

Everything Is Personal

As Israel gears up for another general election, the nation appears to be fixated on something called leadership. There is endless talk about leadership, and candidates have placed the issue at the top of their campaign agendas: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud is now the “strong leader for a strong people,” while Labor’s Ehud Barak is calling for “credible leadership,” and Center Party head Yitzhak Mordechai has launched his prime-ministerial campaign with a sanguine promise of “different leadership.” As the bard wrote, the lady doth protest too much.

The problem is not leadership, but ideas. The political culture in Israel has deteriorated to a point where debate over goals and policies has ground to a halt, and the entire campaign has come down to the single sonnet of *personality*. Candidates who appear to have nothing of substance to distinguish themselves have resorted to peddling their personae on every billboard and atop every high mountain. Politics in Israel has become sport, free of fruitful discourse or noble goals, signifying nothing.

Take, for example, the long-awaited press conference in January, in which former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai announced his candidacy for the prime ministership on behalf of the new Center Party. For months, the party had been something of an enigma on the Israeli scene, as pundits and polls struggled to understand just what the new centrists were forwarding. Yet as Mordechai’s speech wore on, it became embarrassingly evident that they were forwarding very little at all. True, Mordechai spoke of “investment in education,” he declared that “peace is a strategic goal,” he

emphasized that his government would “safeguard Israel’s security,” he made it clear that he would work to “shrink social gaps” and to “advance the status of women.” Yet these statements were vacuous, endorsing no actual policies, nor even so much as a set of priorities, and could just as easily have been made—indeed, are constantly being made—by the leaders of both Labor and Likud. When asked why anyone should vote for him rather than, say, Ehud Barak, Mordechai starts talking about the “extremists” currently running the country, and about how centrist he is, and about who is most likely to defeat Netanyahu.

Mordechai is not alone. When Matan Vilna’i hung up his general’s uniform and entered the political fray last year, he flirted with at least three different political parties before finally settling on Labor, which announcement was accompanied by no mention of issues or ideas whatever. (In February, Labor voters rewarded his opacity by placing him near the top of the party Knesset list.) Moshe Arens announced his candidacy for Likud leadership not because of ideological disagreements or an objection to Netanyahu’s qualifications, but because he claimed he had a better chance at defeating Barak. The new Center Party, burdened with as many as four would-be prime ministers (in addition to Mordechai, party leaders Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, Dan Meridor and Roni Milo have all announced their candidacies at one point or another), resolved its internal power struggle by picking a candidate according to the dictates of a single public opinion poll. The abdication of ideology by Israel’s politicians has begotten its own set of slogans: As Ehud Barak’s protégé, Shlomo Lahiani, put it in a recent interview on Army Radio: “There is no difference today between Right, Center and Left; the only significance is in the leader’s personality.” Former Finance Ministry Director-General Aharon Fogel put it more pithily: “There is no Left or Right in politics ... only people.”

With politics stripped of its substance, we should not be surprised to find that the very word “political” has taken a semantic nosedive. In current Israeli idiom, the political is now synonymous with disingenuousness, opportunism and a lack of professional integrity. On one level, the usage produces bizarre

statements by politicians, such as Ehud Barak's dismissing MK Hagai Merom's decision to leave the Labor Party as a "political decision." But it comes in a more ominous form as well: The call for the "de-politicization" of an increasing number of areas of government, which supposedly ought to be handled not by politicians, but by experts, who, it is assured, can do the job in a more "objective" manner. Although Israelis have always believed in an "apolitical" judiciary and chief rabbinate, in the past few years the public has widened its demands for apolitical governance: The attorney-general, a position created in order to protect the interests of government in the courts, has been transformed into a judicial agent, protecting the interests of the courts in government. The Prime Minister's media advisor, Aviv Bushinsky, was recently censured for *arguing* on behalf of government policy when he appeared on national television, rather than just "explaining" it. Things have reached the point that in a recent ad appearing in the *Yedi'ot Aharonot* newspaper, sometime entertainer Dudu Topaz tried—in all seriousness—to "depoliticize" the question of how to vote in the Tel Aviv mayoral election. "I struggled with the question of which candidate to vote for.... It was clear to me that political views were not the issue. There is no connection between the man's political views and his ability to run a city."

It should go without saying that such statements miss the entire point of representative government; if what we want is to have the country run by people who are not motivated by electoral concerns, what is the point of having a democracy? But more important for our purposes is not the political theory of it as much as what it says about the state of our political culture: We are witnessing a deepening crisis of faith among the citizenry toward political ideology as such—a development which can only bode ill for the future of the Israeli polity.

Why is this happening?

The main reason has to do with the profound disappointment in political ideology that Israelis have suffered over the past two decades. This feeling is little discussed and complex in origin, but it can largely be traced to two events in Israel's history, in which a revered leader has, at a critical moment, abandoned an entire career of commitment to an idea, adopting suddenly the platform of his rivals—without so much as an apology, or a vote of no confidence as punishment.

The first case happened in 1979, when Prime Minister Menachem Begin agreed to the Camp David accords, returning the entirety of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in exchange for a peace treaty. Begin, more than anyone else, had built his political life on the belief that “not one inch” of land taken in the Six Day War should return to Arab hands. Camp David was no momentary loss of nerve or expedient compromise: Without warning, Begin adopted (and permanently enshrined) the idea of “land for peace” which he had so long abjured, and as a result “not one inch” remained in Israeli hands. He did not resign for betraying his voters. Nor did anyone ask him to. After a moment of shock, Begin's own ideological peers accepted the *fait accompli*, and dutifully donned the emperor's new clothes themselves.

Fourteen years later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin did more or less the same thing. The leader identified with an iron-fist policy against Palestinian terror, who taught the West that the only way to defeat terrorism was by *never* negotiating with its perpetrators, suddenly and completely reversed himself, recognizing the PLO and negotiating what became the Oslo accords. Again, he was not sacked as Labor leader, nor did his government fall; he was praised as a hero by his party—a party which had relied heavily upon his hawkish repute in order to come to power in the first place.

At issue is not whether Camp David and Oslo were right or wrong, but what such monumental reversals do to the public's faith in politics. After

leaders as beloved as Begin and Rabin violated their sacred trust, how *can* anyone have faith in political ideas? How can a voting citizen ever again pin his hopes for the national future upon a strong, dynamic, content-driven leader? Twice fooled and still smarting, many Israelis are reluctant to walk down that road again.

This crisis of faith has been reinforced in recent years by a second factor, a widespread acceptance of a belief which has been gaining currency throughout the West, particularly in Europe: That of the “end of ideology.” Israeli opinionmakers have adopted wholesale the idea that the era of ideological politics is over, and that what counts now is competent, professional management of the affairs of state. Statements like those of Lahiani and Fogel are common coin in Europe: Herve de Charette, one of the leaders of the Center-Right opposition in France, recently declared that politics “is no longer a question of the Left versus the Right, but of one team in power and one that prepares to replace it.” In Germany, Gerhard Schroeder’s Social Democrats came to power on an anti-ideological platform, appropriately calling themselves the “New Center.” In English-speaking countries, Clintonites and Blairites speak of a “Third Way,” by which they mean one freed from the burden of a cohesive worldview. California’s new governor, Gray Davis, is the latest Third Way acolyte: Since ideologies no longer matter, Davis saw nothing strange in campaigning on a combined Right-Left platform, depicting himself laconically as a “tough-minded and broad-hearted” leader.

There is nothing new here. Every few decades, a frost of conceptual exhaustion blankets the political arena, bringing with it a longing for the technocrat, someone to run the country in a more or less competent fashion and make sure that the problem of governance is “taken care of.” In the wake of World War II, Western voters turned to leaders whom they considered to be “above ideology.” In Italy and France, conservatives and Communists joined to form governing coalitions based on technocracy; in the United States, Earl Warren’s worldview-free campaign in 1947 earned him the gubernatorial nomination in California from both the Democratic and Republican parties.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, a number of books were published proclaiming the new era, most notably Daniel Bell's 1960 *The End of Ideology*—only to be falsified by the ideological upheavals of the Left in the 1960s, and the Right in the 1980s. And now, with both Communism and welfare-socialism all but defeated, the Left has found itself without a plausible ideology, and the Right is without plausible foes to fight. The “end of ideology,” it turns out, is the pretty face being put on the paradigmatic meltdown of Western politics.

So the Israeli public has grown cynical, licking its wounds and spurning anyone who would offer a comprehensive vision for the country. Ideology is gone (the Europeans said so), and good riddance. Better to find a leader with character, with punch, with a good agent. Politicians have been quick to respond, suppressing anything that might be mistaken for a worldview, offering “personality” alone as their saving grace—and hoping that no one will notice how boring personalities are when bereft of ideas.

Democracies depend on fruitful political debate to be effective. Institutions such as freedom of speech and press, party politics and parliamentary rules all assume a vibrant public discourse, in which ideas can be weighed and tested against the national interest. By allowing the free competition of opinions, democracy makes us wiser, not just freer. But these institutions cannot guarantee that debate, any more than universal suffrage can guarantee that citizens will vote on election day. When opinion leaders refuse to engage the debate; when they have given up on political ideas, looking instead for the end of ideology and apolitical national management; when elected politicians are denigrated by virtue of their being politicians, even as they are representing the desires of their voters, then democracy itself is spurned, and ultimately endangered.

With two months remaining before the elections, Israeli political discourse is in a shambles. Not one of the three main candidates for prime minister has articulated a political platform to distinguish him from the rest. No visions, no programs. At the same time, the list of national problems in

search of remedy becomes increasingly long and urgent. If the present candidates refuse to supply answers to the country's most pressing questions, it should not be difficult to find others who will. As demand for substance rises, so will its supply.

Democracies do not die with a bang, but with a long and sustained whimper, a deterioration of public consciousness to the point where only a shell remains, and something else is sought to fill it. What Israel needs is to rediscover the virtues of ideology and the clash of ideas. More politics, not less.

Ofir Haivry, for the Editors
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AZURE notes with sorrow the death of Zalman C. Bernstein, a founder of the Shalem Foundation, and one of the most devoted friends and partners of the Shalem Center and AZURE. Zalman was a man of exceptional gifts: Intelligence, creativity, wisdom, warmth, and humor—these only begin the list. During the prime decades of his phenomenally successful business career, his many gifts were devoted to building Sanford C. Bernstein & Co., where he revolutionized the way investments are made in New York; the last decades of his life were devoted to revolutionizing the way philanthropy is conducted in Jerusalem.

Zalman was an enthusiastic and visionary exponent of a restored Jewish state, rejuvenated by Jewish nationality, religion, and ideas, and drawing strength from the liberty and faith of its citizens. He worked hand in hand with us to make the vision we shared into a reality. We miss and mourn him.

—*The Editors*