

Israel's Most Recent Election: Reason for Concern?

The results are in, but the results are not yet in, and it isn't over yet.

I am referring to Israel's most recent election. While it is clear that Likud, the party led by Benjamin Netanyahu received the most votes, and that he will be tasked with forming a new government, what is not yet clear is who he will ask to join his coalition. He has a number of options. That he has not yet revealed what he plans to do hasn't prevented various media outlets from expressing opinions, with some of them *shrying gevalt*.

The rush to judgment portrays the results as a threat to democracy. Yesterday's *Washington Post* lead editorial was entitled, "Israel takes a troubling turn toward illiberal democracy." Writing in the *New York Times*, frequent Israel critic, whose predictions are rarely, if ever correct, Thomas Friedman wrote a column called, "The Israel we Knew is Gone."

And some American Jewish organizations have also expressed similar concerns about the results, and its possible implications. Not to minimize the gravity or legitimacy of the concern, part of which stems from uncertainty about what the new government will look like, which parties will be a part of the coalition, who will be in the government and uncertainty over what role will be played by the parties representing extreme views which may be uncomfortable, anathema and inconsistent with one's Jewish values.

When presented with such a consistent critique and narrative, American Jews may assume that Israel has chosen a path we are not supposed to like, and may assume this is the perspective and narrative we must adopt and accept.

What we sometimes forget is that the thing about democracy, and which can be hard to accept, is that sometimes the side we back and want to win, loses. It can be disappointing and messy, which is why Winston Churchill famously said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except all others."

Recognizing that there may be justification for concerns about the nationalist views expressed by the rise of Bezael Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir and their party, Jonathan Tobin wrote reassuredly, "Zionism and Jewish nationalism are not antithetical to democracy. On the contrary, they are an expression of a basic democratic value that prizes the right to self-determination by all peoples, including Jews."

One of the reasons for concern about the new government is if it is going to take a turn to the hard right, fueled by statements by someone like Avi Maoz, member of the Knesset, and head of the anti-LGBTQ Noam faction in Religious Zionism, who said he would work to legally abolish an annual Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem.

And another concern, to be honest, is discomfort with Bibi Netanyahu.

In light of this, it is important to share some facts that are underreported.

The day after the statements about abolishing the Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem, Netanyahu was widely quoted in the Israeli press and wanted it to be known that his government will not allow any change to the status quo regarding LGBTQ rights in the country, including limitations on gay pride parades.

I want to share a story with you about Netanyahu that contrasts with the prevailing image.

As many of you know, last week I was in Israel, where the outgoing Assistant Attorney General told an interesting story of something that had happened about a year earlier.

Without going into details about the specifics of a planned operation, he relayed a proposed action the military leaders wanted to undertake. Although the generals all felt it was a necessary operation, when asked his opinion, he said that it should not be undertaken because it violates international law, and did not conform to Israel's code of military conduct.

The generals objected and continued to press their case, but the attorney general held his ground and explained that on legal grounds, the operation should not be executed. After a tense standoff, the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who it was implied, was initially inclined to go along with the military's recommendation said, "We have heard the opinion of the Attorney General. He says we cannot carry it out. The discussion is over. It's been decided. Let's move on to the next matter."

A number of people have asked me this week what I think about the results of the Israeli election. In part, because I know that it isn't over until it is over, I have replied with a noncommittal response, "the people have spoken." I say this because I have confidence in the people of Israel, its elected officials and because I respect and accept the democratic will of the people, even when it may disappoint or not conform to my opinion.

I subscribe to the advice of Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, who said to the people of Israel prior to the election, "exercising our right to vote is the most prominent expression of democracy in its simplest and most necessary sense... We must not forget, even for a moment: those who think differently from us are not our enemies. Those who support a party that represents views and opinions we disagree with are not traitors or fifth-columnists. Disagreements are and will always be an integral part of the democratic landscape."

Addressing American Jews a day before the election President Herzog said, "The results may or may not be to your liking, but the vote of the Israeli people should be respected. To each and every one of you I say that the firm, vital connection between the State of Israel and North American Jewry will not, and should not, be compromised, whatever the results."

I suggest we heed the president's reasoned advice.

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