Orthodox religious establishment which will have to take the new situation into account in appropriate ways.

Interestingly enough, while these election results were being announced, the Neeman Committee headed by the Israeli Finance Minister, himself an Orthodox Jew with all the bona fides necessary, proposed reasonable steps for just such an adjustment, only to have them turned down immediately by the 23-member "religious bloc" in the Knesset. The Neeman plan proposed that Reform and Conservative rabbis be allowed to officiate publicly at weddings which would continue to be under the jurisdiction of the present rabbinical authorities, which would keep them *halakhically* kosher, and that Reform and Conservative rabbis would be allowed to prepare potential converts for conversion (through a college to be established by the Jewish Agency — another good idea). Conversion itself would be overseen by rabbinical courts in which there would be an Orthodox majority, again for the same purpose. This would be a major step forward in giving the Reform and Conservative movements and their

rabbis a modicum of recognition while keeping the overarching umbrella of a single, established *halakhah* intact.

Like all compromises, it is not a perfect solution for either side, but it offered a real step forward in resolving the controversy, at least institutionally. While non-Orthodox rabbis would not gain equal status with Orthodox ones, Israel would at least begin to recognize that there are hundreds of thousands of Jews out there who have chosen and have been trying to develop a religious Judaism outside of Orthodoxy that continues to emphasize a common commitment to both Jewish religion and the Jewish people. On the other hand, while the Orthodox rabbinate would be surrendering its exclusive position of power, it would in return gain the recognition of the *halakhic* framework and its validity on the part of all Jews who seek to express themselves through Jewish religion, no mean gain after the fractures and fissures of the past two centuries.

### Energizing the System

More than that, in the JAFI framework itself, if ARZA and Mercaz use their newfound numbers for larger purposes of principle as well as for narrower ones of self-interest, they could provide the whole system with an energy that has been even more notably absent since the establishment of the state fifty years ago and even since the reconstitution nearly thirty years ago. The Jewish Agency has continued to fulfill its traditional tasks of *aliya* and *klita* very well, indeed, in the case of the mass *aliyot* from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, even magnificently. By the year 2000 it will have brought a million people to Israel in one decade or the equivalent of nearly one-fourth of the country's population at the beginning of that decade. It has performed satisfactorily in its more traditional educational functions such as supplying small Jewish communities in the diaspora with trained teachers and providing an Israel experience to young people from all parts of the diaspora.

JAFI has been considerably less successful in realms where new ideas have been called for and where it is necessary to reach out to new constituencies. There have been attempts, but normally they have been crushed through the weight of the existing institutions. Indeed, this is part of the tragedy of the WZO. While the "fundraisers" and federation leaders were first getting their feet wet on these issues, the WZO could have continued to be at the cutting edge had its leadership been able to generate those new ideas. Instead, they continued to fight over seats and budgets as if that

was all that was of importance, leaving a vacuum where ideas were concerned. As a result, every reorganizational move in JAFI ended by reducing WZO power in both seats and budgets without opening the door to new ideas.

Only a few of their more farsighted leaders saw the opportunity that the WZO had to become the engine that mobilized the whole enterprise. Sad to say, they were roundly defeated in every case and often denounced by the Zionist parties which had sent them to the table in the first place. Now the WZO is bankrupt, not only in its ideas but also in its budgets and increasingly is losing its seats as well.

The recent elections could bring about a reversal of this if those who come to the table representing Reform and Conservative Jewry can join with those representing the Orthodox who have in the past been almost the sole source of ideas but whose ideas can only play for their own narrow sector, and together could become a new force for generating ideas, even ideas that would compete with one another for JAFI and, hence, world Jewish support. The times demand it. Along with the anniversaries we are celebrating in these years are not only the 100th anniversary of the WZO itself and the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, but the end of the era in which relief, rescue, and rehabilitation of Jews dominates the Jewish agenda. While we will have some continuing work to do in those fields, by and large we have successfully accomplished the tasks they required.

Now, the Jewish people has to turn to what in the Western world are called "quality of life" issues. Now that we are relieved, rescued, and physically rehabilitated, what will our lives be like as Jews? That is a whole new subject for our institutions to tackle, but one which they will need to tackle if they are to survive in a voluntary environment. And let us not kid ourselves. Even in Israel being Jewish has become a voluntary matter in its most critical ways. The new forces raised up by the recent WZO elections could be a major revitalizing element. Now it is up to these new forces to take the lead that is offered them by the election results. The question of whether they will be able to do so or not is not answerable. Indeed, the signs are mixed, but the opportunity is there.

What the JAFI leadership on both sides must do is to grow beyond either a very narrow conception of JAFI's role in Jewish relief and rehabilitation, a role that is rapidly diminishing because the world is changing and it is no longer needed except in marginal or highly routinized ways, and to open itself to new

thinking, and, on the other hand, to abandon the narrow self-interest that some of its leaders show even when it is presented in the guise of progressive thinking.

Thus, in a strange way the WZO elections in the United States, coming at just the right moment when it looked as if all was lost not only for the WZO but for JAFI itself, offer new and unexpected opportunities. World Jewry has been saved by such unexpected turns in the past. Whether it will be this time remains to be seen.

#### Postscript

At the beginning of the last week in October, the disappointing news was that the Neeman Committee, established to work out a modus vivendi between Israel's Chief Rabbinate and the Conservative and Reform movements, reached another stalemate and the two non-Orthodox movements announced that they would renew their petition to Israel's Supreme Court. The disappointment on the part of the moderates in the Orthodox camp was palpable in the interviews with them that were broadcast on the radio. Among the less moderate Orthodox there has begun to be talk of abandoning the Jewish Agency to the Reform and Conservative Jews and for Israel to establish other bodies in its place to do its work. This, of course, is just talk, but it does complicate matters considerably. Then at the last minute, the Finance Minister succeeded in getting a three-month delay in their petition to the high court.

It still may turn out that the Reform and Conservative victory in the WZO elections will prove to be pyrrhic. While the election victory gives them a strong position in the WZO, the Americans tend to forget that, while 90 percent of American Jews may identify with non-Orthodox movements, at most 20 percent of the rest of the diaspora does and many fewer do in Israel. One can hope that the victory of the religious parties in the WZO will revitalize the WZO by introducing new blood and new ideas, but this can only happen when both sides of the religious issue accurately assess their strengths and weaknesses and the strengths and weaknesses of the other side.

\* \* \*

Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. His latest book is *Covenant and Constitutionalism: The Great Frontier and the Matrix of Federal Democracy* (The Covenant Tradition in Politics, Volume III; 1997).