

Blog Post: The Collapse of the Labor Party

Several years ago, I arrived in Israel on a day that featured a fake funeral in Nablus. A procession of militants was snaking its way through the streets, bearing a stretcher on which lay – so it was assumed – the corpse of a fallen comrade. Suddenly, there was a very loud bang – whereupon the “corpse” leaped from the stretcher and fled.

All this was captured on television. I turned to friends after seeing the spectacle, and remarked, “This is like the Labor party, except in reverse. Here you have a live man playing dead; in the Knesset, you have a dead party playing alive.

Or: Remember the necrophiliac who was hauled to court for having had relations with a cadaver? He begged for the court’s mercy: “First of all,” he said, “it wasn’t any old cadaver; it was my wife. And then, how was I supposed to know she was dead?”

I suppose I should step back and be coolly analytic about all this. Parties come, parties go, history is fickle and all that. But I am of the generation that once saw Labor as virtually synonymous with the state itself. That was ultimately a childish perception, but in the context of the times it was not outlandish. In the early years of independence, it was roughly accurate to think of Israel as a federal state, with its component parts not being, as here, the several states but, instead, the several parties. Parties had newspapers and youth movements, banks and housing projects, insurance companies and more. They had serious discipline, as well. Once, in the early ‘50s, Mapai (the large Labor party of the day) expelled one of its leaders, a man named Eliezer Livneh, for buying too grand an apartment. And Mapai ran the Histadrut, which was both the nation’s labor union and its major employer, owning construction companies, food distribution companies and so forth.

Now, even writing these things makes me feel like I have stepped into a bath of tepid water – tepid and stagnant. It has been a very long time since Labor has been a vanguard of anything. It has some very good people, but since 1967 at least it has largely lost whatever sheen it once had. Cronyism, elitism, arrogance, the collapse of the kibbutz movement, the passing of the torch of vanguard to others, the sundry delights of power, the corruptions of an occupying power. All this while its power was in fact ebbing. A notable lack of political and ideological courage.

And now, of course, it has decided to stay on as part of the Olmert coalition despite Avigdor Lieberman’s entry into that coalition, with the exalted rank of Deputy Prime Minister.

I have not spoken this week with any of my friends in Labor to find out their reasons for having stayed. I suppose they have the expected rationalizations – they can do more good on the inside than on the outside, they have forced Olmert to make demands of Lieberman that he might otherwise not have made, there’s the social and economic agenda to care about, and so forth. There is truth to all these. And there is also truth to

the fear that were the government to fall, Labor would likely suffer badly in new elections. Truth as well in the fear that were the government not to fall, it would lurch still more violently rightward.

But all those truths seem to me less powerful than the disgrace of staying. I note with distress that in all the post-Lieberman talk, mention has been made of only some of the Labor ministers who've stayed – Amir Peretz, Isaac Herzog, Eitan Cabel and Binyamin Ben Eliezer. Curiously omitted from most reports have been two others: Shimon Peres and Yuli Tamir. Only Ophir Pines-Paz had the decency to quit. (Of him, Yossi Sarid, once the leader of Meretz, a Knesset member from 1973 to 2005 and a cabinet minister for a time, wrote in Ha'Aretz, for which he now writes regularly, "I want merely to tell Pines that there is life after this defeat. If his luck is good, he will be able to write articles for the newspaper.)

Peres is no surprise. Indeed, he's technically not a Labor minister at all, having joined Olmert before the recent elections. Yuli Tamir, who was Amir Peretz's political intimate during the election campaign and now serves as Minister of Education, is a surprise, and I don't know what to make of her decision.

But the bottom line of all this is that Labor has, it seems to me, written its suicide note.

Amir Peretz, not long ago the hope for fresh air in the government, is now the least popular leader in Israel, with an approval rating of 12 percent. (Olmert's is at 20 percent.) These days, he appears to seek to be all thing to all men, uttering solid left/liberal statements in the morning and directing a stream of oppressive actions in Gaza in the afternoon. He imagines, I suppose, that in time he will redeem himself. Politics invites such self-delusion.

And the rest? No matter.

So we will now begin a time of realignment. There will be, in due course, a left/liberal party in Israel, and it will find its voice. But it is likely to be in opposition for a considerable period. Absent a major and entirely unlikely breakthrough in the peace process, it is the likes of Netanyahu and Lieberman who will come to dominate the political scene. (A CNN poll released today finds that among western nations, only Israelis approve America's war in Iraq.) Against the current temper, there is little even old Labor could have done; there is nothing this Labor can do.