

Netanyahu's comeback – meeting the challenge

• By SRULIK EINHORN

This was the 12th election in which Benjamin Netanyahu headed the Likud party and the 5th for me as his campaign adviser. It was the most challenging election and, ultimately, the most successful one.

Over the past year, the Israeli public has become fed up with the unprecedented coalition, ranging from anti-Zionist Arab parties, whose members support terrorists who kill innocent Israelis, to right-wing parties that had promised their voters that they would never partake in such a coalition.

Nonetheless, winning the popular vote was a great challenge due to the need to overcome a very hostile mainstream media (most television channels, radio stations and newspapers) toward the Likud and its potential coalition members, while uncritically supporting the current government and hiding its failures, as well as the ongoing criminal proceedings conducted against Netanyahu almost daily and covered unjustly by that media.

Yet, Netanyahu led the Israeli right-wing to an outstanding majority in the Israeli parliament. As a result, he stands to govern stably for the next four years, therewith completing 20 years as prime minister of Israel.

Most importantly, the campaign team that I had the privilege to be part of had to first overcome the apathy of the Israeli voter. As is the case in other countries, voters in economically weak regions are less likely to go out and vote, despite their clear support for Netanyahu.

Moreover, this was the fifth election in three and a half years. The voters were tired and in a sense, the campaign team also felt exhausted. Campaign work requires creativity. It is hard to reinvent yourself time and again in five campaigns, and yet we had to do just that.

Our strategic decision that won the day was to focus on mobilizing our supporters rather than making efforts to convince voters in general.

After so many years with Netanyahu in Israeli politics, every Israeli has formed a firm opinion of him: a large majority loves him, and a significant and very vocal minority hates him.

At this point in time, we concluded that no one could be convinced one way or another. Therefore, in these elections, we



TEN MINUTES before the 10 p.m. exit poll announcements on election night, Benjamin Netanyahu and advisers, including the writer (standing center), consult and anticipate developments. (Ziv Koren)

decided that, for the first time, Netanyahu would not interview on the most powerful and popular television channel in Israel, namely Channel 12.

There was no point in doing that. Netanyahu's lovers will love and his haters will hate. This is not the way to win an election. The secret potion was made of digital, logistical and political work.

In an unprecedented manner, Netanyahu worked for his party, the Likud, as well as for the other parties that accepted his leadership. He worked tirelessly to unite parties at odds with each other and ensure that they ran together so that no votes would be lost if one of these parties didn't pass the threshold.

NETANYAHU'S COMPETITOR, Yair Lapid, did not know how to do this and his camp

lost 250,000 votes. Recognizing that the ultra-orthodox public was less inclined to vote, Netanyahu went to Bnei Brak (an orthodox religious city) to convince Orthodox voters to go out and vote for another party that would be part of his future coalition.

Since the previous elections, Likud has been working on identifying every voter and potential voter who stayed at home.

According to the estimate, 200,000 voters simply did not turn out to vote in 2021 because they thought Netanyahu was anyway going to win.

Out of 12,000 polling stations in Israel, all potential polling stations have been marked. In addition, we checked who lived on these streets and Netanyahu personally came to every neighborhood we identified as having a turnout problem.

Netanyahu is a rock star. So we prepared a mobile stage on wheels for him. That way, we could reach 4-5 neighborhoods each evening. Every time Netanyahu finished speaking, we saw a wave of enthusiasm to volunteer for the campaign and mobilize additional voters.

Most important of all were the digital tools. When discussing digital tools in elections, we usually discuss advertising on social networks, segmenting and micro-targeting.

We introduced additional tools: thousands of WhatsApp groups that spread our messages and ignited social networks. We sent millions of voice messages and managed to obtain a mandate that would otherwise have gone to the Left.

An AI bot we operated on a Telegram channel helped manage volunteers and uti-

lize them precisely where needed.

So, on Election Day, everyone knew what they had to do and where to go. An accurate campaign machine was built and no voter was left at home. One year without Netanyahu was enough for the public to realize how much he was missed.

Our job was to fuel this incredible engine: A 73-year-old man who never gets tired and never rests, with a mission to serve and protect Israel. None of his competitors have anything like it and it is impossible to invent anything like it because it's Netanyahu.

And in this election, the public has once again demonstrated its conviction that Netanyahu is simply the best prime minister for the citizens.

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What's the worst that can happen?

• By ZAKAI BENCHAIM

Voting Day and time to hit the polling place. Shower? Check. Dog walked? Check. Breakfast, workout, daughter up and dressed? Check, not yet, check. Fine. Let's go make history.

Whatever your morning routine, surely everyone faced with voting for the fifth time must have considered for the fifth time how our beloved little country would survive such a big decision for the fifth time.

And so, as I loaded my daughter into the back seat of the car – me, an obviously black, overtly Jewish, proudly gay father, with friends across all streams of Judaism and Israeli society, once considered a stranger by many and strange by a few, I wondered if we were becoming victims of fear.

When former president Donald Trump was elected, I posed what seemed a naive question to those around me who were still in shock: What's the worst that can happen? Some replied, "War, famine, poverty!" I dismissed answers like this then, as I dismiss them now. So then, after this momentous vote, I ask, again: What is the worst that can happen?

Some reply is loss of freedom, rollback of rights for the vulnerable, deportation of the oppressed and decriminalization of government corruption. Others say that had they not won, there would be no affirmation of Jewish identity or Zionism, nor further guarding of Torah. They say that leaders must be protected from what is perceived as vicious inquiry and prosecution. This is serious stuff and a lot to be considered.

But then, if our concerns and fears signal impending doom, rather than being simply a sign that we need some assistance, what is the point of hope or even prayer? How does one keep the worst from happening? Here are some ideas.

1. Put down our phones and slowly back away from our computers. Go find someone of an opposing persuasion and ask exactly what was their hope for the vote. This is real social media. Let's not ask the person just next to us ideologically, that's too easy. I suggest asking the person that frightens us the most. Make the conversation cringeworthy. That's how we really start learning from each other.

2. Try to see the supposed antagonist, as one sees one's self. Someone we really need. What if the person we think is an enemy shared valid fears of us? What if we are part of the problem?

3. Listen. Do not simply wait for a chance to have a say. Instead, listen like a person who has no idea how this is going to work out but still hopes to find a solution rather than agreement. Here, one should pause if one cannot see the value and the difference between the two.

4. Try imagining the next prime minister and a coalition willing to do what is best for everyone, within reason. This may seem trivial but it isn't. For the secularist, have you ever heard of a successful company with a negative vision statement? For the Torah scholar, do we not also see Hashem as having thought and then spoke our world into being? We can do the same. And just as it was in the beginning, there was no day without night and perhaps there can be no left without a right. It's called balance.

IMAGINE THAT: Balance. A place to begin again. Again.

What if then we only accepted real debate from leaders, rather than, (sigh) dialogue? This is coming from a writer living in a community with neighbors who are very different from himself but with whom is shared an amazing present and yes, a bright future, as well. What was just done by our voting was unimaginable 80 years ago. And though many were frustrated by the last outcome that prompted this historic vote, rather than storm the Knesset in some ill-conceived insurrection, instead we stormed our polling places and tried again.

That's what it means to be *Am Segula* (treasured nation): More treasured than chosen, we are capable of surviving anything, including dispute and debate. We know historically that our greatest disagreements have often laid the groundwork for our greatest achievements. Torah and time attest to this fact. For the Left, this is a time to learn from the Right, who finally got their acts together and worked together, even in the face of disagreement. For the Right, this is a time to show the Left and the rest of the world that the right hand of God is not the hand of *gevura* (harsh judgment), rather it is the hand of *hesed* (love and power in balance).

If we can do this, it can be a moment when wolves turn to lambs and say, "What the hell? Let's try it." After all, it doesn't say that the wolf needs to become the lamb, just be willing to share space with the lamb without threatening the lamb. And for the lamb giving space to the improbable is a change of heart from even the worst enemy.

So what's the worst that can happen? It may be naive to still hope for a world where coalitions are broken in favor of mutual cooperation and trust. I would suspect that for the broken, entrenched, and those defined by their disputes a world like this is exactly the worst thing that can happen.

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BENJAMIN NETANYAHU waves to supporters at Likud headquarters on election night, last week. For the Right, this is a time to show the world that the right hand of God is not of harsh judgment but of love, says the writer. (Ammar Awad/Reuters)

Between the hammer and the anvil

The critical choice of the next government in the Russia-Ukraine conflict

• By PINCHAS GOLDSCHMIDT

With the Russian authorities' moves to close the Jewish Agency and recent attacks from Russian officials against the Jewish community, Israel's ability to sit on the fence about the war in Ukraine is diminishing. Israel's next steps will directly affect the personal security of the Russian Jewish community and also the security map in the Middle East.

The incoming government must provide a clear strategy in relation to the war and refugees. Will the government respond to Russian aggression with sanctions against the Russian government? Should the government prepare for a large-scale absorption of refugees from both countries?

After more than half a year since the beginning of the Russian campaign in Ukraine, the face of Europe has changed and Europe is now dealing with refugees not seen since World War II. Nearly 15 million residents of Ukraine were displaced from their homes because of the war, and about 6.7 million fled their country and dispersed to other countries.

Since the actions to close the Jewish Agency in Russia and President Vladimir Putin's announcement of a military draft, there has been a significant acceleration in the number of Jewish immigrants to Israel, with the understanding that the Iron Curtain is slowly coming down on the citizens of Russia again. We, the Conference of European Rabbis, also mobilized for the Jews in Ukraine and Russia and provided shelter, food, clothing and assistance for Ukrainian refugees in host countries such as Poland, Romania, Hungary, Germany and Israel.

Faced with these dangers, Israel's new government will have to express a clear position that will include concrete actions in the conflict and not just condemnations or expressions of solidarity from afar. When Aleksey Pavlov, secretary of the Security Council of Russia, published a document that claimed that "Chabad activity is nothing less than satanic," the Israeli government should have responded strongly.

We must remember that Russia has no fewer interests in Jerusalem



ISRAEL MUST use all its resources to untie bureaucratic cables in the reception of olim from Russia, says the writer. (Eli Itkin/CER)

than Israel has in Moscow. When the Russian government creates difficulties for the Jewish way of life in Russia, the Israeli government has enough levers of pressure to respond to the attacks against Russia's Jews by placing sanctions against the Russian interests in Jerusalem. It is clear to everyone that Israel also has the option of responding in a completely different way, which will affect the war in Ukraine.

Anyone who knows the particulars of the Jewish community in Russia knows that there is a clear trend on the part of the Russian government to restrict Jewish education in the country and Israel must respond to this.

Israel, meanwhile, has clear strategic considerations vis-a-vis Russia that affect its room to maneuver in Lebanon and Syria; the power of ambiguity as strategy is clear here. But as the Russian aggression mounts against the Diaspora Jewish community and the national interests of Israel, the status quo is no longer sustainable.

Additionally, the incoming government must create an organized initiative for refugees from Ukraine and Russia, one that would buy them a bright and clear future in Israel. According to official esti-

mates, about 75,000 members of the Jewish community from Russia have already left the country and at least 25,000 Russian Jews have arrived in Israel. Tens of thousands moved to countries in the region and have not come to Israel. As time passes and the Iron Curtain descends across Russia, the opportunity for the Jewish community to leave shrinks.

Israel must use all its resources to untie bureaucratic cables in the reception of olim from Russia. The state must urgently move to ease the way for new immigrants to open bank accounts and move their assets from Russia, and ease the bureaucratic procedures and waiting times related to the processes of confirming the Jewish identity of the immigrants so that they can pick up the pieces and start a new life in Israel.

Now, more than ever, the Jewish communities in Europe need to hear a clear and distinct voice from the Israeli government. This is an issue of strategic importance to Israel, which should be handled directly by the incoming prime minister in Jerusalem.

The writer is the president of the Conference of Rabbis of Europe. He served as the chief rabbi of Moscow from 1993-2022.