

Dr. Sharon Goldman



## Reflections on Elections

# Sharing a Plate of Hummus

In the corner of a plaza off the main road in Raanana sits a hummus restaurant. This particular hummus place, half of a rivalry that has continued for decades with the “other” hummus store directly across the street, is run by a man who moved with his family from Ethiopia when he was a child. He speaks perfect Hebrew, with some Amharic phrases thrown in for color when necessary.

The restaurant has been operating throughout the entire Corona shut-down, with “takeout” that can be eaten on the benches directly outside the restaurant. But as the owner explains, “I would prefer to pay a fine than not to see my friends and family.” All his customers are family: from the Moroccan “only Bibi” voter to the Ashkenazi Meretz supporter (“He is totally confused politically. But if everyone agreed, we couldn’t have the fun of arguing,” says the owner) to my daughter’s half African-American fiancé (“My brother!” exclaims the owner as he hands him a free soda). People from across my neighborhood, even those who don’t particularly enjoy hummus, have continued to visit the restaurant, simply to engage one another in heated conversations around current events – mostly Corona, the economy and the government’s responses.

If you want a symbol of what makes Israel a special place, even – or maybe especially – during this very difficult year of Corona and as we pass our fourth (!) election in two years, this restaurant and its owner are it.

They represent a country of immigrants, where my in-spite-of-my-best-efforts-still-strongly-accented Hebrew is seen as charming; a country where political disagreements are taken seriously, but those yelling at each other can still share a meal. A country where

challenges around difference in race or background are acknowledged but not reified. It is a place where one can have heated debates that escalate to actual yelling, but always end with a smile, a slap on the back and a *lehitraot* (see you again soon).

This is not to say we don’t have real problems in Israel, all of which have been exacerbated by Corona. Setting the tone, and perhaps unintentionally but nonetheless definitely condoning the vitriol, are many of our political leaders whose fractious disagreements continue to turn personal. Both sides have accused the other of being responsible for the deaths of thousands; language that would have been bleeped from TV a decade ago is used to describe opponents, and parties have split into factions. This escalation of political rancor has serious consequences. It not only too often causes political paralysis at a time when action is desperately needed, but it is also reflected in civil society in ways that are both insidious and destructive.

One newscaster said, somewhat nostalgically, “When I was a child and got into a fight in school, the Principal would send both me and the other child home to think about how to improve our behavior. President Rivlin should just send them all home.” One wonders if, at a minimum, they would not all do well with a short break – each in their own time-out corners – to think about the appropriate behavior for elected leaders.

With a fourth election around the corner, some of these leaders have actually been sent home – not by the Principal, but by the voters. Any party which failed to meet the minimum threshold of 3.25% of votes will not be returning. In what can be characterized as both the most and the least democratic of parliamentary systems – given the tremendous power handed to the small parties whose seats are wooed by the winning party in order to reach the magical number of 61 – every voter has the ability to influence the outcome.

There are many pressing issues in Israel: security concerns, the pressure on our hospital system, the critical state of our economy in the face of Corona, the mental health of citizenry – and none of them should be minimized. But I think it is critical that Israelis also demand civility from their elected representatives.

Perhaps I should invite our politicians to come join me at my local hummus restaurant and learn from the real people of Israel how to behave in the face of disagreements: understand we are all brothers and sisters who may hold radically different perspectives, but all truly want the best for one another. Let’s make those who can’t seem to get along share a plate of hummus and pita. It can only help.

**Dr. Sharon Goldman** is a frequent speaker and writer on such topics as Zionism, the American-Jewish diaspora, and the U.S.-Israel relationship.

