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The path forward for liberal Zionism

This government can't be changed, but the foundations can be laid for a broad, new social coalition with a different vision for Israel

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Israeli worker making flags of Israel at the Berman's Flags and Embroidery factory, Jerusalem on April 27, 2020 (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

On November 1, 2022, Israel's voters spoke. The verdict of the majority, however slender, was to put into power the most ultra-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox government in Israel's history.

As lovers of Israel, we have long recognized the complexity of Israel's situation and challenges. And so we, to some extent, accepted as inevitable the gap between the Israel that is and the Israel we long for. Now, though, we

can no longer rely on the argument of “it’s complicated.” In its coalition agreements, statements and intended policies on issues ranging from the future of the Supreme Court and democracy to massive settlement expansion to changing the Law of Return, this government is not complicated. It is simply indefensible.

How, then, to respond?

We can try to argue that some of the proposed coalition policies are illegitimate and exceed the government’s mandate. Or that the voters were misled. Or that current polls show that a majority oppose the government’s direction. This discourse, however, is futile and unconstructive. Parties and politicians are not bound by their platforms, nor by the vague policy statements presented during election campaigns.

We liberals, after all, accepted Benny Gantz’s decision to join Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition during the period of the Covid epidemic, just as we then accepted Naftali Bennett’s decision to eschew the right and build a national unity government with the center and left to avoid yet another election cycle.

In the end, we vote for individuals in whom we place our trust and accept that changing circumstances and coalition exigencies require policy and at times even ideological adjustments. If we do not support the direction our representatives choose, we can protest, and most importantly, vote differently in the next election.

The current government has a stable majority, and under Prime Minister Netanyahu, is well coordinated and unified. Liberal Zionists have to come to terms with the fact that there is very little we can do to influence actual policy. The mandate of the coalition is to rule and legislate, and regardless of how many people show up at demonstrations, those will likely have little impact.

So what can the liberal Zionist community do besides wait for the next election, which may not necessarily yield different results?

An alternative coalition

Some argue for separation from Israel entirely, others for boycotting government representatives, not paying taxes or serving in the army. I believe we have a third option. Protests are critical to claim a public space for a different vision of Judaism and Zionism. To not allow those values we abhor to be “normalized,” let alone dominate the Israeli ethos.

However, demonstrations, which principally attract members of the opposition, are not a theory of societal transformation. Beyond protesting, we need to build an alternative coalition that will encompass liberals from left to right, Jews and Arabs, Orthodox, traditional and secular. A broad social unity coalition that will ensure that the next election will yield a different result.

How can this broad coalition be built? Given the current demographic trends, is it even possible? Aren't the ultra-nationalists and ultra-Orthodox impervious to liberal arguments?

In fact, societal transformation doesn't require that we “convert” them into liberal Jews. We simply need to neutralize their power by creating an alternate power base. Consider the numbers. To build a new broad coalition, we need to *solidify the liberal base, which according to the election results is currently around forty percent, and shift ten percent of liberal-leaning Jews, who for various reasons like security concerns voted for non-liberal parties, back to the liberal camp. At the same time, we need to win over an additional five percent of Israeli Arab Palestinians (in addition to those who currently support Mansour Abbas' Ra'am party, which was part of the previous coalition).* This block of sixty percent can constitute a new political power base for the Israel we yearn for. This coalition should then reach out and invite those within the ultra-Orthodox parties to join under terms that seeks compromise between their values and ours.

One crucial precondition for creating this new broad coalition is to cease the discourse of despair that is spreading throughout the liberal Zionist community. The elections were determined by a mere 30,000 votes, while 150,000 votes on the liberal side were lost due to the Knesset threshold law coupled with poor leadership and planning within the center and left. We need to internalize and take comfort from the fact that forty percent of Israeli Jews voted for parties with Zionist liberal agendas. These include issues of state of religion – from breaking the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate, liberalizing conversion and kashrut certification, loosening Shabbat regulations, expanding women’s and LGBTQ rights, protecting the independence of the Supreme Court, and for the first time in Israel’s history, actively embracing Israeli Arab Palestinians as full coalition partners. Our first task, then, is to strengthen the “converted,” mobilize and equip them with the tools to reach beyond their base.

As for supporters of the government, at least ten percent, though right-wing on issues of settlements and security, and who believe that Netanyahu (and for some Ben Gvir) can be best trusted to protect Israel, nevertheless share many of the liberal commitments of the center and left. A substantial modern Orthodox sector within the religious Zionist community supports gender equality, LGBTQ rights and religious diversity for the sake of Jewish unity. In the current partisan political reality, they gravitated to the Religious Zionist party, dominated by illiberal and ultra-nationalist forces, as a default option.

Similarly, within the voters of the Likud – the historic base for classical liberalism – there are many for whom Smotrich and Ben Gvir are abhorrent and who look at the current coalition agreements with disdain.

Finally, Israeli Arab Palestinians, who routinely and overwhelmingly poll at expressing the desire to be part of Israeli society, have yet to politically step forward. Believing that they are destined for marginalization, they vote at rates twenty percent lower than their Jewish counterparts and many of those who do vote support anti-Zionist politicians, who, unlike Mansour Abbas, are unacceptable partners for Zionist parties.

Key impediments

Solidifying the forty percent liberal base and winning over new allies will require a multi-faceted campaign with multiple methodologies, including political and communal organizing, extensive and innovative media and social media campaigns, political, lay, educational, and religious leadership development, and scalable educational initiatives. It will require cooperation across a broad range of institutions, and the creation of new networks and coalitions similar in scope to the Israeli Jewish “renewal” movement, which strengthened Jewish identity and study among secularists helping overcome entrenched “anti-Jewish” sentiments within the secular population.

Effort and organization alone, however, will not suffice. We need to concentrate on overcoming the key impediments preventing or limiting the formation of a broad liberal national coalition. The first are the ideological and psychological barriers within the liberal Jewish right (and some on the left), especially among its religious and traditional sectors, to trusting and cooperating with Israeli Arab Palestinians. On the Israeli Arab Palestinian side, the fear is that accepting Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people will require them to relinquish their identity, rights and narrative.

New and creative efforts at building shared society and mutual respect between Israeli Jews and Arabs need to be launched.

The second impediment is the current language of liberal values that is alienating to right-wingers. One of the consequences of partisan discourse is that we increasingly speak to ourselves in ways that resonate only with the converted. To broaden the liberal coalition there is a critical need to identify which liberal values have become partisan issues, (e.g., Jewish/democratic, equality, state of all its citizens, limitations on the will of the majority) and develop new ways of articulating them, and at times be open to moderating them. Jewish sources will play a key role in this process.

Third, a major factor in the current partisan culture is the erection of misplaced boundaries and red lines that only serve to consolidate opposition and hinder cross-ideological cooperation. Difference is an essential aspect of

every social structure. The key to social cohesion is not the creation of greater uniformity, but in developing better ways to accommodate differences. A broad liberal national coalition is possible only through the clarification of shared values, while at the same time allowing for disagreements on the values and policies we cannot share. Ultra-nationalism and even racist ideologies and figures have been mainstreamed simply because they stand on the right side of the “Bibi/not-Bibi” divide.

We are not powerless

When boundaries are mislocated, they create inappropriate bedfellows and prevent movement from one side to the next. A general rule for drawing red lines is that they cannot exclude major parts of one’s society, and they need to clearly reflect broad consensual principles. In social life and coalition building it is critical to distinguish between opinions, and values on the one hand, and boundaries on the other. Voting for Bibi or against Bibi cannot be the line distinguishing between those committed to democracy and the rule of law, and those who do not, between those who are loyal Israelis and those who are not. The new liberal national coalition needs to present value propositions and new red lines that can reach out across partisan lines. Failure to do so will doom all efforts at healing and cooperation.

At the same time, we need to plan for the future and develop a bipartisan legislative agenda and position papers that reflect a liberal Zionist agenda, but will not alienate partners on the liberal right and in the Israeli Arab Palestinian communities. Currently, legislative agendas are zero-sum games. A broad national coalition needs to be built on dialogue and compromise, and the groundwork for this needs to be laid in advance.

The path forward for liberal Zionists is not about exercising political power today, but working to acquire it tomorrow. The outcome of the election has placed the majority of liberal Zionists in the opposition. Given Israel’s system of government, in which the makeup of the coalition mirrors the decisive votes in the Knesset, the opposition is devoid of power. Focusing only on

trying to change government policy at this point will only generate ever greater alienation.

But we are not powerless. We have the ability to help shape and influence the future values and ideologies of Israel's citizens. We have the power to lay the foundations for a new and broad social coalition with a different vision for Israel. This coalition needs to be formed nurtured and equipped with the ideology, language, leadership, and vision to recapture the imagination of the majority of Israeli society. The struggle will be slow and difficult, but there is no alternative to long-term change.