

Israeli Elections for Americans

Israel, in the most recent election which took place on September 17th, had over 30 parties with candidates, down from the last election cycle. Almost 64% of Israelis voted, up from 49% the last time.

Israeli politics is all about diversity. There are Arab political parties, communist and socialist parties, religious parties, and of course the vast center. Political parties in Israel change like the phases of the moon.

Most political pundits will opine that Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party did not do as well as he would have wished because of a leftward turn of the Israeli electorate. Nothing could be further from the truth. Security is the key #1 issue in Israel, followed closely by economics. The country has done terrifically under Benjamin Netanyahu in terms of becoming a world economic powerhouse, and it has become a safer country while its enemies across the border have grown vast in power, money and political acumen.

The failure of Benjamin Netanyahu not to do better in this election has virtually nothing to do with his politics and everything to do with the fact that he has been around for 12 years and is under the threat of imminent indictment. It is difficult for Americans to appreciate the charges against Netanyahu, which are officially called "corruption." What Benjamin Netanyahu allegedly did was to accept expensive champagne and cigars from friends, he promoted negative publicity concerning a political opponent, and he encouraged the purchase of submarines from a particular manufacturer. There was no *quid pro quo* for any of his actions, and the attorney general likely will not be able to prove that Benjamin Netanyahu benefitted in any substantial way from any of these transactions. What Prime Minister Netanyahu did was far less than what every American politician does on a daily basis. The difference is that Israel is supposed to be guided by principles of the Torah, and Benjamin Netanyahu was not sufficiently sensitive to those ethical precepts.

Americans elected Franklin Roosevelt to an unprecedented four terms, and yet shortly after the towering figure of longevity passed away, Americans had no problem passing a constitutional amendment limiting the President to two terms.

An iconic picture that percolated and crossed the press in Israel shows the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, in a three-handed clasp of palms with Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz. Gantz and Netanyahu's party are perhaps one or two seats apart, neither, of course, having a majority. Rivlin's job is to decide who gets to try to form the coalition first. Some say that the President in a parliamentary system is simply a figurehead. Not so Reuven Rivlin. The President of Israel currently stands in the position of quintessential importance to the Jewish people. Those in the know believe that Rivlin will try to get Gantz and Netanyahu to rotate the prime minister position in a

national unity government. Can anyone imagine such a thing in the United States of America? It brings to mind the John Lennon song, "Imagine." There sits Donald Trump and Joe Biden in a clasp of hands with either Senator McConnell or Nancy Pelosi joining in the festivities. No way. We do not believe in unity governments because, in the United States, winner takes all and the enemy is vanquished. Donald Trump, of course, is not the first President who made an effort to destroy his political opponents. This course of behavior is an ancient art in America, and many of us have seen it in our own lifetimes with the Kennedys, Nixon, LBJ, Clinton, Bush, Obama, and now, The Donald. Of course, that does not make it right and Americans have yet to get disgusted enough to do something about it.

Whether a national unity government in Israel is possible, and whether power can be shared, has not only to do with ego but also the Israeli legal system. Benjamin Netanyahu may be indicted for a number of offenses that are considered business as usual in the United States. Accepting gifts from friends, trying to influence the press and defense contracts is just part of the way we do business in the U.S. We hire and pay lobbyists just for those purposes. In Israel, Prime Ministers like Ehud Olmert go to jail when they are paid for influence peddling.

Israel's top priority is different than the United States. In terms of economic and social conditions, the politicians fall over one another trying to figure out how to improve the social safety net and ensure the rights of minorities within the country they argue about who is more "liberal" on social issues. With respect to domestic policy, there are shades of differences between the parties; but other than the extremes, there is a great prevailing majority as to the responsibility of a Jewish leader. In foreign affairs, Benjamin Netanyahu has shown himself a master whether at dealing with the enemies of his country or those who have simply sat at the sidelines waiting for the Jewish State to be destroyed. Netanyahu has created unrivaled relationships between Israel and Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. A tiny country like Israel with only 6.5 million Jews cannot possibly go it alone. Israel does not have nuclear-powered submarines and aircraft carriers to scare its neighbors.

Whatever else Donald Trump's failings are, he recognizes the threat of Iran against Western Civilization and the Jewish people. He totally appreciates and gets that Iran has used its money not to better the lives of its own people, but to promote terrorism and instill fear around the world. "No," we should not fight the battles of Saudi Arabia or Israel, but we certainly should not empower and finance destabilizing regimes like those in Iran. Both the Israeli political system and the very different American political system are likely to survive their latest crises, but ultimately it is the citizens who will have to take final responsibility for solutions to those problems.

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