

The hope and disappointment of the Israeli voter



iENGAGE

• By DONNIEL HARTMAN

The voter has spoken. According to most commentators, Israelis sent a clear message that resolving our domestic challenges must dominate the political agenda. We want our political leaders to finally solve problems such as “burden sharing,” housing and the high cost of living.

Other issues can wait. Even if this is the correct interpretation of the election results, it may not be that simple. For one thing, I am not sure the Iranians got the memo.

They may not believe that the 19 seats for Yesh Atid require that the centrifuges stop spinning. Similarly, the Palestinians may not believe their interests are well served by facilitating the status quo so that Israel can get its economic house in order. We may hope to fill our inbox exclusively with domestic issues that have been too long neglected, but the region may have other ideas.

Even on the pressing domestic issues, it is not as if the solutions are sitting on the shelf waiting to be implemented. There are structural and systemic reasons why dramatic decisions in domestic policy are difficult.

One is that Israel is a society of many tribes. Decisions that shift the power balance between these tribes too drastically or suddenly risk alienating key segments of the population, and tearing the connective tissue that holds us together.

While some Israelis are reveling in the election results, others nurse their resentment waiting for the day when their candidates will take center stage and shift the pendulum back in their direction. Push too hard one way, and your opponents are empowered to rally. Yesh Atid won 19 seats, but the ultra-Orthodox parties together won 18. Ground-breaking decisions where one tribe trumps the other can be a dangerous gamble in a society where power is diffused and the equilibrium is fragile.

Election season tends to obscure these kinds of complexities. It is governed by the two great commandments of modern political discourse: Simplify and Exaggerate. The loudest voices, the most far-reaching promises, are the ones that are usually heard. We are drawn to those who speak with conviction and confidence that they have the answer. We suspend our appreciation for the complexities and are swept up in the compelling appeal of the forthright message, or the magnetic personality of its deliverer.

But then the elections pass, and the business of governing begins. And so often, the realities of governance turn hope into disappointment. We place our faith in a new figure who emerges on the political firmament, promising to bring gen-

uine change, to make revolutionary decisions. But how often is that promise realized? How often are we disappointed by the compromises made, by the difficulty and deadlock of the decision-making process, by what we come to think of the leader we once so admired.

Our reaction at these moments of frustration is telling. Many of us believe that the problem was not in our lofty hopes for radical change, but in the individual with whom our hopes were invested. The hero of the moment is Yair Lapid. But if he disappoints, like other political stars before him, another hero will emerge to take his place and we will transfer our hopes, like a torch, from one leader to another.

But perhaps part of the problem here lies with the hopes themselves – with the collective act of self-delusion that we engage in at every election cycle. In a society as tribal and as beset by challenges as Israel, we may need a quieter, more nuanced view of how change takes place. We may need to develop the skill of being able to hear and value softer voices, those who don’t make grand promises, who are less certain they have the answer, but have the human qualities that help navigate lasting change in a fragmented society.

These figures are, almost by definition, less adept at campaigning. They cannot free themselves from the complexity of the issues, or the legitimacy of views different from their own. They shy away from battle cries, and noisy promises, because they know that change is usually more evolution than revolution. They know that after change takes place in Israeli society – as it must – we have to live together here and respect one another. We need to cultivate and value more leaders like this – who are as skilled at listening as at oratory, and who know both how to be agents of change and how to bring it about while ensuring that the fabric of our society is not irreparably torn.

Israel’s greatest leader, Moses, was a profoundly modest man with a speech impediment. He would have made a lousy political candidate. And our tradition tells us that G-d’s own voice can be heard as a “*kol dnama daka*” – the thin sound of silence. The most powerful voice, the most outspoken and blunt, the ones that promise change, quickly, dramatically, painlessly, are the ones that enjoy the spotlight. They attract our hopes. They tell us what we want to hear. But the softer, less strident voices in our society may be no less deserving of our attention. Sometimes, they tell us what we need to hear, and they may be no less capable of bringing the lasting change we seek.

Dr. Tal Becker is a senior fellow of the iEngage Project at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Learn more about iENGAGE at iengage.org.il



• By STEVE LINDE

If there were a “Jerusalem Post Remarkable Reader Award,” I would give it to Hilary Gatooff, a multi-talented immigrant from England.

On Monday, I visited Hilary in her elegant apartment at the Seven Stars House in Herzliya Pituach and presented her with a copy of *Front Page Israel*, which features historic covers of *The Jerusalem Post* over the past 80 years.

“My husband and I are very keen about what’s going on in the world, especially in Israel, and we’re always writing letters,” she says in her northern English accent. “And I’m a collector, so I’ve put all my collections together.”

The daughter of a doctor born in Hull, Hilary married a doctor, Barney, and made aliya from Bradford more than 50 years ago (in 1962), with three children under the age of five. They moved to the luxury retirement home in Herzliya almost 10 years ago after living in the suburban community of Zahala in northeast Tel Aviv, and today they have photographs of their three grandchildren (taken by Hilary) on the bedroom wall.

Between them, the Gatooffs have many talents and interests – music, theater, art, photography and filmmaking, to name just a few – and they are avid readers of *The Jerusalem Post*.

Hilary treasures her collection of well-preserved copies of historic newspapers, including the first issue of *The Palestine Post* on December 1, 1932, which she eagerly shows me.

“I have had these old newspapers for so long that I really don’t remember where I picked them up,” she says. “It was probably at Steimatzky’s during the last 50 years.”

Hilary has written several articles for the *Post* and more than 70 letters to the editor over the years (She has saved them all neatly in an album), and she and Barney still do the crossword puzzle every morning.

“As readers, we are always interested in what goes on, and prefer the views of the *Post* rather than the leftist views of the other newspapers, although some of my friends say their articles are better written, which is nonsense and only snobbishness,” Hilary says. “As a contributor, I am sometimes so interested in where we have been that I feel I want to share it with other people, e.g. the Channel Islands, the Rhine odyssey and Beth Shalom (in Nottinghamshire) run by two Christian brothers.

“As far as letter-writing goes, I sometimes get the urge to put across my point of view because I feel other people haven’t looked at the other side of the coin. When the letters are printed, I feel that the letters editor has agreed with

A collector of valor



HILARY GATOFF holds a copy of the first issue of ‘The Palestine Post’ in her apartment at the Seven Stars House in Herzliya. (Steve Linde)

my point of view and this gives me a good feeling, so I save it and put it in my collection.”

Hilary also has collections of photographs and slides from her many trips abroad with her husband, historical books and documents signed by their authors (including a letter written by David Ben-Gurion), paintings, woodcuts, musical recordings and films.

In England, Hilary studied piano (she got top marks in her Royal College of Music exam), as well as botany and zoology at Leeds University. She got a job in medical research, married Barney in 1956 and they moved to Bradford, where they built their own house.

“But one day, we went to London and saw a film called *Exodus* and that did the trick. The summer was so bad in the north of England that I said, ‘Let’s go to Israel.’”

“Instead of coming here on the Wings of Eagles as it says in the Bible, we came on the wings of El Al,” she quips.

They sold their home in Bradford, and after Barney had completed an ulpan in Netanya, settled in Zahala.

“I fell in love with it. It was a little like Bradford, which we had left,” she says. “There was a villa and a lovely garden.”

Once here, Barney worked as a GP for the Maccabi Health Fund while Hilary gave piano lessons to children in Zahala and produced 50 English plays at ZOA House, acting in half of them, sang in the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra choir and gave piano recitals.

After receiving a television diploma, she made short documentaries for Esvravision Community Television, on an Eng-

lish woman named Esta Azouz who made aliya at 87 and remained active until the age of 106, a South African man named Ron Lapid who started Burger Ranch in Israel, Dr. Sam Zebba, who founded The Campus Orchestra in Tel Aviv, a film on Machal titled *Volunteers of Valor, 1948*, and a 30-minute professional film on the Kindertransport, called *Kinder-Exodus, 1939*.

More recently, she has given lectures at Seven Stars House in English on the theater and in Hebrew on her aliya. Hilary says she and her husband are very happy at Seven Stars, which is not far from the Herzliya Marina.

It has a medical and security staff around the clock, weekly lectures in English and Hebrew, a choir and folk dance group, daily bridge games, exercise classes and a beautiful swimming pool with a mural painted at the sides. One of its residents is Mimi Reinhard, Oskar Schindler’s secretary.

Hilary recently completed her own memoirs in a self-published book called *Recollections*.

A day after my visit on Monday, Hilary emailed me: “*Front Page Israel* was so interesting that it will keep me happy for hours, although I was looking for a shelf deep enough to take it, and I finally found the bottom shelf in my small room, as it was the same length as my atlas!”

Asked what motivates her diverse interests and activities, Hilary says, matter-of-factly, “Opportunities seem to just fall on my lap sometimes. I like to look at the positive side in life, and do good things for other people and myself.”

A kinder, gentler and BETTER Israel!



• By REUVEN RIVLIN

The government of Israel remains well aware of its role as both a Jewish and democratic state and values the status and rights of people with disabilities. In fact, there is a meaningful connection between Jewish tradition and the principles of human rights. Regardless of the other pressing concerns that appear on the government’s agenda, the focus is never far away from the challenges of making life better for those citizens with special needs.

Everyone has limitations. I think I can safely say that I will never run a four minute mile – at least not in this lifetime. And while some of us may be mathematically gifted, others struggle with basic arithmetic. This has nothing to do with the development of emotional intelligence. To be human is to be different.

Individuals with special needs face hard barriers and difficult choices each and every day, but for our community to thrive, they must be an integral part of our lives and collective vision.

Unfortunately for all of us, there are still people who consider people with special needs to be “disabled” in every respect. Studies have proven this line of thinking to absurd. The fact of the matter is that many people with special needs display capability and creativity that go far beyond the talents of those who are considered “typical.”

Although our country is only 64 years old, Israel has come a long way in how people living with mental or physical disabilities are regarded. Much of the ongoing change has been a result of the collective voice of those with special needs and their advocates who alerted those in power to the inequality in education, employment and medical services. Disabled citizens and their advocates have helped bring these issues to the attention of governmental leaders and are demanding the services that are the right of

every citizen in our country.

Responding to this overdue call for justice, the Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law of 1998 went into effect and, subsequently, recognizes the fundamental rights of disabled individuals to enjoy the basic rights and constitutional freedoms and privileges that are available to every Israeli citizen. This includes barrier free access to polling places, minimum wage protection and preferential parking spaces at their places of employment.

Looking out from where I sit in the Knesset, I can assure anyone who is looking at our imperfect system that the nation’s legislative body is actively involved in raising awareness in order that, soon, all members of our diverse population will be treated as equal members of society in this colorful, multi-textured tapestry called Israel. Realizing that change begins at home, in recent years the Knesset has outfitted the building in order for it to be fully accessible to those with mobility challenges. This includes the Knesset plenum (ramp and raised podium), the committee meeting rooms, all hallways and adjacent work spaces. The adaptability features of our government center have made it a popular visiting site for students, tourists and others who are either able-bodied or living with disabilities.

The Knesset has made a concerted effort toward raising awareness and implementing inherent values of inclusion and celebrating differences. Just this past month, the Knesset Speakers Prize was bestowed upon associations and organizations that best promote equality for people with physical, mental and/or learning disabilities.

A key component of integrating citizens with disabilities is in the employment sector. In keeping with our policies, the roster of those who work in the Knesset building includes disabled veterans, men and women with Down syndrome, and others who provide valuable –

and valued – services that make the day-to-day legislative work run smoothly. I must admit that I frequently feel that we receive more from the contributions of these marvelous people than we offer. Their presence in the workplace reminds all of us that our entire country benefits from interactions that are ethical, humane and egalitarian-motivated.

We know. We are aware. More can be done. Nevertheless, it is important for people to remain cognizant that Israel has a long and proven track record in the “hope department.” In Israel, it is not uncommon to see children with Down syndrome on television programs and there are many exceptional parks for people with physical disabilities.

The new SHALVA National Children’s Center (under construction in the heart of Jerusalem) serves as an excellent example of the types of facilities that are becoming available to this population. This center will house the largest disability-accessibly playground and park in the country. In Israel, people who are mentally and/or physically challenged are “out there”; the Knesset has several members who are living with disabilities. Paraplegic war heroes are lead actors in several soap operas and athletes with disabilities like Keren Leibovitch enjoy fame and success. And one of Israel’s greatest “international ambassadors” is the world-renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman, who was afflicted with polio as a child.

Israel doesn’t shy away or back down from challenges that are “impossible” or “difficult.” Without a doubt, it has been the hallmark of our stubborn existence not to ask ourselves if something can be done but, rather, how to do it. We will not abandon the moral and societal obligations of making our society even more equitable and enjoyable for all its citizens.

The writer is speaker of the Knesset, and a Likud MK.

I shook the hand that blessed Barack Obama



• By TZVI GRAETZ

In the past few days, the Israeli news media have been filled with nothing but conjectures about which parties will make up the next government in Israel and when the prime minister will be sworn in. But this week, I was in Los Angeles for the Masorti Olami and Marom AMLAT Leadership Seminar, and all the Americans talked about was whether or not the singer Beyoncé lip-synched at the recent inauguration ceremony for President Barack Obama.

I spent this past Shabbat Shira at Ikar, a congregation in Los Angeles led by Rabbi Sharon Brous. Rabbi Brous is thought of as one of the most influential Jewish leaders in the United States. Who thinks this?

Not just me, but *Newsweek* magazine, which named her as such in its annual edition of the 50 most influential rabbis in America. The list is a veritable who’s who of rabbis from all over the spectrum: Haredim, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. This is the second year that Rabbi Brous has made this list.

In Rabbi Brous’s Dvar Torah on Shabbat morning, she spoke about blessing President Obama at the Presidential Inaugural Prayer Service, held on January 22 in Washington, the day after his second inauguration. Everyone in the congregation was excited to hear about this. At the service in Washington, there were several other influential clergy members, including three rabbis, of which Rabbi Brous was one.

Each clergy member was given a few private moments to meet with the president. She chose that moment to teach the president the midrash about Abraham and the burning mansion.

“Rabbi Isaac told the following parable. A man was traveling and saw a mansion in flames. ‘Who is the owner of this mansion? Is no one looking after it?’ he wondered.

“So, too, Abraham was wondering. Is it possible that the world should be without someone to look



RABBI SHARON BROUS

after it? The Holy One peered down at him and said, ‘I am the world’s owner.’” (Genesis Rabbah 39:1, adapted from Sefer Ha’Aggadah).

The message of the midrash teaches us that a leader must know how to locate the problem and to work hard to find a solution. Rabbi Brous then blessed the president, wishing upon him with insight to know how to locate the problem and to connect to it and to the people that these problems affect in society; those who are most weak and in need of help – not just in the US but all over the world.

She then continued and told the kehillah (community) about how the president was very excited about her words and that he praised her and the interesting midrash that she had shared with him.

During the interfaith Inaugural Prayer Service, Rabbi Brous also offered a prayer for hope asking Elohei Ahava (God of Love) to “pray that you bring your presence among us, as light, as life and as holy inspiration.”

The kehillah was very impressed and excited about the role that their own Rabbi Brous had played during the inauguration. When I went to shake her hand and wish her a Shabbat Shalom, I thought about two things: The first that I was shaking the hand of someone who had blessed the president of the USA on the eve of his second term.

The second, somewhat obvious but also somewhat sad, was that this incredible rabbi (who has taken a congregation that started with only two people nine years ago and turned it into one that now consists of more than 500 families) would never have been invited to a similar ceremony at the Knesset, the parliament of the Jewish state.

How is that possible? I pondered on the paradox that in America a Jewish leader of such vision and influence can be invited to stand before senators and presidents, while not even being considered a legitimate rabbi in the Jewish State of Israel. This is because she is a woman and therefore is forbidden to participate in a religious way in any government ceremony in Israel, and even if she would or could, would most likely be spit upon or spark some other outrageous act of violent protest.

This Shabbat, which as I mentioned was Shabbat Shira, is traditionally known as the Shabbat of women. The haftarah is about Deborah the Judge and Prophet who sings about the victory of the Israelites over Sisera and of course, the Torah portion about Miriam who sang and danced spontaneously after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. (Even in front of the men, God forbid!) It would take me another article and much time to expound upon this serious and complicated issue. I will leave that for another time.

Meanwhile, though, I pray and will continue to pray with all of my strength that there will come a day, in the Jewish state, my state, that a Jewish leader such as my dear friend, Rabbi Sharon Brous, will be invited to bless and to give hope to a nation that currently oppresses and denies her the ability to freely practice Judaism. Then, and only then, will we have truly finished crossing the Red Sea in the tradition of our ancestors, with a woman waiting on the other side to sing praises to God.

Rabbi Tzvi Graetz is executive director of Masorti Olami and MERCAZ Olami.