Adam Garfinkle

Israel the Improbable

Folk-song writer, witty Korean War veteran, and latter-day troubadour of the Wobblies, U. "Utah" Phillips, once said: "If elections could really change anything, they'd be illegal." Phillips has written some fine songs, but his political cynicism is overwrought. Elections do matter, at least some of the time. Israelis certainly believe they do, or they wouldn't consistently roll up voter participation levels near 80 percent. That they did again on May 17, when Israel elected its fifteenth Knesset and made a former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, Ehud Barak, the new prime minister.

In every Knesset election after the first one on January 25, 1949, Israelis have expressed the firm conviction that each successive national polling was the most important in the history of the state. This belief has expressed more than just the standard conceit of the contemporary. It has actually been true, which helps explain the high voter turnout. But it also hints at something more deeply embedded in Israel's nature—namely, that Israel is an improbable place. Consider some of the evidence.

The Jewish people, while enduring a 1,800-year historical discontinuity from normal political life, remained a single people despite being exiled to the four corners of the earth and speaking a hundred different daily languages. They then managed to restore their sovereignty over the same land, speaking pretty much the same language, and holding the same basic faith as when the exile began in 135 C.E. In the meantime, world Jewry survived, barely, the most systematic attempt at genocide in modern history, and just a few years later defended its nascent independence against seemingly impossible odds. Israel also became, and has remained, a vibrant democracy despite the fact that neither the experience of its founders nor any of its cul-

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tural antecedents—religious or otherwise—disposed Israeli politics in that direction. And in just over a half-century of independence, Israel raised itself from the ranks of the Third World to the First, its economy now exceeding that of all its immediate neighbors—Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, and Lebanon *combined*.

What is even more improbable is that Israel did all this without ever managing to agree internally how to reconcile the religious civilization that gave it seminal definition with the national idea—Zionism—that, at long last, brought it back into being. Nor has there ever been agreement on the ideal frontiers of the state, the purpose of the state, how to relate to the majority of Jews not living in the state, or, for that matter, even on the definition of a Jew. Israel has also held fifteen national elections without a speckle of depredation cast on its democratic credentials, but Israelis have never been able to agree on primary political principles long enough to write out, let alone ratify, a constitution.

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It is because Israel is so improbable that every national election seems so important. The country's inherent intensity is borne on a hope that one day the country's improbability will give way to the normal, the typical, and the regular—indeed, to the probable. Thus they hope, because living the improbable national life, though sometimes exhilarating, is also dangerous, nerve-wracking, and now and again exudes hints of impermanence.

There is no mystery as to the core element of this hope: It is the issue of war and peace, which for Israel has always been a literally existential matter. In short, Israelis vote with a sense of portent and solemnity (sometimes also anger and frustration) because each time they do, they hope that those put in charge will find a way to transform the improbable into that moment when Israel's normal future will be stamped with its defining characteristics. This is why the country's national anthem, *Hatiqvah* ("The Hope"), has always been such a nifty symbolic double entendre.

In recent time, there has been reason to hope for the twilight of Israel's uncomfortable improbability. Its beginnings were small, starting with surreptitious and limited cooperation with Jordan, Morocco, and a few other Arab states in the 1960s. Then came a major breakthrough: peace with Egypt in 1979. That was followed by the very public Madrid Conference of October 1991, and then the very private success of the Oslo track in August 1993, which together assembled for the first time the practical modalities of a

comprehensive peace. Then came Oslo II of September 1995, which suggested that, despite all its problems, the Israeli-Palestinian peace track carried vehicles in only one direction only. But, as it turned out in June 1996, it did so a little too fast and loose to suit a majority of Israelis, who elected Benyamin Netanyahu to slow the train down and take more care with vehicular security.

Netanyahu's shorter-than-expected tenure was quite exasperating, even for his supporters. He slowed the train down to a crawl, seemed congenitally unsure of which track to take, and proved incapable of getting his crew to stop arguing long enough to do much work. The passengers, fuming over the delays and disgusted with the general lack of civility on board, decided on May 17 to change engineers.

An Improbable Election

But this most recent Israeli election, too, was improbable. So was the campaign that preceded it and the process of coalition assembly that followed.

Ehud Barak has only been in politics for about four years, succeeding Shimon Peres as Labor party leader after Peres failed in 1996 to extend the late Yitzhak Rabin's 1992 mandate. Barak's performance as opposition leader during Netanyahu's tenure was almost universally adjudged to be lackluster, and as recently as December, when the Netanyahu government fell, the smart money in the United States as well as in Israel was on Netanyahu to succeed himself. Not only that, but even the head of the new Center (Merkaz) Party, former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordecai (joined by former chief-of staff Amnon Shahak, former Likud finance minister Dan Meridor, and former Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo, among others) was expected to do better than Barak.

And yet Barak won by a smashing margin, 56 to 44 percent. Not only that, he carried nearly every constituency in the country: Russian and Ethiopian immigrants as well as sabras; Ashkenazim and Sephardim; men and women; Jews and Arabs. The only groups he did not carry were the Orthodox and settlers in the West Bank and Gaza.

Moreover, until May 16, most observers assumed that there would be no first-round winner, for there were five candidates for prime minister vying to attract a majority of the votes. The need for a run-off, many believed, would deliver an advantage to Netanyahu. But at the last minute Mordecai dropped out, as did Benny Begin representing the right-wing, and Azmi Bishara, the first Israeli Arab to run for prime minister.

That was not all that was odd about the campaign. Unlike all of its predecessors, this one was almost devoid of serious debate, and nearly empty of

ideas. No doubt this owed much to widespread concern over how coarse and divisive Israeli politics had become, and the deep desire of the country to turn down the volume and oust those they took to be responsible for it. But the Americanization of the Israeli election process also played a role in this. In 1996, the first time Israelis voted directly for prime minister, only the Likud exalted an American campaign consultant to the top of its brain trust, one Arthur Finkelstein. This time, the Labor Party—redubbed as One Israel thanks to its absorbing the Gesher faction of former Likud foreign minister David Levy and the small pro-peace Orthodox group, Meimad—also joined the fray. At Barak's side was none other than President Bill Clinton's chief pollster, Stan Greenberg, and Clinton's key political adviser, James Carville. The television ads were slicker than ever, the slogans more polished than ever, and the intellectual content of the campaign more vacuous than ever.

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Even more interesting, however, is that careful analysis of the electorate revealed that for the first time ever, peace and security issues were not foremost in the minds of voters. Some were more concerned about the economic downturn than had engulfed the country. Many were exercised over the religious-secular divide, which has grown rhetorically more pointed in recent years despite research showing that, objectively, the polarization of Israeli society is not as sharp as many Israeli political impresarios like to make out. Why was this the case?

Some observers have argued that Barak and Netanyahu are cut from more or less the same cloth when it comes to peace process issues, and if that is so then it follows that voters had little to choose or argue over on that score. Netanyahu, coming from the right, has reluctantly come to believe that some sort of land-for-peace deal was inevitable, and, indeed, he led his party to offload the goal of Greater Israel from its historical platform. Barak, coming from the left, is widely known as a Labor hawk. While in Rabin's cabinet he abstained in the vote on Oslo II, and his reason sounded a lot like Netanyahu's reason for thinking the Oslo approach a mistake: that Israel was foolish to give up territorial assets in an interim process, before coming to final-status negotiations. Netanyahu's maps and Barak's maps for a territorial settlement were said to be more or less the same maps, and the country was aware that, as of January 1997, Labor and Likud Knesset factions had worked out a near consensus on final-status issues.

It is true that Israel is more united on fundamental foreign and security

policy issues than ever before. Political and strategic realities have led nearly everyone, whatever their inclinations, down a funnel from the wide end to the narrow, in which Israel's real choices are bunched ever closer together. But it is wrong to make too much out of similarities between Netanyahu and Barak. Aside from real substantive disagreements, their tones are diametrically different and their political styles are totally at odds. Netanyahu inclines to divide and conquer, to accumulate the grievances of others and then direct them back at his adversaries. Barak inclines to unite and guide, to reduce alienation and disarm his adversaries. Tone and style count for a lot in politics, and they count for even more in diplomacy. Netanyahu was never able to convey to any Arabs that he respected and trusted them, and so he garnered disrespect and mistrust in return. Despite signing the Hebron and Wye agreements, he was never able to convince Yasir Arafat or Palestinians in general that his heart was really in the enterprise, that he really wanted or expected it to succeed. Barak starts with no such crippling disadvantages, and many assets.

A Divided Knesset

If the campaign was peculiar, the election results were also a little surprising. Not only was the margin of Barak's victory a shock, the distribution of Knesset votes was also unanticipated. Labor (One Israel) got only 20.2 percent of the vote, good for only 26 of the Knesset's 120 seats—a loss of eight seats from the 1996 election. Likud got only 14.1 percent, good for 19 seats, a loss of 13 seats. For the first time in Israeli history the two largest blocs failed between them to get a majority of Knesset seats—and they fell 16 short! (They used to average about 80 seats.) Shas got 17 seats, nearly as many as Likud, and the anticlerical Shinui Party came out of nowhere and got 6 seats, as many as the vaunted Center Party.

This points up a mighty historical oddity. For all of Israel's experience, until now, disagreement on policy and ideology was active, but political power was allocated in stable fashion. Now, there is a working consensus not only on foreign and security policy issues, but even ideological disputes have mellowed. There are no more doctrinaire socialists in Israel, everyone pays homage to the goal of privatization, and there remains not even a single kibbutz left in which children sleep separately from their parents. But at the same time, political stability has given way to a virtual tribalization of politics. Thirty-three parties qualified to run for Knesset, more than ever before, and 15 parties made it into Knesset, four more than in the previous Knesset.

There are at least two obvious reasons for this; two others are more elusive. First, the change in the election law, brainchild of the best and the

brightest of Tel Aviv University's Law School which was supposed to reduce the fragmentation of the Knesset, has done the reverse. Second, the threshold to get into Knesset—just 1.5 percent of the vote—is too low. Third, the impressive capacity of Shas to unify and articulate the interests of the Sephardi community represents its more advanced integration into the Israeli political system, as does the enhanced skills and political success of Israeli Arabs. The rhetoric suggests greater polarization, but the reality of their political clout suggests the reverse.

Fourth and probably most important, the *raison d'etre* of the old party structure has simply come unglued. With security policy and ideology no longer as important in shaping political affinities, it is natural that party alignments find themselves in transition. Israel has many social and even philosophical issues to work out, and they may be harder to handle ultimately than Israel's Arab neighbors. As the sense of external siege slowly lifts, the contradictions of Zionism and the Yishuv, long set aside in the face of clear and present dangers, are now rising to the fore. Some elements of the old party structure are better suited to engage coherently on such issues than others. That is why the political right in Israel got clobbered in this election, because its platform looked incoherent next to on-rushing realities. In the fourteenth Knesset, Likud, the National Religious Party, and Moledet had among them 43 seats; in the fifteenth Knesset the parties of the right outside the government have only 27.

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Even the process of forming a new government has been improbable. First of all, it took longer than ever. The new Knesset was sworn in before the new government was assembled; that had never happened before. Second, the prime minister-elect was, for nearly seven weeks, the quietest man in the country. That also has never happened before.

Barak played his cards close to his chest, operating exactly like the general he is. He waited for the targets of his attention to reveal their circumstances and interests before he revealed his own. He knew the price of admission he needed from the smaller parties in return for their access to the state budget, and he secured that price in every case. He knew what he wanted—a broad coalition that would avoid the fragility of the Rabin, Peres, and Netanyahu governments before him, and that would help bring the country together—and he got it: seventy five votes plus ten more implicit in the Arab parties, and eight more implicit in the Shinui and the One Nation parties. And by simply keeping his mouth shut, he has managed to bring

down the feverish political temperature in the country, a blessing perhaps equal to all others.

For a man that so many had counted down and out only six months ago, this is an impressive achievement. There may be others to come.

Planning for Peace

Everyone knows that Prime Minister Barak is very smart, but he has an even more useful trait: he is a meticulous planner. Now in office, he still knows what he wants, and he knows his order of battle. He wants first to focus on the peace process, and he wants to focus on the Syrian track before the Palestinian one so that success in the former will yield pressure on the latter. He wants to repair relations with Egypt, Jordan, and the United States for such purposes, if not also others. And once that is all set firmly in motion, he wants to tackle Israel's internal discomforts, its self-doubt and excessive self-criticism, and thus deal with the toll all of that is taking on the military and the younger generation as a whole.

Will he succeed? As to the peace process, it is unlikely that the Syrian track will yield a quick dividend. If Barak tests Hafiz al-Asad, he will find Asad as ever unwilling to make peace, no matter how generous the Israeli offer. Once he comes back to Arafat, his engaging tone is most likely to produce just enough forward motion that the two sides will only come that much quicker to realize that a fully successful final status negotiation is impossible. Even with the best of intentions—and certainly with others—Netanyahu would have brought Israel the same result. The difference is that the world would have blamed Israel despite the Palestinians' more-than-ample contributions to the impasse, while now it is far more likely to blame Arafat. The best we can expect is a higher-quality level of belligerence in Israeli-Arab relations and hope that the next generation can do better. But in the Middle East, even small mercies are better than none at all.

As to Israel's internal circumstances, its serenity, and its soul, there is only so much any one politician can do. Despite the hoary religious mythology of all Jews being descended from the bloodline of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the truth is that modern Israel has one of the most genetically heterogeneous populations in the world. More important, it has had only a half-century as an independent state to create a synthesis of many diverse traditions, visions, and experiences. This takes time and it causes growing pains. Israel might ultimately fail at achieving this synthesis; certainly, Jewish history is replete with examples of Jews not getting along with each other, to the general detriment of all concerned. But if it succeeds, no one should expect it to happen so soon. That would be most improbable.