
AN INTERVIEW WITH NACHMAN SHAI

The May 1996 Israeli elections were the closest in the country's 48-year history. Likud party candidate Binyamin Netanyahu's narrow victory over Labor's Shimon Peres was a watershed event from two perspectives.

First, 1996 marked the inception of a new electoral law in Israel. In previous elections, Israelis voted only for their party of choice. The party gaining the most parliamentary seats had the prerogative to form a government headed by the party leader, who then became the prime minister. The new law allows citizens to vote directly for the prime minister—as well as for their party. In contrast to the previous system, the candidate winning the prime ministership is given the right to form a government, even if his or her party does not gain the most seats in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. The new power afforded the prime minister elicits many new governance issues and brings to the fore the image and personality of the candidate during the campaign process.

Second, this election revealed the intense political divisions existing in Israel with respect to the Madrid and Oslo peace processes. These divisions were not a new phenomenon but were exacerbated following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 and the wave of terrorist bombings in early 1996. More than a year after Rabin's murder at the hand of a fellow Israeli, it is unclear what character the peace process will take and how soon it will move forward—if at all.

Nachman Shai is currently Director-General of Israel's Channel Two television station. He was instrumental in forming Israel's second television station in the early 1990s and in breaking the government monopoly on television programming. Prior to this position, Brigadier General Shai was head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman's unit. As IDF spokesman, Shai gained national fame for his soothing presence on the radio and TV during the Scud missile attacks of the Persian Gulf War. Before reaching this post, he held various positions in the media, including serving as a reporter and editor for Israel Radio and Israel Television, as press advisor at Israel's United Nations delegation, and as press secretary at Israel's Embassy in Washington.

During his tenure as a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University in 1996, The Forum asked Shai to share his thoughts on the 1996 elections.

The interview was conducted October 8, 1996, by Sara Mason and Jessica Lieberman of The Fletcher Forum and Jason Ader, a Fletcher student who spent several years working at Israel's Embassy in Washington.

What were the most important issues in the 1996 election?

I think the most important issues were peace and security. Those two words played a major role. During the elections, there was not much difference reflected in attitude between the two parties. Likud called for a secure peace and Labor called for peace and security. Both probably meant different things, but basically they used the same words. The public was either misled by those words or was looking for a different interpretation of peace. When Netanyahu spoke about peace he didn't mean Oslo, he meant his own peace. That's quite clear now.

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Were people aware of that before the elections?

I'm not sure. Not in the proportion that the election results suggest, where 60 percent of the Jewish population of Israel voted for Netanyahu and 40 percent for Peres. This is a little above the 50-50 split of the total Israeli population during the election.

Or, you could say that people did understand that there was a different interpretation of peace, and they voted for a different peace—I'm not sure. Netanyahu did his best to show his peace policy would be similar to Shimon Peres', and he got the vote as much as possible from the center segment of Israeli voters. Most Israelis are in the center. If there is a leader who can persuade Israelis that he is leading the country toward peace, he will gain their support. After the series of terrorist attacks on Israelis, the major ones in February and March, people were much more sensitive to their own security. Netanyahu said he would offer a higher degree of security. That helped them decide.

Do you think Netanyahu deceived the public?

I think he played the political game. I'm not sure that there are words like deception or lies in politics. I think that most politicians do whatever they feel will bring them to power. Once they are in power, they may do things other than what they promised their voters during the election campaign.

This was the first time the Israeli prime minister was elected by a direct vote. Could you explain the new electoral process?

It is now a split vote. You vote for the prime minister and for your own party. As a result, the Labor Party has a larger numerical representation in the Knesset. But that doesn't mean much, because once Netanyahu was elected directly he was invited by the president to form a new government. In the past, that role went to the leader of the party with the most votes. All the provisions in the new law make the prime minister stronger than in the past. It is still a parliamentary system but some of the powers are given to the new prime minister.

Now, we have a government which is like cement. You can not move this

government from power. According to the new electoral system, if the Knesset votes the government down, the Knesset itself will fall. I'm not familiar with any politician who has fought for years, especially during election campaigns in Israel which are very tough, and at the last moment, after he's elected to the Knesset, would bring the government down and go home and try to fight his way back into the center of Israeli political life. In this way, Netanyahu is promised four years in power. In four years he can do many things; he enjoys a lot of freedom that none of his predecessors ever had.

When was the new bill on direct election of the prime minister introduced?

A strong extra-parliamentary movement worked on changing the electoral system in Israel and [the bill] was approved by the last Knesset. Likud was against the reform; Labor was in favor. It was decided by one vote. In fact, Netanyahu voted for the bill—against his party—and that turned out to be instrumental in making him prime minister.

What lessons can be learned for future elections?

Labor hasn't yet digested the outcome of the elections. It's not so much that Netanyahu won, but that Labor lost. Once you are in power it's generally difficult to be defeated, as it should have been after the assassination of Rabin. Right after the assassination, Labor had a 20 percent to 25 percent advantage in the polls. Labor totally mishandled the campaign. They didn't have a clear message. The confusion helped Likud. For example, they did not mention the Rabin assassination even though we all knew that the assassination was the reason for the early elections. The elections were originally scheduled for one year after the assassination but were moved up to six months after, because there was no elected prime minister in Israel. Shimon Peres was convinced that he could go to the public and get a new vote of confidence. He should have had his own clear policy pointing out first of all that Yigal Amir, the assassin of Rabin, wanted not only to kill the man but also to kill the policy. And he [Yigal Amir] succeeded in changing the course of Israel.

Netanyahu was a better campaigner than Shimon Peres. By advocating a secure peace, he persuaded many Israelis who had planned on voting for Peres to vote for him. He said he would have a strong policy calling for security, on the one hand, and a peace policy on the other hand. No one really asked him how he would be able to do both at the same time.

Further, Labor didn't campaign until the last month. They thought that they could win by keeping a low profile and running the government. By making headlines everyday and visits all over the world, with international summits and visits to Paris and the White House, they may have had the mistaken belief that they would always be in power. But in that manner they did not reach the thinking of the people in the small cities and settlements. Politicians must talk to the people, shake their hands, spend time, open their eyes and ears. They must talk to 600,000 Russians who came to Israel in the last five years and become familiar with their problems. In the end, the Russians voted for Netan-

yahu or for their own new party, which now has seven Knesset members fighting for their own interests.

The polls showed Labor's lead narrowing; week after week [the gap] came down. In the end there was no lead because there was no campaign. It is clear to me if Labor had understood that they were almost losing, they would have run a fierce campaign, even at the last moment. But they didn't want to irritate the right or those right of center. They were not able to mobilize those supporting them to come and participate and take part in this democratic process. The Labor candidates and party members were not in the streets on election day.

Peres knew that he had never won an election in Israel, and he had a responsibility to continue a historical process that he was committed to. He should have also tried harder to beat the historical attitude [of people] voting against him. He did very little. A recent Labor party investigation after the elections showed that there was no attempt to look at various interest groups like Arabs, Russian Jews, and Sephardic Jews.

Since 1977, the religious parties have supported Likud. Labor should have done something to bring them back to Labor's side. They should have known these things. Now Netanyahu will decide what kind of policy he would like to have in the next four years.

The religious parties took a big step forward in the recent election. Could you comment on what impact that will have on domestic society?

The religious parties take full advantage of the democratic system. They know that once in four years they have a chance to mobilize all their power at the polls and enjoy the political power for the next four years. In every election, more people vote for the religious parties. While the religious parties are generally not united—when it comes to elections, they are.

The system can support a rise in their power. But the religious parties are very skillful; they are always in the coalition. They need the government and the budget for their education system from kindergarten to *Yeshivot*, higher education institutions. They negotiate with the government by supporting programs in exchange for monetary support. There was a big fight after the elections over who would serve as religious minister because [the ministry] allocates over \$300 million to education and culture. They all want to have their own share. The religious parties are concentrating on that, and they will let other Jews run their own lives. We [Israelis] can eat non-Kosher food or go to a movie on Friday night. There will be no change in the status quo. There will be new bills but they will not be supported by the whole Knesset.

What does the election of Netanyahu mean for the future of the peace process?

This is a political question about which everyone will have his own view. I hope that it will continue. As an Israeli citizen, I would like to see peace. But peace has different interpretations. I still believe that Netanyahu will hold to the basic peace process—but maybe I'm wrong. Since he's come to power, the Middle East situation has deteriorated a lot, including military tensions between

Israel and Syria and terrible violence between Israeli troops and Palestinian police. Netanyahu is coming from the right. He will not adopt the peace process as it is. He will try to modify it. The question is whether he will be able to do this if faced with American opposition, and EC opposition which is already very vocal, and if Israel must face endless votes in the UN Security Council. The world is different now and not just in the sense that things are different between Israel and Palestinians. There is no more Cold War. In the new world atmosphere, the world will not accept another round of hostilities in the Middle East. It will not be the same as in the past. And Israel cannot stand alone. The support of the Jewish people, especially in the United States, is not enough. Netanyahu is very Americanized, probably as a result of the many years he spent in the United States. I'm not sure that he is looking for a confrontation with the U.S. government. But it's all speculation. We don't know. Now we have the key question of the previous government's agreement to withdraw from Hebron. This is a case we can learn from.

The Israeli stock market seems to move in tandem with the peace process, so given those economic pressures, is the peace process reversible?

Netanyahu is the first Israeli prime minister who understands economics. That's the result of his education in the United States and his experience as a businessman. In his first few weeks in office, he surprised many Israelis with his attitude towards the economy. He will be the first to read what the stock market in Israel is calling for.

Since the signing of the peace agreement three years ago, Israel has enjoyed tremendous support from the world business community. There has been a new era of investment. But companies are not Zionists; they are looking for stability in order to make money. Netanyahu and the entire country understand that a strong Israel means a strong economy. The fact that the United States still provides Israel with \$3 billion a year is a miracle. This will not last forever. Our defense budget is higher than any other country proportionally and therefore we have less expenditures and economic growth in other sectors.

What does the election mean for domestic policy, specifically economic policy and privatization?

Netanyahu committed himself to privatization, and he promised once he took power that in less than a year government corporations will be privatized. It should take much longer for the infrastructure companies such as electricity, roads, and communications. Netanyahu created the National Infrastructure Ministry for Ariel Sharon, who made it clear on the very first day that he is not going to hand over control to anyone. Plus, Netanyahu doesn't have the time because defense and foreign policy will keep him busy.

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In the media in 1994, the Israeli government gave licenses to groups to produce television programs—and it's been a huge success. There is now a big advertising business that didn't exist three years ago. Radio is a new market which will work as well. I'm sure the country is ready for less government control and more private powers taking over and using initiative and imagination. There is always a security argument, such as the one about privatizing the communications company, which would give international actors information about the Israeli national communications system. In times of war, it's not that simple.

More than half of the Israeli population has cable television. How does that kind of penetration affect the views of Israelis now that there is more than one competitor to the state-run channel?

We are one of the leading countries in the world in terms of the penetration of cable. It represents the constant hunger of Israelis for a variety of everything, including information. I attribute this partly to breaking the siege after so many years. I believe that a revolution took place in Israeli media by breaking the one channel [monopoly] on television and radio. By opening cable and then moving to a second channel on television, I believe we changed the ground rules of information in Israel. No one can tell the people what they will watch, how, when or how long. No government can manage the information going to the public because there is always another source of information. The world media surrounds us with CNN, European and Middle Eastern TV. If both Israeli channels decide not to carry a story, Israelis can turn to CNN.

What role did the media play in this election?

A very large one. This election showed the inability of Peres to play the game according to the new ground rules that he accepted. The new rules mean that you have to look good on television. Peres did not want to give in to that pressure, and I can understand that. He has been in politics a long time. He felt that Israelis would vote for him based on his record. He didn't realize that he can't take his record for granted.

The importance of the media was Netanyahu's greatest advantage. He speaks both Hebrew and English without accent. He knows how to answer the questions and play the game. The 25 years between the two candidates was apparent on television. That's part of democracy today in this generation—image is very important.

And this really had historical implications, because Peres' failure to play this game cost him the election. The 30,000 votes were all he needed.

