



Israel's Quest for Stability

The happy ending of the Purim story is that instead of the wicked Haman, King Achashverosh's new viceroy was Mordechai HaYehudi.

But even then, after Haman and his sons are dead and the Jews are no longer at risk, the last verse of the Megillah recounts how Mordechai still did not please everyone:

“For Mordecai the Jew was viceroy to King Achashverosh, and great among the Jews and accepted by most of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and interceding for the welfare of all his kindred.”

One can look at this verse with frustration and think how ungrateful the Jewish people were to Mordechai, who kept them alive in exile. Much like the complaints of the Israelites to Moshe after their liberation and the parting of the Red Sea, the Jews of Persia appear petty.

Nevertheless, the fact that Mordechai was even accepted by most of his brethren is impressive by today's standards. Amid hyperpolarization, on March 23, Israel is going to its fourth election in under two years, because no leader has obtained the support of a majority of Israel's nine million citizens.

Like Moshe, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is from the tribe of Levi, and like Mordechai, he boasts of his successes in saving the Jewish people from enemies in present-day Iran.

Netanyahu is the longest serving prime minister in Israel's history after winning elections in 1996, 2009, 2013 and 2015 and remaining in power after the three inconclusive elections of 2019-20. The current race is yet another referendum

on his leadership, in which he faces four disadvantages he did not have in the previous three.

1. He lost part of his political bloc when he left the right-wing Yamina Party out of his current governing coalition. Yamina leader Naftali Bennett now says he is running against him for prime minister.

That leaves Netanyahu's bloc with only his own Likud, Haredi parties and the Religious Zionist Party, which may not cross the 3.25% electoral threshold. Unless those parties obtain a majority of the Knesset's 120 seats, Netanyahu would need the support of the angry Bennett to form another government.

Netanyahu also faces New Hope, a new party led by former Likud minister Gideon Sa'ar. Unlike past alternatives to his leadership, Netanyahu cannot disparage either New Hope or Yamina by calling their leaders leftist.

2. Netanyahu cannot campaign by warning about dangers from Israeli Arabs, as he has successfully in previous races. In a gamble, Netanyahu instead built an alliance with United Arab List leader Mansour Abbas, placed Arab educator Nael Zoabi on the Likud list, and promised he would appoint Zoabi a minister.

3. Netanyahu's trial on charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust is in full swing. Having to face the charges in court shortly before the election could either harm him politically or boomerang and strengthen him among his political base that views this trial as a witch-hunt.

4. The final disadvantage is that Netanyahu no longer has Donald Trump as US President. Ahead of recent Israeli

elections, Trump took steps that helped Netanyahu politically.

Despite these disadvantages, Netanyahu also has three new advantages:

1. He can celebrate his peace agreements with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates. The agreements reinforce the Likud's message that Netanyahu is by far Israel's most experienced and worldly leader.

2. His success in making Israel the “Vaccination Nation.” The Jewish State has vaccinated a much higher percentage of its people than any other country, helping ease the health and economic crises caused by the coronavirus.

3. The final advantage is that his challengers are more divided than ever. The “anyone but Bibi” camp has parties in the right, left and center of the political map. The leader of the largest party running against him, Yair Lapid, has been ruled out by the Haredi parties, so he would have to unite a very wide spectrum of parties to build a coalition, which could prove very difficult.

If Netanyahu, Lapid, Sa'ar and Bennett cannot form a government, Israelis would have to endure yet another election in the fall.

This instability will continue until Israel finally has a leader who – like Mordechai – is accepted by most of his brethren.

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