

Responding to Israel's Election Results without Anxiety

March 20, 2015 – *Parashat Vayyikra*

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In late January, we held a Shabbat dinner program, during which I explained Israeli elections procedure, so different from our own, and the Byzantine process of forming a governing coalition after the election. I suggested that we probably would not know how Israel would be governed until several weeks after the election.

I was wrong.

The election results were as clear as they were unexpected. Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud garnered a larger share of the votes than any single party has in many years, putting him in a position of tremendous power as the new government is formed. Even exit polls had predicted that Netanyahu's Likud Party and the left-of-center Zionist Union would emerge with parliamentary delegations of roughly equal numbers. The pollsters were correct about the size of the Zionist Union's delegation, but Likud won six seats more than its rival. Prime Minister Netanyahu may now form a new ruling coalition populated entirely with parties on his side of the political spectrum.

How should we respond to this unexpected result? What does it mean for the future of Israel, of the U.S.-Israel relationship, and of the relationship between Israelis and American Jews? How will a very bitter campaign further fracture a divided Israeli society? What are the prospects for peace?

First, we would do well to remember, and to celebrate, that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. Admittedly, Israeli democracy is imperfect: Unlike Arab citizens of Israel, Arabs who live in Occupied Territories aren't citizens and don't have the right to vote. Jews who live in the same Territories are Israeli citizens and do vote. That being said, no democracy in this world is perfect. Our own American democracy is fraught with voter-suppression laws and campaign finance that confer corrupting influence upon the wealthy and large corporations. Israel's imperfect democracy is infinitely preferable to the entirely fake democracies, monarchies, theocracies, and dictatorships that reign Israel's neighbors. Israel's Arab citizens voted in huge numbers in this election, and the United Arab List will be the third largest party faction in the new Knesset, a first in

the 67-year history of the Jewish State. Israel will be ruled, as it has been since the beginning, by the consent of the overwhelming majority of the governed.

At the same time, we may rightly be horrified by Prime Minister Netanyahu's strategy in the final days of the campaign. First, he repudiated his long-standing verbal, if only verbal, commitment to a two-state solution. The Prime Minister already yesterday pulled back from that particularly dangerous campaign rhetoric. I can't tell you whether to believe what Mr. Netanyahu said Monday or what he said Thursday.

Worse, and immorally, Prime Minister Netanyahu appealed to the basest instincts of some voters on election day itself, warning that Arab voters were streaming to the polls in large numbers, as if that were a bad thing. These Arab voters are citizens of Israel. Despite his attempts to explain his statement away, the Prime Minister's words were nothing short of race-baiting, unthinkable in most of the civilized world. We may be thankful that Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has cast himself as the President of all Israelis, expressing particular commitment to the well-being of Israel's Arab minority. In Israel, the President is largely a figure-head, but one with tremendous moral authority. The President will meet with the leader of each party elected to the Knesset in the days ahead, and then may be expected to invite Prime Minister Netanyahu to form a new government. President Rivlin will doubtless take the opportunity to insist on fairness for Israel's Arab citizens. The Prime Minister's racist rant on election day may even provoke a reckoning that would redound to the benefit of Israel's Arab citizens.

President Rivlin may remind Prime Minister Netanyahu of the offering that our ancestors had to bring to the ancient Temple after they had committed a sin. As Luke read tonight, first, the sinner had to make restitution, with an added penalty. Then, he had to bring a *korban*, usually translated 'sacrifice,' though the word comes from a root that means, "to draw near." Perhaps the President will compel the Prime Minister to treat Israeli Arabs as full citizens of the democratic Jewish State, with acts that draw them closer to the center of Israeli society and the Israeli body politic.

Or maybe not. Maybe I'm being a Pollyanna. Perhaps a new right-of center coalition will adopt extreme policies, diminishing the rights of Arabs within Israel and in the Territories, further isolating Israel from the rest of the world. Perhaps a Likud-led coalition that includes ultra-Orthodox parties will grant increasing

prerogatives to the already-powerful ultra-Orthodox, further diminishing religious liberty for non-Orthodox Israeli Jews. Perhaps tensions between the United States and Israel will rise. Perhaps American Jews will be alienated from Israel, as we see the Jewish State reflecting values we do not share and offering shabby treatment to Israelis who practice our Jewish faith as we do. Perhaps American Jews will be increasingly divided, and the language of our Israel-related debate will become even more vitriolic than it has been. Those who have opposed Israeli government action in the past have often been branded “anti-Israel,” while Netanyahu’s supporters have been called racist enemies of peace. Perhaps that divide will deepen, rendering that rhetoric harsher still.

I felt better after Wednesday night, after I heard post-election analysis from former long-time State Department official Aaron David Miller at the Central Conference of American Rabbis Convention. Miller, who advised both Republican and Democratic Secretaries of State, from James Baker to Colin Powell, provided me with a sense of calm about the future.

First, Miller asked us to be patient with Israel. He reminded us that the United States was not in better shape than Israel at the age of 67. When our nation was 67 years old, “chattel slavery” was the law in much of the land. Our political system was not yet solidified or stable, nor were our nation’s borders defined. Israel remains a young nation, in a very hostile neighborhood. The full development of democracy – and of defined, peaceful, and secure borders – may take some time.

Miller told us, from first-hand experience, that the history of the U.S.-Israel relationship has been fraught in the past: former U.S Presidents and Secretaries of State have been met with Israeli Prime Ministers they did not like, and vice versa. Not all were Yitzchak Rabin, of blessed memory, and Bill Clinton. Their affection was deep, said Miller, who personally witnessed President Clinton’s deep grief after Rabin’s assassination. Still, past Presidents and Prime Ministers who disliked one another found a way to work together in ways that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have not. Think Menachem Begin, of blessed memory, and Jimmy Carter, with Anwar Sadat at Camp David. At this point, our best hope may be that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu will “dial down” the rhetoric, said Miller. Hopefully, both realize that they have self-interested incentive to do that, though our President’s approach to Netanyahu since the election, while understandable, isn’t a good early sign.

Miller acknowledged that the peace process as we know it is dead, not only because of the Israeli election, but because there has long been no Palestinian leader prepared to be a partner for peace-making. In its place, Miller suggested that what he calls “positive transactions” could improve the situation in the Territories. With a comprehensive settlement off the table, perhaps the two sides can agree on borders, everywhere except in Jerusalem, with land swaps defined, Palestinians gaining autonomy in increased territory, and Israel ceasing settlement in areas designated for Palestinians.

For me, responding to the Israeli elections has been an exercise of two of the *middot*, the soul-traits, of *Mussar*, Jewish ethical practice. We need to practice patience – not only, as Miller suggested, with a nation that is only 67 years young, but also by not pre-judging what the new government will do. We may criticize the excesses of the Prime Minister’s campaign, while being careful to do so only in ways that are required to preserve our moral integrity. What we should not do is to criticize actions of an Israeli government that hasn’t even been formed.

Most important is the soul-trait of *bitachon*, or trust. *Mussar* teaches that we must do everything in our power to achieve good and moral results. In this instance, we must vote in the World Zionist Congress elections, which really do influence Israel in areas that include religious liberty and women’s rights. At the same time, we must acknowledge that our power is limited. *Bitachon*, trust, requires that we acknowledge that we cannot control the outcome of most situations in this world. Those of us who hoped for a new Israeli government had that lesson driven home hard this week. As we accept the limits of our power, we summon *bitachon*, trust, that whatever happens will be O.K.

On Wednesday night, Aaron David Miller reminded us that every step toward peace in Israel has been achieved by hawkish Prime Ministers, some of whose election brought despair to the same people who mourn Prime Minister Netanyahu’s reelection today: Menachem Begin, who bombed the King David Hotel, signed and implemented the Camp David Accords. Yitzchak Rabin, whom Miller reminded us had “broken bones during the first *intifadah*,” signed the Oslo Accords. Benjamin Netanyahu himself signed the Wye River agreement, the first to hand West Bank Territory over to Palestinian control. Ariel Sharon, considered by many to be a butcher, handed back the Gaza Strip. Who knows what a newly empowered Benjamin Netanyahu may do?

Perhaps the day for harsh criticism of the new Israeli government will come. Perhaps Prime Minister Netanyahu will surprise us. For this week, though, our response should be to marvel at the wonder of democracy, and to accept the will of the voters. Most importantly, we must live with *bitachon*, with trust. Neither we nor God could control the outcome of the elections. With God's help, let us trust that blessing will come to Israel, to the Jewish people everywhere, and to all the world.

Amen.