

## **“Democracy: Necessary But Not Sufficient, Picking Teams Is Just the Beginning”**

**February 14, 2009 / 20 Shevat 5769**

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This past week there was an amazing election in Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu, former Prime Minister and head of the Likud Party, according to all polls, was enjoying a lead going into the elections. It seemed pretty clear to every Israeli that he was going to, once again, rest control of the government. Tzipi Livni had burst onto the scene when Ariel Sharon, then Prime Minister, was unable to carry out his duties after suffering a stroke. Though Ehud Olmert assumed the party's leadership, his consistent legal problems have forced him to step down, leaving the extremely deft Livni to assume the mantle. She did well, but no matter how articulate she was she could not outrun the decline of her progressive party. It was Livni who was suffering in the polls and, unfortunately, Ehud Barak was nowhere to be heard. To complicate things even further, Avigdor Lieberman of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party showed up uninvited.

To sum up, Israel used to have two major parties – Likud and Labor. Sharon, disenchanted with Likud, left and formed Kadima. The pie now had to be split into thirds rather than halves. Enjoying the largest slice of the pie was Bibi Netanyahu who would become Prime Minister. However, there were still two wrinkles to work out; one, the election still had to take place and two, a government had to be assembled. In the strangest of turns, Livni's Kadima party won more seats. Notwithstanding Kadima's victory claims, and its leader Tzipi Livni's insistence that the people of Israel have given her their backing, Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu can now hope to build a narrow coalition majority with "natural" allies while Livni cannot.

To simplify even further, remember when you were a kid and there was a pick-up game. Two captains were chosen and then those two picked who they wanted on their team. Well, that is what is going on in Israel right now. Livni and Netanyahu are picking teams. Whoever puts together the best team wins, or as far as Israeli politics goes, the one who puts together a coalition gets to govern. According to many sources, Bibi has the best chance of putting together a team. It's not so much about who the captain is but rather who's on the team. Many are distrustful of Bibi. Some don't like his politics and some don't like his personal reputation while others adore him and agree with his hard line approach. However, even as Prime Minister he doesn't get to make all of the decisions. In fact, key ministerial positions will have to be given away to build the coalition.

The lesson here is that in a true democracy no one person has all of the control or authority. The power is in the hands of the people and that is the very definition of Democracy. Israel and America are connected by this ideology. We recall the language of the Gettysburg Address in the immortal words of Abraham Lincoln: “That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” If democracy is truly going to work, power cannot and must not be consolidated into one person. It just won't work. The people must produce the leaders. These leaders must come from the people and they must be trusted by the people. This is a lesson we learned all too well, not only from this past week's news, but from this week's Torah reading as well.

Soon after the Exodus, it is clear that Moses is overwhelmed. Governance of a people is hard, long and demanding work. It takes personal commitment, strength and time. It's clear he can't do it all himself. So, his father-in-law makes a simple, but extraordinary suggestion. “*Lo tuchal asohu levadecha*” – “You are not able to perform it yourself alone.” (Exodus 18:18) Yitro says, “It can't be done alone and a good leader must surround themselves with good leaders.” He offers some advice on

to how to evaluate these leaders. You must determine if they have the raw material with which to work. So he tells Moses that they must be *anshei chayil*, capable people, *yirei elohim*, God-fearing people, *anshei emet*, trustworthy people, and *son'ey betza*, people who spurn ill-gotten gain.

Would that all of our leaders could live up to these criterion? Would that we could trust all of our leaders? Would that all of our leaders would live with conviction above reproach? Would that all people who sought public office were more perfect than they actually are? These ought to be our standards and these types of people ought to be our prospects. It is Targum Yonatan that clarifies this astonishing expectation when he further recommends what Yitro really desires of leadership. They should study and pray, visit the sick, bury the dead, perform acts of kindness, and uphold justice.” Now we can begin to realize how unrealistic this is.

Four verses later, Moses agrees with his father-in-law with regards to setting up a government, yet the text alters the criterion. Chapter 18, verse 24: Our holy Torah teaches, “*Vayishma Moshe et kol chotno*, and Moses listened to his father in law *Vayaas kol asher amar*, he did everything his father had told him to do. *Vayivchar Moshe anshei chayil*, and Moses chose capable people.” That’s it. He chose capable people. So I am forced to ask, what about all of those other characteristics? What about being God fearing? What about being trustworthy? What about people who spurn ill-gotten gains? What about the kind, righteous people Targum Yonatan refers to?

Then I hear Moses whispering in my ear. Come on, give me a break, these individuals don’t exist. I’m doing the best I can with what I have. I need some help, I can’t do this job myself and the ideal really doesn’t exist. Moses is telling us, “You can hold me to that standard, you can believe in me, but I can’t vouch for everyone else who seeks to serve. I’ll do my best to put the right people in the right positions but some are going to fall short of the mark.” May I suggest that we have reasonable expectations for the character of those who will govern.

Truthfully, we want more than that and we deserve better than that. That is why these past few weeks have been so disappointing. We have watched as President Obama chose people to assist him governing, those who have clearly fallen short of the mark. In some cases they were confirmed and in some cases their shortcomings, even criminal behavior, were too much to bear and they were not chosen. That is right and that is correct. We trust our leaders to make choices that are in our best interest and we trust that they are doing just that. However, I’m still disappointed because I want leaders that are, as Targum Yonatan describes, people who visit the sick, bury the dead, perform acts of kindness, and uphold justice. Moses knows the reality. Those selected are necessary but not sufficient. Yes, you have to be smart but that isn’t enough. You have to stand for something. Charisma is a plus but it is not everything, you must believe in something. If you want to achieve something in life you have to have passion, not just a plan. The list of characteristics includes strength, wisdom, morals and values.

Moses modifies Yitro’s list because he knows there is a difference between real world politics and the ideals. We all know what we want in an ideal leader but the problem is we only have what we have. Obama represented what we thought to be an ideal, and I continue to believe in the man. I believe, like government in general, he can be an instrument for good. People in government are going to disappoint us from time to time. We often speak in terms of big government and smaller government when what we really want is the right government made of the right people. Government is the place where people come together for the common good and, therefore, they have to be good people.

The past couple of weeks have been disappointing, but the beginning of this week gave me hope. On

Tuesday, President Obama left the White House, left the world of confirmation hearings and cabinet appointments and made his way out to the real world. He found himself in Fort Meyers, Florida where a woman named Henrietta Hughes, a homeless woman, asked the President for help. Our President was in the midst of doing a town hall meeting when she broke down in front of thousands. Henrietta told the President that she and her son have been homeless for more than a year. They are living in a pickup truck. Then our President did the most amazing thing. First he asked her to tell him her name again because he wanted to know who she was. Then he went over to her and hugged her, an exceedingly sincere act of kindness.

After the interaction he said his staff would help. A staffer later gave her a card of the head of the city housing authority and she was told he would help her. Soon after the meeting ended she was offered a home. Although this has been a troublesome couple of weeks for our President, this was a glimmer of light. I think it was the President's way of saying, "I remember why I got into this business. I know what I am about and yes, I have already made mistakes – I imagine there will be more, but at the end of the day, if we can each reach out to just one person, make one life better, then we will have accomplished something great. So to you I say the same thing. None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes, but our story must never end on that note. We can become the people Targum Yonatan dreams of, people who visit the sick, bury the dead, perform acts of kindness, and uphold justice. The President did it. I do it. You can do it too. Our government is a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," and we must be that person.

When I was a child, I remember how my friends and I longed for recess. We couldn't wait to play tag but I would dread a pick-up game. I remember this like it was yesterday, the feeling of being picked last, or worse, not getting picked at all. I remember the pain I would feel as the captain would scan past my eyes looking for the bigger kid, the kid perceived to be the better athlete. The pressure of getting picked last was sometimes hard to endure. Then one day something worse happened. I was chosen as captain. Now I had to make the choices, I had to look past Larry Abramowitz, the guy who was always picked last. Then like a burst of brilliance I went back to Larry. I knew he couldn't catch a ball worth a bean but he was my friend and I wasn't going to leave him for last. We got clobbered that day. I don't think we scored a run, but we had fun and I think we both learned a really important lesson. When you are in charge you have to do the right thing, the kind thing, the just thing. I am not sure who thought of the idea of picking sides because it seems like a cruel exercise in evaluation of worth, but it does teach an important lesson. When you are the captain, you get to pick the sides and you get to decide how the game is played.