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THE 1981 ELECTIONS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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The most important aspect of the 1981 elections is that they offered clear confirmation that Israel has now entered its second generation of statehood, and that its political system has turned away from the alignment of forces which was formed in the generation before the rebirth of the Jewish State and which prevailed during that whole first generation. Israel may or may not have a basically two party system now, but what is clear is that it does have two parties capable of contesting for control of the government. The Labor Alignment (in Hebrew Ma'arakh) has not yet learned this truth, which is one of the reasons why it lost.

Labor: The Fruits of Arrogance

Labor's leaders still persist on acting as if Labor is the only legitimate governor of the state and that it was the height of affrontery for Likud or anyone else to challenge its control of the government. If there was anything that turned moderate voters who were not among the strong pro-Likud, pro-Begin forces away from Labor it was that arrogant attitude on the part of the Labor Alignment which came through in its campaign at every turn. However much electioneering may involve efforts at dissimulation, in Israel it tends to be exceptionally honest and straightforward in the sense that the truth will out. Every television presentation and virtually every speech of the Labor Alignment displayed clearly for all who would pay attention how much the Labor camp saw itself as ruling by right and how little had changed as a result of its defeat four years ago.

This kind of attitude made it easy for Begin and the Likud to capitalize on their greatest strength, namely, their role as spokesmen for the outsiders. Thus the government in power was able to campaign as spokesmen for the outsiders to win the substantial outsider vote in the country because of Labor's attitude.

The Sephardic Factor

In no segment of the population was this more true than in connection with the Sephardic Jews, especially those from the Arab countries. Most of them still see themselves as outsiders because that is how they have been labelled by the Labor-dominated Israeli establishment. Hence their easy identification with Menachem Begin, the perennial outsider, and their positive pleasure in seeing him press the Labor camp unceasingly. Many people have been puzzled by the attraction between Begin, the quintessential Polish Jew, and the Jews from the Arab world. This mutual sense of being

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on the outside is one powerful reason, but beyond that, their mutual admiration should be a lesson to all those who believe the myth that there is inherently a great gap between the Jews of Eastern Europe and those of the Mediterranean world. The idea of this gap, which is widely held, especially in the establishment, is a myth developed by that segment of Eastern European Jewry which sought to forget its own traditional past and which arrogated to itself the designation of "Western" while tagging their Mediterranean brethren with the appellation (or should one say epithet, for that is really what it is) "Oriental." In fact, as those of us from the real West well know, both groups are Easterners, the difference is that Eastern Europeans come from the northern East and the Jews from the Arab countries from the southern, but they fully share the habits and outlook of the East. Thus affinities between them should not be surprising. Nor should it be surprising that there is an effort to resist recognition of those affinities on the part of those who wish to protect what they perceive is superior status, through this mythology.

All this is not to obscure the polarization that is beginning to develop in the country. Perhaps if there were real differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim of the kind imputed, the gap would be of a different order, but the fact that these differences are more reputed than real merely intensifies the hurt of the Sephardim at being excluded. There were many examples of this during the campaign. One will suffice. Eliahu Nawi, the longtime Mayor of Beer Sheba and of Iraqi origin, was promised, by Shimon Peres, a safe (Israelis call it "realistic") place on the Labor Alignment Knesset list. In the end, he was put very far down on the list so he approached Peres to ask why he had been excluded, to be told that the list already was overloaded with Iraqis. Nawi's response was "I arrived in Israel seven years before you, yet you are an Israeli and I am still an Iraqi." It is this attitude of the Labor establishment which is the source of polarization and bitterness, the sense of cultural and political rather than economic deprivation, of being pigeon-holed by country of origin if one happens to come from the wrong country.

Contrary to the lurid newspaper accounts, Jewish Israel is not divided into "two nations," not into two cultures, and not even into two societies. The degree to which Jews from all parts of the world have intergrated into one society goes far beyond the kind of divisions which get headlines at election time. Nonetheless, there is a growing division. I am not sure what to label the phenomenon. It essentially consists of those who believe that the country is theirs by right, and would be if they could only go back to the old ways of the socialist aliyot, and those who believe that the country belongs to all Israelis with nobody having special claims by virtue of seniority. It is a division between those who patronize and those who are patronized, those whose particular culture is considered normative, regardless of how good or bad it may be, and those whose particular culture is considered quaint and picturesque or "ethnic," no matter how good or bad it might be.

The fact that this division cuts across parties and camps does not prevent the patronized from seizing upon one party in particular as coinciding more closely with its present interests. In any case, this situation is likely to get worse before it gets better, but bad as it is likely to get, it does not represent what it suddenly has been seen to be by outsiders -- namely, a fundamental split in the nation. What this election has highlighted is the true character of Sephardic grievanves -- not economic, but cultural and political -- and the ability of Sephardim and Ashkenazim to forge alliances to gain political power.

Beyond the headlines, one can see the new synthesis developing. Politically, it is built around a group of outstanding young Sephardic leaders in the Likud, all of whom have emerged from the development towns. David Levi, who started as the head of the works committee in a textile mill in Beit Shean and is now contesting for the number two position in the Likud government, is the most prominent example of this phenomenon. He has long since transcended the vulgar jokes which four years ago mocked his Moroccan background. Not only does he dominate the Herut party "machine" but he has become an accomplished and moving public speaker in his own right, sought after for his clarity of expressio

(he seems to share the strong inclination among Sephardim to value clear, elegant and precise Hebrew, a matter of overt Sephardic pride at least since the formulation of the Sephardic version of the prayer liturgy nearly a millenium ago). But he is not alone. David Magen, Mayor of Kiryat Gat; Moshe Katzav, Mayor of Kiryat Malachi; and Meier Shitret, Mayor of Yavne, all now Knesset members as well, represent a new and immensely capable power bloc. Each has a story to tell about how he tried to break into the Labor Party (or its predecessor, Mapai) at the outset of his political career and was rejected with prejudice by a short-sighted establishment.

Culturally, like most such syntheses in democratic societies, it will not emphasize the highest elements of the various cultures which have been brought to Israel, but, at best, their respective middlebrow elements. That is both the glory and the dilemma of contemporary society. Israel, at least, still has standards and Israelis can tell the difference between better and inferior forms of cultural expression, no matter what their origin.

The Likud Coalition: 3-2

What of the details of the election results, what do they mean? The basic message is a massive swing away from Labor. True, the Labor Alignment won 47 seats in the voting and then added another by persuading Shulamit Aloni of the Citizens' Rights Movement to join their Alignment, but that merely brought them back to the combined total of Labor and the Democratic Movement for Change of four years ago, itself, a far lower figure than the Labor Alignment normally won in its heyday. Moreover, several of those 47 seats were the result of a large Arab vote for Labor, of which more below.

On the other hand, the Likud gained over and above what it and Ariel Sharon's Shlomo-zion party, which subsequently merged with it, won in 1977. It did so despite the secession of Likud's right wing to form Tehiya and part of its Ia'am faction to form Telem. At least four of the five seats won by those two parties must be added to the Likud total to get an accurate picture of the result. Moreover, most of the thirteen seats of the Religious camp represent people committed to coalition with the Likud in the way that the National Religious Party was once committed to coalition with Labor. In effect, the Jewish vote went three to two against the Labor camp.

The Labor leadership may wish to fool itself that it has regained its strength, just as they fooled themselves last summer by misreading the polls to think they had victory in their pockets. (Even a novice at pollwatching should have noted then that 30-50% of the voters were undecided -- most of them from groups that had been voting Likud for the past several elections. All they needed was a justification to return to established loyalties and they would do so, which they did.) The Labor leadership's mistakes which flowed from that misreading probably lost the election. Thinking they had an absolute majority on the way, they managed to alienate the religious camp and all of the population who were not part of the original Labor family.

Today, Labor may be thinking that another election would put them over the top. While that possibility cannot be ruled out -- after all a Likud disaster is always possible - in fact, the first polls after the elections showed Likud gaining and Labor losing even more seats. From the perspective of the long term trends in the Israeli polity, Labor may well have peaked in this election. There is almost no one else to draw into its fold. This is a bitter pill to swallow for those who still believe themselves to be to the manor born, but nothing will change in Labor ranks until this truth is perceived.

That is not to say that the Likud vote consisted only of Begin's faithful. Perhaps half of its seats were gained from those who happily voted Likud. The other half, I would suggest, were gained through the votes of those who held their noses and decided whom they disliked least. That is a slender reed upon which to build a new majority, but in Likud's favor, one of the reasons that most of those voters disliked Likud least was because of an affinity for the non-socialist camp. Hence, they are more likely to become Likud voters over time than to shift to Labor. By and large, their opposition to the Labor camp had to be balanced against their dislike for the Likud leadership,

including Prime Minister Begin. In other words, they could have been persuaded to vote for an alternative had there been one available, but, I repeat, Labor did everything possible to alienate those voters.

The Crisis of the NRP

What of the Religious camp? Did they lose as handily as it seemed at first glance? Yes and no. The camp as a whole dropped from a maximum strength of 17 to 13, a loss of 4 seats for what was generally considered the most stable bloc in Israeli politics. The NRP absorbed the entire loss -- its strength was cut in half -- and, in addition lost to its offshoot, Tami, the splitaway party of Religious Affairs Minister Aharon Abuhatzzeira who tried to capitalize on North African resentment over his trial to build a communal list and, to a degree, succeeded. Agudath Israel, on the other hand, held its own and, because of the virtual tie between the two large parties plus the skills of its leaders, much enhanced its bargaining power.

In other words, 1981 was a decisive turning point for the Religious camp in the way that 1977 was decisive for Labor. The former are presumably undergoing a reassessment of who and what they are, in the way that Labor should have done four years ago. At this writing, it is unclear whether they will be more successful than Labor was. The NRP has a particularly difficult row to hoe. After winning 12 seats four years ago under the effective dominance of the young guard (now its strongest faction), its new leadership was filled with thoughts of expanding its base to become the Israeli equivalent of the European Christian Democratic parties (see Jerusalem Letter #24), in other words, a broad-based, religiously-oriented political alignment capable of contesting for governmental power and not simply continuing as a balance wheel between the two large parties as in the past. The NRP had gone so far as to welcome a delegation from the Christian Democratic Union last year, as part of its initial exploration of the possibilities. Those hopes have been severely dashed, at least for the moment. Is this effect temporary? Is it a case of overreach? These questions must be occupying the minds of the NRP leadership. One look at Zevulun Hammer's face the night after the elections was enough to reveal the agonizing reappraisal he was undergoing, especially after having gained effective control over the party, moved it toward a more hawkish position, and then losing all those seats to Likud and Tehiya and Tami. The first two succeeded in outbidding the NRP on hawkishness and the last cut into its Sephardic vote.

A Jewish - Democratic Synthesis?

Curiously enough, however, there is an outside chance that this development may provide the basis for the kind of broad, traditionally-oriented party alignment which could compete for the government that Hammer and company envisaged. Tami is the key here. Its origins are something less than noble, involving as they do the ambitions of Aharon Abuhatzzeira who is not yet out of the woods in his troubles with the law, and the blatant intervention of Nessim Gaon, a rich diaspora Jew of Sephardic background whose interest in Israel reflects his own ambitions; and a barely disguised appeal to the North African Sephardic segment of the population. Nevertheless, the ideological trappings in which the party wrapped itself fit perfectly into what is needed for the building of such a coalition.

Tami advertized itself as the movement for tradition in Israel (that is its name), an appeal to Sephardim who are traditional rather than Orthodox, and, as such, the first recognition of the masoreti (traditional) Jews as a potential force in the country. Its emphasis on positive involvement with Jewish tradition on something other than an Orthodox basis plus mutual respect among all the communities in the state was telling, so much so that, had the bearers of those banners been different people, the banners themselves might have attracted even more voters. Should Tami prove to be more than a vehicle for its leaders' ambitions, it could lead the way to the development of a

party which could later align itself with the NRP and begin to build that "Jewish Democratic" force.

No one should underestimate the power of the idea which Tami embraced. Menachem Begin certainly does not, since he has embodied it in his own person to become a classic "Jewish Democratic" leader. His emphasis on Jewish tradition as the cornerstone of Israel's "civil religion" is one of the dominant elements in his public stance (and one of the bases for his appeal to Sephardic and Religious voters). It betrays a serious concern-- derived from Ze'ev Jabotinsky, his mentor -- for the continuity of Jewish tradition in the Jewish state on other than Orthodox religious grounds through an appropriate synthesis of civil and religious elements. By and large the other Likud leaders do not reflect that synthesis, which is one of the reasons that Begin is far more popular than they.

Begin's emphasis on traditional Jewish behavior on the part of the Prime Minister has been a powerful factor in his own attractiveness to a large number of Jews in Israel who want to see that kind of "Jewish Democratic" synthesis as the cornerstone of the Jewish state. If he can infuse the Likud with it, he will secure for his party the power that the NRP young guard and Tami are seeking from the same source.

There is a long way from a Jewish Democratic synthesis to a desire for Orthodox hegemony, as the post-election coalition bargaining once again reveals. The perennial "Who is a Jew" issue has once again brought down a general sentiment on the part of all but the most extreme to avoid the issue, even among those who stand to gain by raising it. Those outside Israel must understand the complexities of this question. For Israelis, it is not concession to require conversion according to Halachah, since that is the only kind of conversion which exists in Israel, nor are more than a handful of Israelis interested in anything else. Were it not for the diaspora, they could concede the question without perceiving that it cost them anything. The issue is regularly shelved for the sake of world-wide Jewish unity, to prevent permanent divisions in the Jewish people. It has been again.

The advance of Agudath Israel in strength and in stature is one of the most interesting phenomena of this election. They have attracted the admiration of many who are utterly opposed to the kind of Orthodoxy they advocate because of their skill in utilizing their position and their essential moderation in the application of that skill. For them, the "Who is a Jew" issue, however significant, can be sacrificed in return for additional financial support for their institutions. They are building for the long pull and need funds now, far more than they need to win what is, for the most part, a symbolic issue in its effects. Thus, they raised it and then backed off rather quickly from insisting upon it, but will gain their reward for backing off in very tangible ways.

Not only is their bargaining skill admired but, at a time when the NRP looks like it is dominated by nationalist fanatics, the political moderation of Agudat Israel in matters of national policy is apparent to one and all. Not for them "Land of Israel" crusades. Indeed had the Labor Alignment not so deliberately turned its back on the religious camp when its leaders thought it was going to get over half the seats in the Knesset, there might even have been room for Agudath Israel becoming partners in a Ma'arakh coalition, without seats in the government but providing votes in the Knesset in return for heavy financial support for their institutions and key committee chairmanships.

The Arabs Vote Zionist

Somewhat overlooked in the aftermath of the election was the shift in the Arab vote away from the Communist-dominated popular front party and the various separate lists which have paralleled the several Zionist parties in the Arab community, particularly the Ma'arakh. At a time when there have been all sorts of reports about how the Israeli Arabs are deserting the state, this trend represents very important evidence to the contrary. This time, the major parties included Arabs as integral members and put Arab candidates on their lists, appealing directly to the Arab voters rather than working through their "front" Arab lists as has been the case in the past. Perhaps they overcame their previous reluctance to vote for avowedly Zionist parties for that reason, but even more so because they believed that a Ma'arakh victory would advance Arab interests (which include Palestinian ones, of course), while a Likud victory would inhibit those interests. They came close to succeeding in putting the Ma'arakh over the top in number of seats, although as suggested above, Labor would have had a difficult time putting together a governing coalition even so.

No doubt the Arab vote camouflages a growing Palestinian consciousness as well as reflecting a great willingness to participate in mainstream Israeli politics. Whatever their reasons, the Arabs actually took a big step towards further integration into the Israeli polity, one that should be duly appreciated.

What of Dayan?

Perhaps the biggest loser of all in this election was Moshe Dayan, who was desperate seeking vindication. After some initial excitement, Telem, his new party soon was understood by all for what it was, a catchall for professional politicians, present of former Knesset members, who had lost their base in other parties and were looking for some way to stay in office. It was a sad collection, indeed, where ambition clearly took precedence over talent, even though many of the individuals on Dayan's list were notably talented. The voters responded accordingly. He kept his corporal's guard of those faithful to him unto death, but no more. Begin rejected his terms for joining the coalition out of hand. While Telem's two Knesset members voted against seating the new government, as of this moment, Dayan has informally committed himself to supporting the government in most matters from here on.

What Next?

Menachem Begin came to life for the election campaign and demonstrated once again what an awesomely effective politician he is in the Israeli context. He then continued to demonstrate his political skills in the negotiations surrounding the formation of a governing coalition as well. For a brief time, the religious parties perceived themselves to be even stronger than the number of seats they won because of the 48-48 tie between the Likud and the Ma'arakh and began to present extraordinary demands. Begin succeeded in quashing those demands to which he was opposed by refusing to give in to them and threatening to call new elections.

While the new government has the formal support of only 61 out of the 120 members of the Knesset, it is likely to be even stronger than Begin's previous government because there will be less variance in views on key issues among the coalition partners than there was before. This is especially true of the key figures in the government. Begin, Yitzhak Shamir as Foreign Minister, and Ariel Sharon as Defense Minister represent a far more united team than Begin, Dayan and Ezer Weizman four years ago. So, too, the strength of Yoram Aridor and David Levi in their respective ministries of finance and housing adds to Begin's strength.

Moreover, Menachem Begin knows how to govern, in the sense that he treats a majority of one as if it were a landslide and is not inhibited by a small margin. (One of the problems of Shimon Peres is that he has acted in just the reverse fashion. He was never able to act as if he were the leader of his party, despite his overwhelming majority within its caucuses.) Finally, after the Israeli withdrawal from the rest of Sinai scheduled for April 1982, it is likely that Tehiya will join the government in order to help prevent a withdrawal from Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Thus, unless something comes apart unexpectedly, Begin can be expected to hold onto the reins of government for a full term. Certainly, he will not be seeking early elections, although given the character of Israeli politics almost anything can happen.

So much for the political aspects. What kind of government will Begin and his supporters provide? It will be at once more singleminded, more experienced and more rapacious -- and it may have some surprises. It will be singleminded in its pursuit of an Eretz Israel embracing the entire land west of the Jordan and in its efforts to weaken if not destroy the PLO. It will be more experienced in its handling of domestic affairs, particularly the economy, industrial development and inter-communal relations.

It will be more rapacious in that it will seek to entrench itself even further in the public offices of the country. The desire on the part of Likudniks, particularly those of Herut, to gain offices was manifest from the very first in 1977 but that appetite, if anything, has grown. More people have risen within the party to the point where they believe they can handle those offices and the way in which Labor oriented bureaucracies have frustrated government policies has become apparent. Thus, the pressure will be on to strengthen Likud representation in all facets of public life.

One must add that this is not simply a matter of spoils. Israel still has a way to go before the ideal of a neutral civil service becomes fully assimilated. Today, the jobs of civil servants are protected by the law but the civil servants themselves are barely required to maintain neutrality. The fact is, that after more than a generation of Labor rule in which party ties were of crucial importance in obtaining public positions, Israel's public sector was thoroughly dominated by people owing their allegiance to the Labor Alignment. During the past four years, most of these people barely concealed their Labor ties, and in many cases continued to use their offices to advance Labor interests in opposition to the government in power. Thus the Likud must make as many changes as it can in government offices, in the national institutions, and in public organizations and public companies simply to protect itself and to advance its policies.

With regard to surprises, the biggest ones are likely to come in the Likud's position vis-a-vis the Palestinian Arabs and Jordan in an effort to advance the cause of peace and in the role that will be played by Herut's new Sephardic leadership in domestic affairs. But each of these requires full treatment on its own -- and will receive it in future Jerusalem Letters.

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