

# It's Party Time

*Joel Schalit*

If the joyous exclamations of Israeli journalists were any indication, the parting of the Red Sea could not have made a bigger splash. In the days immediately following the November 7 surprise victory of Histadrut leader Amir Peretz over party chair Shimon Peres in Israel's Labor primary, *Ha'aretz*, *Yediot Ahronot*, and even the *Jerusalem Post* were awash in praise over the election of a 52-year old Moroccan-born Leftist to the head of Israel's second largest political party. Calling it everything from "a new dawn," and a "rebirth of Israeli democracy" to arguing that Peretz's ascension was the most significant event in Israeli politics since the 1977 elections (which swept Menachem Begin's Likud Party into power), the consensus was unanimous: for the first time in over a generation, Israelis could distinguish between Right and Left again. Or maybe even right and wrong.

Campaigning on a peace-and-social-justice platform so resolutely socialist that his candidacy appeared doomed to failure from the start, the amount of support Peretz garnered shocked Labor's Ashkenazi-dominated, ex-general ridden, business-friendly leadership. Because Peretz's platform promises everything from raising the minimum wage and returning to welfare-state policies to overcoming the ethnic divide between Middle Eastern and European Jews and arriving at a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, his victory truly merits the attention the Israeli press

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has accorded it. Both his ambitions and the support shown them suggest something truly utopian. To paraphrase the title of a November 14 article in *Ha'aretz*, Peretz could indeed be the harbinger of a new Israeli social order.

In order to truly appreciate the magnitude of such statements, it's important to remember the remarkable sense of ennui that Sharon's repeated victories over the course of the past years instilled in Israelis. One word sums it up: hopelessness. Having won two consecutive elections, Sharon defied everyone's expectations by holding on to power for nearly five years—a record, considering Israel's incomparably accelerated political time. During these years, Sharon decimated Israel's opposition parties and delegitimated the sole principle that united Israel's Left: its shared commitment to a policy of negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. Not only had Sharon achieved political supremacy, he'd secured ideological hegemony as well.

By the time the Disengagement was under way, an eviscerated Labor Party led by Shimon Peres was sitting in coalition with Sharon, giving him the support he needed to deal with the settlers and, however reluctantly, providing cover for former Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's neoliberal fiscal policies of drastically downsizing Israel's public sector and slashing social spending. Though Sharon could claim to have successfully executed the withdrawal, by October 2005, 9.1 percent of Israelis were unemployed, 1.3 million were living below the poverty line, 667 civilians had been killed by terrorist violence, and 303 IDF soldiers were dead as a result of his leadership.

As much as the Disengagement was

regarded as the breaking point between Sharon and Israel's extreme right, Peretz' election indicated that a similar fissure had taken place between the Prime Minister and the Left. This was inevitable. Whenever any state takes it upon itself to redraw its national boundaries as radically as Sharon did, it is bound to change more than just borders; its internal political makeup is destined to be revised as well.

If there is any positive lesson Zionism has to teach us, it's that political sovereignty requires the stability and freedom of grounding. In the absence of such a guaranteed geography, anarchy will always reign. While the Israeli Right has historically thrived in such circumstances, its ability to govern is limited by the kinds of sacrifices it asks of Israel's population. Just as the casualty level incurred by Israel's eighteen-year occupation of Lebanon birthed the country's first peace movement and helped move Israel, however briefly, to the Left, all indications suggest a similar process at work during the fifth year of Sharon's rule.

How else are we to explain the sudden appeal of a political leader like Peretz, who talks about the crippling effects of neoliberalism and globalization on Israeli society in the same breath as the necessity of a negotiated solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict? How else are we to explain the possibility of a working-class Mizrahi Jew actually becoming Prime Minister? If Peretz never succeeds in doing anything more than increasing the number of Labor seats in the Knesset in March, one thing is for certain: His election not only helped bring down the second Sharon government, it's given us the possibility of believing that Israel has the potential for a just and decent future. □