

# THE ISRAELI ZIONIST LEFT:

## Sources of Failure and Renewal

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## INTRODUCTION

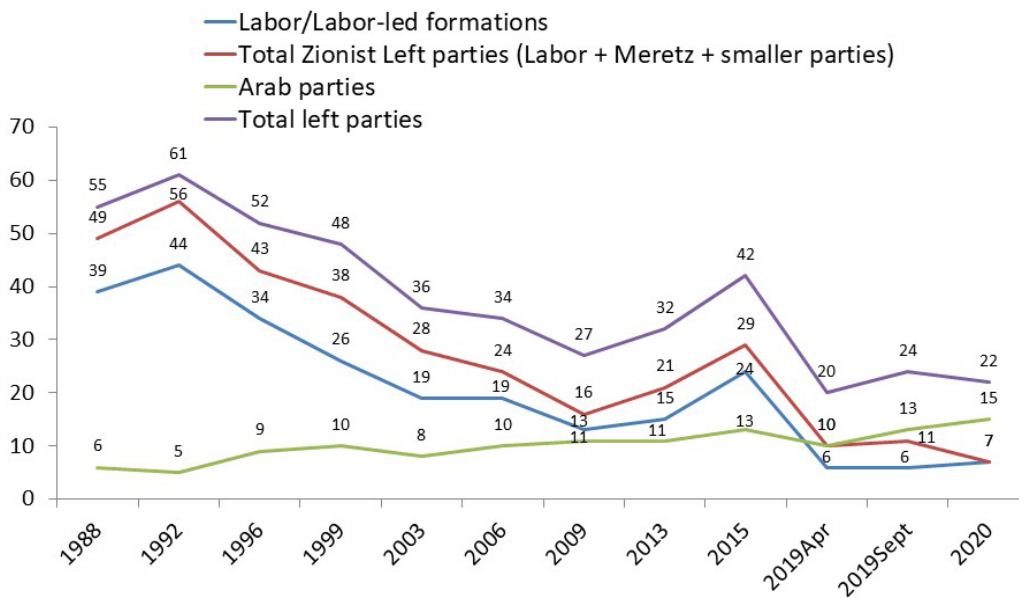
On the eve of Israeli elections in March 2020, the chief editor of the far-left website +972 Magazine wrote that the poor showing predicted for the single left-wing Zionist party, a slate made up of Labor, Meretz and Gesher, “is more than simply a testament to the slow, sluggardly death of the Zionist left. It is a testament to an entire worldview in crisis.” (Konrad 2020)

In the electoral sphere, the Israeli left has been on a long decline over decades. The Labor party presided over Israel’s government from the first election in 1949, for nearly three decades. Following its first loss in 1977, Labor (the continuation of earlier political parties Mapai and Maarach) began a slow decline, which accelerated from the 1990s. The combined total of all left-wing parties fell precipitously from the 1990s onward.

success of the Joint List. Therefore, the examination of the decline of the left begins with the collapse of the Jewish-Zionist left.

Numerous explanations for the decline range from what might be called a primordial approach – a deeply nationalist and perhaps ultimately illiberal nature of the Israeli political culture – to a historic focus on the failure of the peace process with the Palestinians from the 1990s. Other explanations look at failures of the political system, poor strategic decisions of left-wing parties, old or failing internal party institutions, weak or inappropriate leaders of the left or poor political campaigns? <sup>(1)</sup>

### Left wing electoral strength (Knesset seats)



Israeli election results - Knesset website, Israel Democracy Institute, Wikipedia. Graph: Dahlia Scheindlin

During the decades of the decline for the Zionist left, parties representing Arab voters began a slow, uneven rise from the 1990s onward, gathering momentum from 2015. By March 2020, the elections yielded the worst results for Israeli Zionist left-wing parties in the history of the country (just seven seats), but the highest-ever vote for the Joint List, an Arab-majority party (15 seats). In 2020, the entire bloc of left-wing parties received 22 seats, just above the all-time low in April 2019 (20 seats in total) – but the rise was due only to the

(1) Disclosure: The author is a political consultant who has advised four electoral campaigns for the Labor party or Labor-led formations, in 1999, 2001 (special elections for Prime Minister representing the Labor party), 2006, 2015. She has advised four other campaigns in Israel – for Meretz, HaTnuah, the Democratic Union, and Joint List.

This paper does not seek to provide an additional explanation. Instead, the primary question is what exactly did Israelis reject? What did the Israeli Jewish and Zionist left-wing parties and political movements represent in Israel, which has now been largely abandoned? How has the meaning of “left” wing evolved alongside Israeli politics and society, and what does it mean today? Perhaps most importantly, what are the values, ideas and organizing principles that can guide a different vision for Israel in the future?

The findings show a straightforward problem with the Israeli Zionist left:

- Historically, the parties and major social institutions representing the stated ideology of the left behaved in ways that contradicted their goals. The result was that the very populations who could have expected to be included, either in the early years or as target constituencies for electoral growth over time, were left out.
- In the social and economic sphere, left-wing institutions conveyed a commitment to a socialist egalitarian “model” society while creating an ethno-economic underclass and structural social inequalities.
- On the national front, left-wing leaders represented the idea of a Jewish, democratic state living in peace. While left-wing goals regarding land, territory, peace and concessions evolved alongside historical events, left-wing parties often contributed to suppression of equality/entrenchment of inequality between Jews and Arabs in Israel, while undermining its own peace efforts by advancing the settlement project in conquered territories.
- The left became increasingly associated with the peace process and a two-state solution in 2000s, but as this solution collapsed and a populist right-wing nationalism swept the country, the left-wing political parties became paralyzed and fearful of advancing or even defending their stated commitment to two states. In lieu of strong political representation and because parties remained wedded to an increasingly obsolete ideology, a new generation of activism emerged within civil society to fill the void left by ineffective political parties and grapple with ideological questions of the left.
- The younger generation of left-wing activists has cultivated human rights, civil rights, equality, Jewish Arab partnership within Israel, largely outside the party framework.
- The values of equality and partnership hold greater potential to win support within Israel. They represent a fresh ideological direction that remains faithful to left-

wing values, but which hold widespread appeal and reflect a range of social concerns, beyond the occupation. Yet these values can ultimately, if indirectly, steer Israel back towards a just political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, end of military occupation, and national equality between Jews and Palestinians in the region.

In the following examination, the electoral system provides a concrete manifestation of left wing (or any) ideology as well as an empirical indicator of how such ideas perform in society. But politics interact with and reflect the public opinion, and civil society, which are brought into the analysis accordingly.

The goal of this analysis is not to revive, rebrand, or re-name the left-wing political “camp,” or theorize about the route to electoral victory. Rather, the overriding goal of any social movement is to change the direction of the country.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY: THE EARLIEST YEARS (1947-1977)**

From 1947 – 1967, Israel’s founding leaders represented a national ideological vision for shaping a Jewish and democratic society. From the first election in 1949 to 1977, Mapai and later the Alignment (the forerunners of today’s Labor party, established in 1968), won all elections. Continuing their hegemony in the pre-state years, those parties and their institutions would advance the vision of socialist egalitarian society within Israel, espousing a romantic commitment to agrarian production and values of social solidarity.

In 1947, the founding leaders accepted the partition of historic Palestine. The decision was made reluctantly, driven by political pragmatism at the international level. But dividing the land provided a more manageable territory in which to engineer a Jewish demographic majority (See Ross and Makovsky 2019, and Segev 2019, for a close historic examination of David Ben Gurion’s dilemma regarding partition).

But even in the smaller land, the only route to Jewish demographic certainty in 1948 was displacement and expulsion of the vast majority of Palestinian Arabs. And the path to Jewish political dominance ran through policies directed at those who remained.

For two decades after the war, Israel under the Mapai leadership augmented the initial expulsion with a series of policies to suppress the remaining Arab population. The memory and presence of Palestinians was destroyed by repopulating

villages with Jewish residents, while street renaming policies extracted memory from the public sphere. The new state passed a law to expropriate the land of those who had scattered.<sup>(1)</sup> The government established martial law over a large portion of the Arab population, implemented by a military regime. In 1956, dozens of civilian villagers were killed by the border police in Kfar Kassem, and six protestors on Land Day in 1976 - these would become the symbolic traumatic events in Arab-Palestinian citizens' collective experience during the first phase.

To ensure Jewish dominance in the national political culture, the Mapai leadership of the 1950s sought to curtail independent-minded Arab political leadership, including by outlawing political movements such as al-Ard (Rouhana 1989). In 1948, the Arab elite "vanished," the state continued to deport influential figures, favoring instead a more compliant cadre of local Arab leaders (Jamal 2017). Those leaders cultivated satellite Arab parties loyal to ruling party (Jamal 2017). Thus, the relationship between Arabs and Israel's Zionist left was grounded in suppression, coercion and patronage, rather than a genuine commitment.

The contradictions of the Zionist left between ideology and practice within the Jewish community are also well-documented, specifically with regard to Mizrahi Jews. The socialist-egalitarian ethos manifested deep contradictions from the earliest years.

The Histadrut labor federation was established prior to statehood on an openly exclusivist basis, with the goal of constructing a new Jewish economy (Sternhell, p. 143). But pre-state Zionist leaders openly viewed Jewish communities from the Middle East as the raw material for an economic underclass: in the early 20th century, one newspaper advocated importing Yemenite Jews, not only because they would consent to do the work of Arabs, but "Mr. Marx certainly not to be found either in his pocket or his brain" (Quoted in Segev, 2019, p. 103). These attitudes would carry over into Israel's first decades, as immigration and absorption policies funneled Jews from Arab countries into an inferior socio-cultural stratum of society. Development towns proliferated and represent Israel's urban slums to this day, marked by traumatic practices such as the kidnapping of Yemenite infants and spraying arrivals with DDT.

It is worth observing that even the actual economic and finance policies of the 1950s and 60s belied the image of a romantic socialist agrarian system. The Israeli government began encouraging immigration of entrepreneurs from the diaspora from the 1950s and 60s to develop industry (Rivlin 2008), and already during this time the country began shifting to an industry-based, export-oriented market, even

as the collectivist social ethos remained key to the national ideology (Rivlin 2008, Krampf 2018).

The ideological contradictions within the social economic sphere marginalized Mizrahi migrants and the economic underclass. The national violence against Palestinians and the suppression of Palestinian-Arab citizens led to acquiescent electoral support at best, but cultivated fear, resentment and suspicion at a deeper level. How then did Labor's forerunners, Mapai and later the Alignment, win each election prior to 1977, with a range of 40 and 56 seats?

A critical examination of the electoral environment shows that the success of the Zionist left did not result from genuine democratic competition. In fact, it was a phase in which the country's institutions were rife with systems of patronage and broad electoral coercion. New Mizrahi immigrants were funneled into voting for Labor through local party organization structures (captured poignantly by the legendary Israeli film *Sallah Shabati*, whose plot centers on a vote-buying scheme among the poorest immigrants). Mapai/Alignment dominated the most powerful social institutions in the country, especially the Histadrut. The latter not only wielded an enormous impact on the Israeli labor force; it owned and controlled the major health insurance plan-making it difficult to avoid membership – as well as a range of other social institutions (Aronoff 1993). This system propped up Mapai's votes, not due to serious voter choice.

Israeli conformism played into large scale support for the party of the founders. Civil society was committed to the Jewish statebuilding agenda; with youth movements, and print media such as *Davar*, the Histadrut's newspaper, linked to political parties. From 1968, the Israel Broadcasting Authority held a monopoly over the emerging medium of television; these helped facilitate a monopoly over ideas.

Most of these systems of patronage, institutional, political, social and media control in Israel's early decades no longer exist, or the lingering elements have lost widespread power. Having failed to earn deeper levels of loyalty from communities that fell outside the original voter base, Labor was ill prepared for genuine political competition. Liberalization of markets in the 1980s and 90s would bring consumer choice, media competition and a genuine competition of ideas.

But the Zionist left was perhaps most unprepared for the deepest shift in Israeli life, led by a Maarach/Labor government itself: the 1967 war. The war fundamentally changed the population Israel governs. The attempt to forget the identity dilemma during the 1950s by burying the memory of Palestinians was undone by bringing a new population of Palestinians into the heart of Israeli society, through a military regime in which all Israelis participate either physically or passively. Economic dependency and social interactions would follow, spoiling Labor's ideology of national forgetting

(1 See Absentee Properties' Law, 1950 [https://www.nevo.co.il/law\\_html/Law01/313\\_001.htm](https://www.nevo.co.il/law_html/Law01/313_001.htm) (Hebrew)

(of Palestinians) by pushing the Palestinian national question onto center stage.

Labor lost its electoral hegemony for the first time in 1977, a decade after the national ideological conflict begun in 1967 had begun, and a decade after the start of the settlement project, under Labor's patronage.

Left-wing civil society became active in opposing government policy, perhaps not coincidentally, after Labor lost elections. Activists established Peace Now in 1978 to criticize the first 11 years of occupation. Its founding moment was the "Officers' Letter" signed by IDF officers, expressing its commitment to the Jewish and democratic state.

"This letter is sent to you by Israeli citizens, who also serve as soldiers and officers in the reserves.... The government policy, perpetuating its rule over a million Arabs, could harm the Jewish-democratic character of the state, and make it difficult for us to identify with its task."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, as left-wing ideology moved outside of party politics to civil society, finally opposing the leadership (which it no longer held), the first demand was to strengthen the Jewish-democratic state formula.

This appeal set a tone for civil society activism that mirrored the political problem: its basic ideology appealed exclusively to Jews. The logical policy associated with Peace Now's criticism was territorial concession, which was simultaneously rejected by the traditionalist Mizrahi and other right-wing Jewish communities and reinforced Jewish exclusivity through the separation narrative.

Civil society activism from the Mizrahi Jews of the 1970s was directed against their social and economic marginalization within Israel. Yet following the political loss of 1977, Labor had little to offer in response to the movements such as the Black Panthers and collective Mizrahi anger.

The constituents who resented the Zionist left grew and nothing happened during this time to woo their support. Later they would be augmented by new waves of immigrants with no inherent party loyalties. The communities who thrived at the upper levels of society, who felt aptly represented by the old Zionist left, became a declining portion of society over the years.

## A BRIEF REVIVAL: 1992 – 1996

After a quarter century of occupation, Labor's leaders calculated that endless control of land and population would destroy the balance between a Jewish state and democracy – and territorial concession was the only way out. Right-wing slogans of "transfer," and expulsion were no longer deemed legitimate.

In the intervening years ahead of the 1992 elections, the Zionist left in Israel also shifted to embrace liberal politics and values. The 1990s was a time of emerging individualism in general in Israel, as the collectivist ethos eroded. New Basic Laws became a foundation for protecting individual human and civil rights, judicial activism gathered momentum at this time; awareness of feminism, gender equality and the early understanding of LGBT issues grew. Critically, separation of religion and state became an increasingly prominent tension (Peled 2001).

Israel now supported open markets and began to cultivate the high-technology sector, disposable income grew (Shalev 1999), private television news stations and cable channels broke the state monopoly over information. The Labor party now saw globalization and a liberal economy as the preferred source of growth. Some argued that Labor no longer represented a distinct economic outlook from Likud (Elazar 1992).

Labor now advanced the theme that peacemaking, including the broad notion of territorial compromise, was linked to economic fortunes. Peace would facilitate global integration, generate international financial support for implementation of a peace process, and the the Zionist left argued for interconnectedness of these concepts (Krampf 2018, p. 219).

On this dual vision of liberal-secular universalist values and advancement of peace, Labor swept back into power in 1992 with 44 seats. Its campaign focused largely on the personality of Rabin, a symbol of heroism in battle. Rabin's victory played on nostalgia for the past from those who benefited from it; however, the myth that only a warrior-peacemaker could win elections for the left endured beyond Rabin - well past its relevance or effectiveness in Israeli politics.

In 1992 the newly formed Meretz party won 12 seats – its strongest result before or after – presenting a natural coalition partner for Rabin. To top up his coalition, Rabin, like all leaders of Israel, chose religious parties rather than inviting Arab parties to join. Still the two Arab parties later provided coalition support from "outside" to advance the Oslo accords. It was the first and only time Arab parties played a significant role in supporting the executive branch.

Arab-Palestinian citizens now ran independent parties and grew their electoral share. The incremental success of these parties showed political empowerment, but also reflected a de facto,

<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author, from Peace Now website reprint of Officers' Letter. <https://peacenow.org.il/en/about-us/who-are-we>

almost iron-clad reality of sectoral politics in Israel. In less than a decade, the Arab vote for Labor would practically collapse.

Rabin advanced some causes that appeared to mark a different course in Jewish-Arab relations. The Oslo accords of 1993 and the peace treaty with Jordan in 1994 were landmark events. In return for Knesset votes of the Arab parties for the Oslo agreement, Rabin's government invested in material and social needs of Arabs in Israel, equalizing budgets, promoting equal health care and child allowances (Peleg & Waxman 2011, p. 90).

But settlements continued to expand following these breakthroughs. The Supreme Court took on a more activist role in society, but upheld most occupation related policies, or as human rights lawyer Michael Sfard put it, "the court's glorious conquests ended at the Green Line." (Sfard 2018, p. 191). It was never even clear that Rabin intended for Oslo to lead to a Palestinian state. Eventually Oslo turned from a symbol of hope to hypocrisy, from the Palestinian perspective, exacerbating the tenuous links between Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel and the Zionist left.

Further, a large portion of Mizrahi traditional or religious Jews opposed the accords entirely. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a religious Jew of Yemenite origin came to symbolize the national-ideological resentment of the Ashkenazi Zionist left within this community, as a subset of the national chasm.

Meanwhile, the rapid growth of the Israeli economy drove prosperity, but also inequality. The process had in fact begun from the mid-70s, but under the Likud-led government of the late 1970s, some social indicators for Mizrahim improved, such as longer life expectancy and lower education gaps (Cohen and Haberfeld, 2002). Under Rabin wage inequality reached a peak (Cohen & Haberfeld, 2002). Economic analysts point to labor discrimination as one of the reasons for persistent income gaps despite improved social indicators – pointing to ongoing institutionalized discrimination, still deeply associated with Labor.

Thus, although the values of the Zionist left evolved somewhat with the times, embracing liberal values and individual rights as well as peace through a two-state solution, it still appealed mostly to a traditional base of electoral support without winning over other Israeli demographic groups. And the biggest new community of potential new supporters, immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, switched electoral paths during their first few cycles, but most ultimately settled on the right-wing side of the Israeli political divide. Shimon Peres lost the 1996 elections following Rabin's assassination; Labor still came in first, but lost 10 seats. Due to his victory in the direct elections, Benjamin Netanyahu took the helm.

## THE LOST DECADE: 1999 – 2009

This phase began with hope for a peace revival that quickly mutated into despair. Hopes for a two-state peace floundered in the face of unforgiving circumstances and Labor's political fortunes sank. The left began to split ideologically from within.

Ehud Barak and Labor (as a three-faction list called "One Israel") won the 1999 election. Given that his was the last electoral victory for the Zionist-left in Israel to date, political figures in later years would look back seeking to emulate what they guessed as the reasons for his success.<sup>1</sup> Barak was a career military figure; he presented himself as a successor to Rabin (Trousseau 1997). He too promised the parallel themes of interdependent peace and prosperity in his campaign, which also threw a spotlight on the concerns of citizens in daily life – student tuition, overcrowding in hospitals, high unemployment (Lochery, 1999). Peace was viewed as the missing link that could redirect national resources to address middle class aspirations, advance social liberalization, and ensure separation of religion and state.

Barak's approach won natural support of the left; his military biography help coopt a sufficient slice of the right-wing, including a segment of Russian speaking Israelis disenchanted with Netanyahu (Greenberg, 2009, p. 298).

Barak also convinced a large segment of Arab citizens to support him. His campaign worked to convince an Arab-Palestinian candidate running symbolically in the direct elections for prime minister, Azmi Bishara, to drop out of the race so his supporters could vote for Barak.<sup>2</sup> In a foreshadowing of the elections 20 years later, the center and left converged around the desire to oust Netanyahu. Seventy-five percent of Arabs turned out – the last time they would participate at such high rates (Rudnitzky 2020).

But Barak rapidly repeated old contradictions and introduced fresh disappointments. He would thereby alienate the same communities that had resented Labor for decades – but in addition, Barak also alienated his base.

Barak's first major campaign betrayal was to bring Shas into his governing coalition. The move won few friends among religious and traditionalist Mizrahim, who saw the recent conviction of legendary Shas leader Ariele Deri as a modern manifestation of the Ashkanazi hegemony.

(1) Since his victory in 1999, no other leader was elected based on the perception of representing the Israeli or Zionist left; following his election in 2006, Ehud Olmert came to be viewed in the eyes of some Israelis as left-leaning, due to his far-reaching negotiations with the Palestinians towards a two-state solution. But he had been a lifelong Likud figure and his electoral victory owed much to his image as the successor to Ariel Sharon.

(2) Direct elections were held in Israel between 1996-2001, before the electoral system was changed back to party votes only.



Shas was then angered by Barak's intention to conduct far-reaching negotiations with the Palestinians, and left the coalition ahead of the Camp David talks in July 2000 (Greenberg 2009, p. 331).

Despite the high support for Israel's withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon in 2000, peace processes with both Syria and the Palestinians collapsed spectacularly. While all sides share some measure of blame, arguably Barak's failure in the negotiations revolved around some of the deepest contradictions in the liberal Zionist narrative: how much sovereignty could the Palestinians really be allowed to have as a state within the areas conquered in 1967? How much responsibility could Israel ever truly acknowledge for Palestinian refugees Israel expelled in 1948? These questions represent deep historic identity problems that Israel's Zionist left engendered and refuse to answer decisively, even decades later.

The Intifada from 2000 to roughly 2004/5 shattered hopes, even for many on the Jewish left. (For the right, the failures of negotiations sparked a certain vindication). In surveys, about half of Jews who self-identified as left-wing in 1999 (roughly 30 percent) flooded to the center, leaving just 15 percent or slightly lower for the next 20 years. The self-identified right-wing grew steadily among Jews during this time, reaching over 55% by 2020. <sup>1</sup> These trends reflected what Barak himself had said, that Palestinians were no partner for peace. Many concluded that land for peace and two states, the enduring brand of the Zionist left, had failed and must not be tried again.

Arab voters lost faith in the system altogether. In October 2000, Israeli police killed 13 Arab citizens, leading more than 80 percent to boycott the 2001 direct elections for Prime Minister. Among those who did vote, the portion who voted for the Zionist left fell. <sup>2</sup> Azmi Bishara wrote shortly after the October events that for "liberal intellectuals" – a euphemism for the Jewish left-wing elite – "coexistence" is based on internal discrimination, and the Arabs are viewed merely a reserve vote for Labor party coalitions (Bishara 2001).

With the Zionist left now reeling from its failure, its paths began to diverge from within. On one side the Jewish left-wing leaders and the public consolidated around the two-state solution, and clung to reviving negotiations to get

there. On the other side, during the 2000s, activists of the left saw negotiations as atrophied, destined only to perpetuate occupation. These activists began to advocate a human rights approach, international advocacy, and universal justice. Others rejected the two-state idea altogether, for failing to address the founding dilemma of 1948 and the resulting problems of identity and democracy within Israel. Some repudiated Zionism as well.

Left-wing civil society reflected the divide. The people-to-people and coexistence activities that had blossomed in the 1990s dried up along with funding and movement restrictions during the Intifada; Palestinian anti-normalization undermined motivation of participants as well. Yet four new anti-occupation human rights organizations were established during this time: Gisha, Yesh Din, Emek Shaveh, Breaking the Silence. Older ones, such as Btselem and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel became more vocal and radical in their critique. <sup>3</sup>

The last years of the decade saw the rise of the populist, nationalist and religious right. Fueled by controversies over Israel's first of three wars in Gaza, the right-wing turned its fire first on the activist left, branding the community traitors and whipping up public rage against the Jewish human rights activists. The populist right then targeted Arab Palestinian citizens: setting its sights on the vocal young guard of legislators from Balad, and eventually against the Arab population as a whole. They branded left wing Jews and Arabs alike of as foreign agents, terror supporters, anti-Zionist, and traitors. Young Israelis who grew up after 2000 are more likely to identifying as right wing than their elders, as "left" became a dirty word.

The political parties representing the Zionist left were often paralyzed by dilemmas about how to respond. Labor campaigns during these years struggled to avoid addressing the conflict to escape its left-wing image. But it was unable to galvanize votes based on social issues alone. Avoiding the conflict did not change the image of its association with land concession to Palestinians, yet held the parties from a deeper reconsideration of the issues or new orientation to the old dilemmas.

The political left was the victim of numerous circumstances: failed circumstances of the peace process leading to ideological crisis and internal divergence of tactics within the left; shifting public attitudes, an emergent populist right. Yet poor decisions of the Zionist left-leadership, failure to reconcile its own contradictions and hollow responses to the political dilemmas contributed to the decline.

(1) The self-definition reference is based on the author's ongoing polling data, showing trends rather than a single survey. The range of right-wing self-identification among Jews between 2018 and 2020, including firm and moderate right wing, is between 54%-60%, most frequently above 55%.

(2) Rudnitzky's compilation shows a mild decline for Jewish parties following 2001 from nearly 31% in 2003 to about 18% in 2009, with an overall downward trend in the next decade. However, this does not itemize votes by party – with fewer overall voters, the portion of Druze voting for Likud most likely remaining stable, it is reasonable to deduce that very few voted for Labor or Meretz. This aligns with findings from the author's campaign work during these years (2001/Barak, 2006/Labor, 2009/Meretz).

(3) This observation drawn from the author's experience working as an external strategic consultant for a group of 10 Israeli human rights organizations, including most of those mentioned here, in 2011 to assess the impact of these decisions and strategic paths forward.

Ultimately, the right-wing onslaught against the Jewish left and Palestinian citizens would set the political tone for the next decade – but also spur the revival.

## THE CRISIS AND THE REVIVAL:

### 2009 - 2020

The elections of 2009 saw the worst showing for Zionist left-wing parties up to that point, just 16 seats in total, with 27 once the combined Arab parties and Hadash were included. Benjamin Netanyahu, the new-old symbolic nemesis of the left, was back in power.

From 2009, the two-state solution was heavily undermined by the deteriorating feasibility. The populist right waged an unrelenting assault on liberal values, which had become a secondary core identity of the Zionist left; the attacks mirrored populist right-wing movements in other countries during the decade, ranging from eastern Europe, to Brazil, the UK and the US.

The 18th Knesset (2009-2013) introduced anti-liberal and anti-democratic legislation and normalized offensive, ultra-nationalist, anti-Arab rhetoric in social discourse. Throughout the decade, Netanyahu's governments built a case for annexation in the West Bank, and against the Israeli judiciary. Defending the Arab-Palestinian population, opposing dangerous levels of race-baiting and discriminatory legislation, and defending the judiciary fell to the left. Although the left still opposed occupation, civil society increasingly found itself scrambling to fight policies targeted against their own organizations or even individuals, such as the NGO law passed in 2013 to target foreign funding, and public campaigns against individual left-wing civil society leaders.<sup>1</sup>

Left wing parties and activists alike now appeared to be meeting the challenge by diversifying their efforts as well. Civil society organizations to address the various threads of right-wing assaults expanded. New media emerged to amplify more critical voices in the burgeoning field of free web-based platforms, including Ha-Oketz, Hamakom Hahi Ham (The Hottest Place in Hell), +972 Magazine in English and by 2013 its sister site in Hebrew, Local Call.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the political left floundered. The reasons included a pile-on of problems: ideological stagnation,

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(1) This is based on the author's experience from 2011 onward working with a group of human rights organizations as an external consultant to develop response strategies to the sense of a social, political and legal onslaught.

(2) Disclosure: The author is among the founders and was the first board chair of +972 Magazine, and a regular writer there. At present she is neither on the board nor a member of the editorial staff, and remains an occasional writer.

miscalculation of identity politics, and poor short-term campaign strategy decisions. Labor elected a Mizrahi party leader three times beginning in 2006 (Amir Peretz in 2006, Avi Gabbay in 2017, and Peretz again in 2019). Each failed to expand Labor's vote.

In 2013, a new centrist party arose following the 2011 social protests in Israel. Yesh Atid was established by Yair Lapid, a symbol of Israel's bourgeois Ashkenazi cultural elite. His brand was centrist and focused on middle-class concerns from the start. In his first run, Lapid capitalized on heavy criticism of Netanyahu's leadership that burst out in the 2011 social protests – his centrist positioning meant keeping mostly agnostic on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and attracted both moderate right and secular former Soviet immigrants who had previously supported Lieberman. The first dazzling result of 19 seats appeared to have come at the expense of the Likud and Lieberman's votes when they merged parties but lost 11 seats, while Labor gained two.

The dynamic of a centrist party pulling votes from the right-wing would not last. As Netanyahu dug into the right-wing populist themes, and the coalition partner to the right of Likud, Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home, honed a more extreme right-wing position, the concept of "right-wing" took on a more extreme character. In this environment voters increasingly perceived Lapid as the center left. By 2015, Zionist left and centrist voters became fungible.

The Zionist Union – a merger of Labor with Tzipi Livni's small party called The Movement (HaTnuah) was the last openly Zionist left party to win a respectable double-digit figure in Knesset elections and mount a serious challenge to Netanyahu. It placed second in elections, with 24 seats. That result looks enviable from the current position of the Zionist left, but was a major disappointment to the party leaders, who had expected to beat Likud and instead lost by six seats (Likud won 30 in the final count). The Zionist Union's strong result reflected satisfaction of center-left voters that two parties had merged, but primarily its votes came at the expense of Lapid, whose party lost eight of its 19 seats – nearly half its strength. These two factors contributed to the strong result – but the campaign itself failed to expand the voter base any further; the center right remained firmly repulsed by Labor under a new name; hence the inability to push past Likud.

The pattern of fungibility between the center and left set the tone for 2019. Netanyahu continued to win cycle after cycle. Zionist left-wingers began to pin their hopes on center parties once again. Yesh Atid's poll numbers rose from 2015 onwards and Labor's numbers dwindled inexorably: even when a putative fresh face – Avi Gabbay – was elected as party leader in a 2017 primary, a compilation of polling showed that the party's fortunes continued to sink from nearly 14 seats in 2016 – just one year after the election – to just over 12 in 2018. But voters were recognizing that Labor would



never regain sufficient support as in the golden years, and they came to believe replacing Netanyahu required supporting the parties of the center.

### **Civil society steps in again:**

Once again, new thinking to address the challenges emerged not from Zionist left parties but more prominently from thought leaders and civil society. Left wing journalists wrote of the permanent peace process as an obstacle to a genuine solution (Sheizaf 2013). Policy and academic figures on the left drifted from the two-state solution in light of the growing analysis of its unfeasibility, generating alternatives in the form of federation, confederation, or a single state (Spears 2014).

And among Jews it was the non-party left – civil society organizations, activists, regular citizens – who would ultimately rally to oppose the growing threat against Arab citizens.

Government activity and rhetoric attacking Israel's Arab-Palestinian minority became more aggressive throughout the decade. Legislation from the 18th Knesset ('09-'13) included the Admissions Committees law (2011) designed to bar them from residing in small closed Jewish communities, the anti-Nakba law (2011), the amendment to the citizenship law placing severe difficulties on citizens married to Palestinians from the occupied territories (2013), and culminated in the summer of 2018, with the Nation-State law effectively excluding Arab citizens from equal membership in the polity.

Throughout this time, Netanyahu, Likud members, and coalition partners fueled incitement against Arab citizens; in 2019 Netanyahu himself referred to Arab parties as an "existential threat" and argued that their Knesset seats should be dismissed in coalition negotiations. As the right-wing assault intensified over the years, some left-wing activity began to converge on opposing the incitement and building alliances for cooperation and solidarity instead.

In 2015, a new organization called Standing Together was formed on the basis of equal Jewish Arab participation in fighting for common social causes. One of the founders, Alon-Lee Green explained that in a pluralist society parties must be able to advance common social causes, without forcing citizens choose parties based on separate de facto ethno-national identities. The goal of Standing Together is to generate a social movement based on ideas – which he views as more important than a new party, platform or leader (Green 2020). A survey for the left-wing website Local Call showed that majorities think Jewish Arab partnership can strengthen such social causes such as women's advancement, the environment, worker's rights; and possibly even contribute to advancing Israeli Palestinian conflict resolution (Scheindlin 2019a). At the same time, others began to advocate for new forms of partnership within the party system – through the formation of a joint Jewish-Arab list

that would transcend the nationalist ideology (and legacy) of left-wing Zionist parties in Israel (Ali 2019; Masalha, 2019).

### **Parties fail to keep up:**

Throughout the three election cycles of 2019 and 2020, the parties of the Zionist left appeared disconnected from these percolating social movements. They remained fixated on strategies for winning elections, symbolized by Labor leader Avi Gabbay's ill-fated decision to tack to the right as leader of the party, Ehud Barak's decision to re-enter politics but failure to bring sufficient new votes to even enter Knesset, let alone save the left – despite altruistically merging with Meretz ahead of the September 2019 elections to create the Democratic Union. Similarly, Amir Peretz became head of the Labor party for a second time, and merged with a parliamentarian from the right-wing, Orly Levy-Abekasis – in a desperate attempt to swing votes from the right. It was a short-term gimmick that made headlines but meant little in the final count.

Campaign strategy had ultimately come to replace long-term engagement with changing trends within Israeli society. Labor had become a shell, with no firm ideological commitment or clarity.

During this time, Meretz struggled stay above the voter threshold of 3.25%. When Meretz merged with Labor ahead of the March 2020 elections, longtime Arab representative Issawe Frij was pushed down to an unrealistic spot on the list of candidates. A prominent Arab political commentator and activist declared that the decision finalized Meretz' failure to be a genuine home for those committed to Jewish-Arab partnership (Salaimeh 2020).

The one political actor on the left that showed dynamic expansion was the Joint List. This group of parties was a merger of Hadash and three other Arab-Palestinian parties. They first merged in 2015 and won 13 seats, with almost entirely Arab votes and hardly any Jews, according to an advisor for Hadash at the time who later became a founder of Standing Together (Green, 2020). The list broke up and lost power in April 2019, then reunited ahead of the September elections, re-energizing Arab voters and winning 13 seats. For its campaign ahead of the March 2020 elections, the Joint List focused almost entirely on a theme of partnership and political integration. The result was a historic high: Joint List won 15 seats, with 87 percent of Arab voters supporting the party. The small number of Jewish voters was at least double the rate from nearly one year earlier, including many defectors from the Zionist left who considered themselves lifelong Meretz or Labor voters. <sup>(1)</sup>

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(1) Based on author's analysis of election results available from Central Election Committee, and research conducted for the Joint List for the campaign targeted at Jews.

But the vast majority of Zionist left voters did not move to the Joint List. Just as Arab voters in 1999 had sacrificed their candidate, Azmi Bishara, these voters sacrificed Labor for the “pragmatic” decision to support Blue and White. This centrist party had subsumed Lapid and Yesh Atid, who consented to take second place rather than stand as candidate for Prime Minister, so that former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz could woo support. The general wisdom among the center and center-left remained stuck in the misguided myth that they could beat the right on its own turf – security – and that a parlor trick of installing a security men at the helm would change the tides of the country (Scheidlin 2019a).

The unprecedented repeat election cycles of 2019 and early 2020 turned on tiny shifts of voters, but in effect each time resulted in a tie for the two largest parties – Netanyahu’s Likud, and Blue and White – at the coalition-building stage. Blue and White had its closest chance at forming and leading the government following the March 2020 elections, when the non-Netanyahu parties received 62 seats. To succeed, Benny Gantz would have had to take the unprecedented step of forging a deal with the Joint List, which held 15 of the 62 seats. The move would have been controversial considering the sensitivity of the Rabin years when Arab parties merely voted with the coalition from the outside for the sake of a single policy, and how much more right-wing Israel had become by 2020. However, leadership means taking the population forward at the right historic junctures, not only following. Powerful majorities of the Arab population supported the move, and the Joint List leadership had boldly broken with tradition to support Gantz as the next leader. A strong and savvy politician might have grasped the opportunity, but Gantz, with less experience than any candidate for Prime Minister before him, was neither.

The last to grasp the new emerging spirit and electoral calculus of Jewish-Arab partnership was the Zionist left. Well after the March elections, after Blue and White had capitulated to Netanyahu and Labor had collapsed, Yair Golan, the brief emerging hope of the political Jewish left-wing, wrote an article defending his Zionism. Another former IDF general – after repeated failures of left and even centrist ex-military figures in Israeli politics – wrote that while Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, this need not preclude equality of all citizens. “What is left,” he wrote, “if it is not in fact equality and partnership?” Written in May, the sentiment was too late to save the left in the elections in March, and decades too late to change the historic failings of the Israeli left from the earliest years (Golan 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has not so much attempted to judge the decisions of the Israeli Zionist left historically, as to analyze the sources of their successes and failures at different phases in Israeli

history.

A brief review of past decades shows that success of left-wing parties in Israel rested on specific historic circumstances that allowed it to overcome deep ideological contradictions. The contradictions involved professed visions of equality and the creation of structural ethnic inequalities among Jews. The profound national contradiction was the notion that a Jewish and democratic state depended on the suppression of memory and active participation of the non-Jewish community.

When the specific circumstances that propped up electoral support in the earliest years dissipated, the Zionist left parties began their decline. 1967 destroyed any remaining option of building a Jewish democracy based on minimizing the presence of Arab-Palestinians, pushing a large new Palestinian population into the center of Israeli life and politics.

The Zionist left espoused a vision of territorial compromise and two state separation for reversing the consequences but failed to implement the vision, for numerous historic reasons. As the consequences of this failure drove Israelis to the right, the Zionist left parties failed to regain footing. Instead, left-wing citizen activists – both Jews and Arabs – forged a new path based on intuitive values that the left would be expected to espouse: equality, solidarity, partnership across sectoral lines, a commitment to democracy and the institutions that exist to guarantee rights and equality of all citizens.

If the left continues to commit itself to that path, manifested in deeds as well as rhetoric, through citizen action or through parties, it will ultimately have made a true break from the past and demonstrated its ability for renewal. The change will be critical in the event that Israel’s government moves ahead with plans to annex Palestinian territory, in the struggle for equal rights for all those under Israeli sovereignty.

To fulfill this role, the Zionist left should revisit the questions posed by David Grossman in 1991:

“How real and sincere is my desire for “coexistence” with the Palestinians in Israel? ...Do I actually understand the meaning of Jewish-Arab coexistence? And what does it demand of me, as a Jew in Israel? Have I ever imagined...a truly democratic, pluralistic, and egalitarian way of life in Israel?”

Israeli citizens should stop thinking in terms of a Jewish or Arab left, and instead commit to set a common set of values for all.

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