Israel after the Election

Shabbat Tol'dot 5787

November 13, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

I returned last Sunday from an extraordinary visit to Israel, which I treated as a kind of professional vacation, a delayed portion of my usual summer sabbatical.

My trip was heavily focused on the Israel Reform Movement. Four decades ago, when I was a first-year rabbinical student in Jerusalem, my large class of North Americans had almost no interaction with Israeli rabbinical students, since there were only three of them. During this visit, I was inspired by an afternoon worship service jointly led by North American and Israeli rabbinical students for the full and equivalently sized contingents of each. The fascinating liturgy class for Israeli rabbinical students with our 2024 Yom Kippur scholar-in-residence, Rabbi Dr. Dalia Marx, was followed by an Israeli student's creative adaptation of *Pidyon HaBen*, a ritual for a couple's firstborn child that Reform Judaism has typically rejected for very good reasons, all of them addressed by the thoughtful ritual. I was both moved and impressed by the rabbinical student and the ritual he created for his son.

Israeli Reform Judaism is teaching "secular" Israelis that they are hungry for something the Jewish State needs: Jewish spirituality and adaptation of our tradition that speak to contemporary Israeli life. Israelis often see religious Judaism only from a Hareidi—that is, Ultra-Orthodox—perspective that is coercive and demands special privileges without working or serving the country. A substantial majority of Israelis are inconvenienced by the closure of public transportation every Shabbat. They are outraged that most of the large and growing Hareidi segment of Israeli society does not serve in either the military or national service and avoids gainful employment, demanding instead to be protected and supported by secular Israelis' constant military service and tax dollars. That new Israeli dad with the *Pidyon HaBen*? He told Professor Marx not to expect him the next three weeks, as he has been called up for reserve duty. Again. This tour will likely put him over four hundred days of service since October 7, now leaving his wife at home with a month-old infant.

Mostly, I spent time in conversation with Israeli Reform colleagues, their family members and communities, and much of that discussion was about the election. How could it be otherwise? I arrived the day after the vote, and I left shortly before the new Knesset was sworn in.

Over dinner after Shabbat services with Rabbi Ayala Miron and our friends at Congregation Bavat Ayin, in lunches and dinners and coffees with rabbinic colleagues, and in splendidly joyful hours with Rabbi Yossi and Hedva Elmackias and their family, I heard a great deal of concern and worry, which I came to see as a posttraumatic response.

The reaction to the Israeli election could not have been more different than responses to the one here in America. Americans were either overjoyed or distraught after November 3. In Israel, few see the results so clearly. The far right clearly lost, while Palestinian citizens of Israel are justly proud. They turned out in large numbers and elected an unprecedented number of their own to the Knesset. Supporters of Prime Minister Netanyahu, like Hareidi voters, were likely disappointed, but they also see paths to remaining in power.

My Israeli family and friends are not from a random cross-section of society. All voted for the so-called Change Bloc, made up of four parties, spanning from center-right to center-left, constituted to replace Prime Minister Netanyahu. After the elections were certified, the President met with the leaders of each party elected to the Knesset, asking them whom they would recommend as the next Prime Minister. The Change Bloc and the parties constituted by Palestinian citizens, representing a Knesset majority of sixty-seven of one hundred twenty members, recommended Major General Gadi Eisenkot, leader of Yashar, one of the Change Bloc parties, and he now has a mandate to form a government. But can he?

Three of the four Change Bloc parties vowed before the election not to form a governing coalition with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Hareidi parties, or the Arab parties. The majority of the people with whom I spend my time in Israel voted for the Democrats, not the American party of the same name but the most progressive party in the bloc and the only one that is eager to be in coalition with at least one of the Arab parties. My friend and colleague Rabbi Gilad Kariv is a leader of the Democrats Party.

His colleagues who aren't in office, though, are worried. Yes, they support Kariv, and they want him to be in the cabinet. They also agree that Palestinian Citizens of Israel, being citizens, deserve to be represented in government. Their post-trauma in this regard is about all the times that Prime Minister Netanyahu has grabbed victory from the jaws of defeat. They simply will not believe, until they see, that a governing coalition will be formed that will move the Jewish State away from the anti-democratic actions and Hareidi religious coercion supported by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition partners.

While the strongest opposition to including Arab parties in the coalition is racist, this week's Torah portion helps us understand why even some Jewish Israelis who are **not** racists oppose a coalition with the Arab parties.

Our matriarch Rebekah is pregnant with twins. She is suffering a difficult pregnancy, and Rebekah pleads with God to understand why she's in such terrible pain. The fetuses that will become Jacob and Esau are fighting in her womb, but God has a plan: The older, Esau, will serve the younger.[i] Today, Israel exists as the one place in the world where the younger twin, Jacob who will become Israel, is dominant. That is of course the reason Israel exists: Only with a Jewish majority can the Jewish State remain a secure refuge when Jews around the world face violent antisemitism and must emigrate.

Reading Genesis, we see that Esau is **different** from Jacob, not worse. We read: "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob became a mild man who stayed in camp."[ii]

Our rabbinic sages, though, read these differences as descriptions of Esau's evil. He's a murderer.[iii] He's a liar and cheat.[iv] He's an idolator.[v] He's an adulterer.[vi] Jacob, by contrast, is a Torah scholar.[vii]

The sages were not reacting to the biblical character but to his imagined descendants. Biblical Esau is the father of the Edomites, a people who lived near the Dead Sea. Our rabbinic sages, though, needed a way to talk about their Roman and Christian oppressors without naming them, which would have been deadly, so they called them Edomites, descendants of Esau. Having been oppressed, the sages understandably had nothing nice to say about their tormentors' supposed ancestor.

After October 7, posttraumatic Israelis do not need to be racists to feel that bringing Palestinian and other Arab citizens into their government could be dangerous. To some, every Arab is potentially Hamas and therefore may be destructive to the Jewish people like all those supposed descendants of Esau who came before. Will they diminish Israel's Jewish character from within?

General Eisenkot seems to know better. Arab citizens elected to the Knesset are in two parties, one of which explicitly rejected past affiliations and recognized Israel as a Jewish state. The other, anti-Zionist, also condemned the Hamas massacre and might support the Change Bloc from outside the government.

Next week, the Knesset will reconvene and begin to pass laws that large majorities of Jewish and Arab citizens who opposed the outgoing government are eager to see. New laws to extend service obligations to Hareidi and Arab Israeli citizens, open public transportation on Shabbat, and strengthen Israeli democracy

cannot be achieved without votes from the Arab parties, for example, will be widely popular. General Eisenkot hopes those votes will convince Change Bloc partners to his right that a government supported by the Arab parties is not only necessary but desirable.

Last Friday, I was privileged to sit next among the Elmackias family, as we witnessed Yossi's ordination. I knew, and we all learned when he was here, that Yossi's rabbinic thesis was about פיוטים, liturgical poems, often sung. What we did not know was that Yossi has written at least one, which was sung by Rabbi Cantor Shani Ben-Or, Cantor Gitlin's teacher, at the ordination. The English translation of the פיוט is in the bulletin, and we will hear it shortly. It is a prayer, crying out for peace.

Now, Rabbi Elmackias is the Executive Director of the Association of Israeli Reform Rabbis, an organization committed to a better future for Israel and all its citizens. A first start will be a government that is committed to a future, even if not an immediate future, when Israelis—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, Arab and Bedouin and Druze—can live together or side by side in peace.

Amen.

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[i] Genesis 25:32-33.
[ii] Genesis 25:27
[iii] Rashi on Genesis 25:25.
[iv] Kli Yakar on Genesis 25:25.
[v] Da'at Zekeinim on Genesis 25:27.
[vi] Kli Yakar on Genesis 25:27.
[vii] Rashi on Genesis 25:27.