

## Of Elections and Pipe Dreams: Passing Thoughts

It is months since the captains and the kings departed, the Israeli elections came and went, and the leavings of the thirty-one parties were cleared from the airwaves and the streets. (Sixteen of them blessedly did not make the cut-off point to enter the Knesset; unblessedly, fifteen did.) Israelis will miss the excited teenagers at crowded intersections holding huge banners for Barak who will change things, or for Netanyahu who will guarantee peace with security, or for the NRP who will give its soul for Israel, or for the haredi United Torah Judaism who will preserve the Torah in the state. But no one will miss the detritus of flyers that carpeted the streets for months, reminding one and all of the dire consequences if anyone but their own candidate were elected. Gone are the *Rak Netanyahu* (Only Netanyahu) and the *Rak Lo Netanyahu* (Anyone But Netanyahu) bumper-stickers. The American election gurus have floated off to other campaigns, the clamor has subsided, and the media's vitriol and vituperation have been lowered a few notches.

Blessedly behind us also is the post-election campaign, conducted behind the stillness of locked doors: favor-seekers begging Barak for a share of the spoils of victory. Yesterday, Shas warned of the catastrophe that would befall the land if Barak won, and today they beseech Barak for a seat at the table; yesterday, the religious parties warned the faithful of the sacred duty to defeat the Barak who would destroy Shabbat and give away Jerusalem, and today they crowd around him and extend their hand of peace if only they can obtain *shirayim* scraps from their new *rebbe*. Yesterday, the militantly anti-religious secularists bitterly attacked all Torah values and vowed never to sit in a government coalition with representatives of Torah parties, and today they find that perhaps they can sit with them after all if this means that they, too, will get a crumb.

It was an unseemly sight, this spectacle of erstwhile enemies affectionately holding hands. The conclusion is that yesterday they were not really enemies, and today they are not really friends. The one, single-minded goal—to hold on to power at all costs—transcends such naive things. Much more bracing was the sight of Benny Begin quitting politics, and of Netanyahu saying farewell to his Knesset seat. (One wonders why Peres could not have said farewell after his defeat in 1996.)

At every election, Rabban Gamliel's words in *Pirke Avot* II:3 resonate with renewed power: "Be careful in your dealings with the ruling powers . . . for they appear as friends when it is to their advantage, but do not stand by a man in the hour of his need."

And at every election, everyone forgets these words.

## II

Although the elections are history, a number of unresolved issues remain in their wake:

- ♦ The religious/non-religious hostility that it underscored, and the continued fragmentation of Israeli society.
- ♦ The arrogance and venom of the media that makes no pretext of objectivity in their news coverage and that never forgave Netanyahu for the cardinal *chutzpah* of winning the election against their wishes in 1996. (After the initial euphoria about the Barak victory, the secular columnists in *Ha-arets* and other such journals are now beginning to be critical of him—altogether an encouraging sign.)
- ♦ The American spinmeisters brought in to tell the Israel candidates how to do their job, and how this is yet another manifestation of how America and the West dominate Israeli life. Through their sound-bite influence, none of the major candidates ever addressed any serious issues, and offered no ideas about peace, or unemployment, or the ideological divide, or the faltering economy.
- ♦ The revolving door of military and politics. The armed forces are viewed as stepping stones into the upper echelons of government. Generals covet cabinet seats, and chiefs of staff covet the Prime Ministership. Do ex-generals make good political leaders? The history of military men in Israeli politics is not a great cause for optimism.

Many issues, but the relative quiet of this post-election period brings certain suppressed pipe-dreams to the surface—which, like all dreams, are only personal and represent no one's views but the writer's.

## III

What if Barak had been able to form a government without any religious parties? Would this have been a disaster for Torah? Would *kashrut* and *Shabbat* and all things sacred be tossed overboard by a secular government? Would funding be summarily cut off from reli-

gious institutions? If Torah were not part of the massive jockeying at the trough, if it were above the fray and not seen—as it is now seen—as just another political party, would it be held in higher esteem, and would the contempt with which its adherents are held by so many be abated?

One example among many: Although the Deri conviction apparently strengthened the Shas party, did it strengthen Judaism in the eyes of Israelis, or did it increase contempt for it? Does anyone really think that the courts—which are notoriously anti-religious in Israel—in this case convicted an innocent man? Does anyone really believe, as his defenders like to claim, that Deri is another falsely accused Captain Dreyfus, a victim of a vast conspiratorial frameup of those who hate Sephardim and religious Jews? And is the defense that “they all do it” a legitimate one for those who claim to represent God and Torah? Did l’affaire Deri sanctify the Name of God so that—in the definition of *kiddush haShem*—men will forever say in awed tones. This is how a religious Jew behaves; more glory to the God of Israel and the study of Torah which creates such self-sacrificing Jews; would that my children could be like that? Or will they say with a different cantillation. This is how a religious Jew behaves.

And is not the Deri case symbolic of the inevitable fulfillment of Lord Acton’s dictum that all power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely? Is Torah so weak in Israel that it cannot exist and prosper without the degrading wheeling and dealing that is part of the political process? Perhaps withdrawal from politics is an idea whose time has come.

Granted, the thought is naive, but pipe dreams are permitted a certain innocence. Yes, it would create a financial crunch for many religious institutions. But would Torah and Judaism and the good name of the Jewish religion, now dragged daily through the political mud, lose or gain in the long run? And does not authentic Judaism possess its own persuasive powers, and does not Torah have its own persuasive teachers? And on a practical level, would not the growing electoral strength of the religious community prevent any serious diminution of basic religious principles or a radical slashing of support? For even if they stayed out of the government, religious Jews would still be a sought-after vote in elections.

The erosion of Torah in the community at large—with religion in the government—is slow but steady. The Orthodox grow stronger within, yes, but religion in society grows ever weaker—and the

appointment of militantly anti-religious Yossi Sarid as the new Minister of Education is not a promising omen. Would Torah do worse if it were not in government?

The millions of *shekalim* now expended by the government for religious institutions do not come without a price-tag: the good name of the religion. Torah's legislative representatives are viewed as just another group of political hacks trying to get a piece of the action—and hacks, furthermore, with an agenda of intolerance and religious coercion. Riding the waves of this sentiment, Lapid's Shinui party, for example, ran a vitriolic anti-haredi hate campaign in which the campaign issues were: freedom to marry whomever one pleases, to violate *Shabbat*, and to eat pork. Instead of being condemned and smothered at the polls as the Israeli Ku Klux Klan, he garnered five seats in the Knesset—as many as did the haredi United Torah Judaism.

The price for being in politics is even steeper than this. It is the complete unawareness by the general population of what the religious community really is. The *hesed* of religious Jews, the *mentschlichkeit*, the exemplary family life, the values, the principles: none of this is known to the general electorate. Nor are they aware of the intellectual rigor of Torah study, the discipline and majesty of a Torah life, the profound joy of a *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*, the drama and power of religious life cycle events. It is all obscured by the jostling at the trough. The electorate knows only the terrible cliches that have become part of the daily lexicon of the media: that haredim are all parasites who pay no taxes, share no civic burdens, and have too many children; that religious parties take more money from the government than they should (though the fact is that they receive no more proportionately than the secular community and the secular kibbutzim); that Orthodox Jews want to force Judaism upon an unwilling public; that *gedolei Yisrael* and hasidic *rebbeim* and the rabbis of Judea/Samaria are all hard-eyed Ayatollahs.

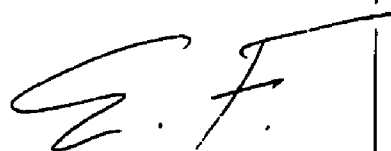
Religious Jewry in Israel has much to offer the country, and has contributed enormously to its spiritual and material fiber. But who outside of the Orthodox is aware of this? When the religious parties horsetrade with other politicians, the effect on a marginal Jew who is curious about his Judaism cannot be very positive.

## IV

It was only a pipe-dream, a passing thought. In the cold light of day it is, admittedly, chimeral, for it brings in its wake many realistic problems. But pipe-dreams, fantasies and passing thoughts—even if they dissolve like smoke rings—are the essence of a sentient human being. Oscar Wilde once said, “Life is a dream that keeps me from sleeping.” This is because dreams are often the seeds of serious questions, such as: In today's world, unlike decades ago, is Torah in politics good for the Jews or bad for the Jews? And: What would God want?

Only God knows. But as the beauty and nobility of Torah is devalued by the dross of Israeli politics, it is not impolitic to keep in mind the pipe-dream. That there seems to be no satisfactory way out of the present religio-political arrangements is no reason to ignore it.

When all is said and done, it never hurts to ask, “Vos vill Gott?” In the dilemmas of life, that is not the last question we should be asking, but the first. And that is not a passing thought.

A stylized, handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a large, sweeping 'E' followed by a smaller 'F' and a period.

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