

{MARCH 25 2006}

WHOM TO VOTE FOR?

This must be about the 15th time that I am writing an article like this one. On the eve of every national election I set out my doubts and hesitations. I do not tell people how to vote. What I am trying to do is help voters (including myself) to organize their thoughts and reach a logical conclusion, each according to his own conscience and understanding.

I know, of course, that none of us makes this choice solely on the basis of logic. Many factors influence a voter on the way to the ballot box, some conscious, some unconscious. Loyalty to family or rebellion against it, loyalty to a party, sympathy with one leader or dislike of another, membership of a group or community, the views of people around us – all have an impact. But rational and self-aware people will try, in spite of all that, to let logic, too, have its say.

My considerations can help only people whose views are similar, more or less, to mine. That means people who believe that the achievement of Israeli-Palestinian peace is essential to the future of Israel, that ignoring morality and justice cannot be in the national interest in the long run, that the continuation of the occupation is a calamity for us too, that peace can be achieved by negotiations with the Palestinian leadership, that it must be based on mutual recognition and respect between the State of Israel and the future State of Palestine, that the border between them must be based on the Green Line, that Jerusalem must be the capital of the two states.

With these views, who should one vote for?

Ahead of all considerations, there stands a categorical imperative: Everybody must vote!

It is easy and tempting to say: There is nobody to vote for. They are all corrupt hypocrites. There is no real difference between them. So why take the trouble? Why dirty oneself? Why be a party to this?

This assumes that abstaining from voting strengthens the convictions of the abstainer and hurts their opponents. Or that this protest is registered somewhere and thus influences somebody. That's a great mistake. A total logical fallacy.

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This is how it goes: when a person votes, he supports a certain election list. If he votes for list X, 100% of his vote goes to list X. If he does not vote, or posts a blank ballot, he lets the other voters determine the outcome. He does not use his ability to change the balance. Effectively, he confirms the choice made by others. It is as if he divides his vote between right, center and left, according to the distribution of votes among the general electorate.

I hope that nobody who supports peace will be tempted to take this ineffective course.

After having decided to vote, we must determine the main consideration that will guide us.

In these elections, as in almost all previous ones, we are facing a dilemma: the list closest to our convictions is not necessarily the one that can contribute the most to realizing them in practice.

If this is so, what is more important? Shall I tell myself: I must give my only, precious vote to a list that is closest to the things I believe in, even if its chance to influence the decision in the next few years is minimal, or shall I vote for a list that is less close to my opinions, but may be able to influence events in practice?

What is more moral – to voice my credo and to vote for a party that will remain outside the decision-making circle, or make a compromise about the principles and vote for a party that has a chance of realizing at least a part of the things that I believe in? In short, to vote for the desirable or for the practical?

This is a real dilemma, and let nobody belittle it. I do not intend to advise anybody on his choice. Everybody must consider for himself and decide for himself. If I can help at all, it is in clarifying the meaning of each choice.

The list closest to the approach that I outlined at the beginning is Hadash, with the Communist Party at its center.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many misgivings that I had in the past about this party have become irrelevant. Neither Marxist ideology nor memories of Stalin play a role any longer.

The problem with Hadash is another altogether: that it is fixed in the public mind as one of the "Arab parties". In the outgoing Knesset, it did not have a single Jewish member. In the next Knesset, it will probably have one: Dov Hinin, a lawyer, Nr. 3 on the list, a talented, decent and active person. But the party will not easily shed the image of an "Arab party". The overwhelming majority of its voters will be Arab, and its election campaign is being waged almost entirely in the Arab street.

That should not prevent any progressive Israeli from voting for it. We want a state in which all citizens are equal, irrespective of their origin. But it will have a decisive impact on the party's ability to influence the policy of the state. After all, our main aim

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is to change the opinion of the Jewish majority in Israel, since only such a change can transform the country's policy.

Right from the foundation of Israel, the Arab citizens have been excluded from the decision-making process. That is a shameful situation, and we must struggle with all our strength to put an end to it. But there is no chance at all that this will happen during the term of the 17th Knesset. The Hadash faction will be on the sidelines. The majority of the public will try to ignore it.

So here we have the first decision to make: should one vote for an isolated opposition party close to one's views, or for a party that is less close but that can – either in government or in opposition – influence the majority? The first alternative leads to Hadash, the second to Meretz or Labor.

Should we vote for Meretz? Among the "Jewish" parties, it is certainly closest to the views I set out earlier. Its leader, Yossi Beilin, launched the Geneva Initiative some years ago, which serves as the unofficial program of Meretz.

Meretz makes no secret of its ardent desire to be a partner in the next government, if it is headed by Ehud Olmert. That is a problematic position. Olmert aims openly at the annexation of large chunks of the West Bank. Since he does not draw a definite map, this annexation may be minimal (say 15%) or maximal (perhaps 55%) of the West Bank. It may include all the Jordan Valley and the "Settlement Blocs" – a term coined, curiously enough, by Beilin himself. The blocs may be larger or smaller.

If Meretz joins the government, there will be no leftist opposition at all in the Knesset, apart from the "Arab" parties. On the other hand, Meretz can argue that its presence in the cabinet may help to moderate the extent of the annexation.

One of my problems with Meretz concerns Beilin personally. Recently he had a much publicized breakfast with Avigdor Lieberman, one of the worst racists around. After sharing "juicy herrings" with him, he announced that Lieberman, the man who is not prepared to tolerate any Arabs in Israel, is really a good and nice guy, a wise and capable fellow. The beginning of a beautiful friendship.

I am sure that the herrings were tasty. But it's very difficult for me to vote for a leader who is able to keep company with a rabid racist. And, worse, to accord him public legitimacy, and on the eve of elections, at that.

My most serious hesitation concerns the Labor party.

The election of Amir Peretz as party leader made my very happy. It was much more than just a change of personnel. It was a qualitative change in Israeli society.

For dozens of years, we were painfully aware of the fact that more than half of the Jewish population in Israel, the "oriental" public, was overwhelmingly estranged and disconnected from the peace camp, which should have been its natural home. I have

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always believed that the resolution of this paradox is our most important and most difficult task. And now a Morocco-born leader has been elected to head the Labor party. That breaks all established patterns in the political arena. It will have far-reaching consequences, if not this time, then the next.

I don't know Peretz from close up. But he impresses me as a concerned, intelligent and strong leader, with solid principles, not only on social matters (which are important enough by themselves) but also about peace. He has a lot of experience as a negotiator, and he understands the importance of negotiating with the Palestinian leadership. I am sorry that this part of his message has been subdued, and almost silenced, by the marketing experts who now run Labor's campaign.

If one wants to give one's vote to a party that has the best chance of influencing the decisions of the next government, one can vote for Peretz. The larger the Labor faction, compared to Kadima, the larger will be its part in the government and in the decision-making process. And, also, the stronger Peretz' own hold on his party will be, as against the remnants of the Peres-Barak era.

There is one more consideration that speaks for Peretz. On our way to the ballot box for the 17th Knesset, we must already be thinking about the 18th. In Israel, political-psychological processes move slowly. (The Yom Kippur war, for example, aroused a huge wave of anger against Labor's leaders, especially Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan. But the big change did not happen in the elections held immediately after the war, but four years later).

I can imagine that, if Peretz gains enough seats, he will become an important minister in the next cabinet, acquire experience at government level, free his party from the old team and introduce a new spirit. Then he will be a very strong candidate for Prime Minister in the next elections, which may take place in as little as one or two years time. That is not certain, but certainly possible.

On the other hand, if he does not win enough votes, we cannot be sure that Labor will indeed stay true to his course. Perhaps it will appear in the end that a vote for Labor really reinforces Olmert's Sharonist program. After all, Labor's program does not even call for changing the path of the Wall.

It seems then that in elections – in contradistinction to other political events – the choice is between remaining clean and correct and giving up the opportunity we have once in four years – or using the opportunity to tip the balance in our country and bring peace a little bit closer.

A hard choice.