

FABIAN POLICY REPORT

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# REFLECTION AND RENEWAL

**Where next for the left in Israel?**

*With Natan Doron, Zahava Gal-On, Nadia Hilou,  
David Lammy MP, James Morris, Yigal Shtayim,  
Hannah Weisfeld and many others*



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## EDITORIAL

Israeli politics has been viewed by British audiences almost exclusively through the prism of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Regardless of where a British Labour party member stands on the political spectrum or which side of the Israel-Palestine conflict they position themselves, it is likely that most within the Labour family would be able to agree that the situation would be improved with a stronger democratic left in Israel.

Once the dominant force in Israeli politics, the left has experienced a dramatic decline in popularity over the past two decades, spending much of its time divided and/or in opposition. Indeed it can be argued that Israel's left has not represented a coherent governing power since the death of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.

There are now hints of a reversal in this trend and the 2013 election provides an important moment to reflect on the opportunities and challenges facing the centre and broader left political movement in the country. On the one hand the Israeli Labor Party increased their representation in parliament whilst fellow leftist party Meretz doubled theirs. But the election still returned a Netanyahu government. And whilst the rise of the centrist party Yesh Atid represents a thirst amongst Israeli voters for something new, party leader Yair Lapid is by no means a social democrat.

This report seeks to broaden and deepen the British Labour party's understanding of the political context in Israel and, in particular, the challenges and opportunities currently faced by the political left. It hopes to better develop the kind of shared political understanding and analysis that helps parties of the left win power across the globe.

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# Shifting grounds

There is a paradox at the heart of the left in Israel today. It has largely won the public argument for the two-state solution, but politically the left has been weak and often in opposition. *Natan Doron* reflects on how Israel's population, geography and politics have changed so dramatically that the left remains unsure how it can respond



*Natan Doron is  
senior researcher at the  
Fabian Society*

ISRAELIS WILL NOT tire of telling you that in their country, left and right are set apart depending on where they stand on the peace process with the Palestinians.

Broadly, if you are on the left then you are firmly committed to a two-state solution and willing to concede on territory in order to make a solution work. On the left you are also more likely to see the settlements in the West Bank and, for some, the blockade against Gaza, as a major barrier to any such solution. If you are on the right, then you believe in a 'greater Israel' that encompasses large parts of the West Bank. You are also likely to be less sympathetic towards the inhabitants of both the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian controlled parts of the West Bank.

Hawks on the right and doves on the left. This is what the spectrum of left and right represents in Israeli politics.

In most democratic countries, voters search for the socioeconomic agenda most in line with their interests and values. In Israel, voters must first find a party that represents them on issues of peace and security.

The result is that parties referred to as 'left wing' may have politicians that, to European audiences, look suspiciously right wing on socioeconomic issues. This makes Israeli politics look very strange to outside observers.

I realised quite how strange this situation was as I sat talking to Einat Wilf – a former Israeli Labor parliamentarian who left the party in one of a series of splits that led

to small splinter parties – Israeli political history is littered with such occasions.<sup>1</sup> She referred to the trade unions, the kibbutz movement of collective agricultural settlements and social democratic policy as useful tools in the early days of state building:

*"The establishment of a socialist society was always subservient to the Zionist goal of building a sovereign state for the Jewish people. The establishment of a socialist society in itself was never the goal"*

Others that I talked to in Israel took a different view – the Labor movement existed not only to establish the state of Israel but also to establish a model society. Many of the pioneers of the movement fled

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the Europe of the early 20th century and they brought with them the contemporary political demands of their day: democracy, liberty, equality and justice.

So clearly Einat Wilf represents only one strand of thinking about what the Labor party, and what she calls Labor Zionism, signified. But the fact that someone who once represented the Labor party in parliament holds these views demonstrates just how broad the tent of the party has been in the past.

In many ways the past is a source of comfort for the left. From the creation of the state in 1948 until 1977, Labor and its forerunners was always the biggest party in parliament and always provided the prime minister.<sup>2</sup> But from 1977 Labor was either in opposition or in a governing coalition with their main right-wing opponents the Likud party. It was not until the return of the party leadership to Yithak Rabin and his spell as prime minister in the early 1990s that Labor once again represented a coherent party of government. Rabin was assassinated in 1995 and since then, the party has been in almost constant decline, defined by infighting and factionalism. This decline became particularly pronounced when Ehud Barak's brief time as a Labor prime minister was followed by the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000 – a period of heightened tension and violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

But what happened that led to the rise of the right and the decline of the left in Israeli politics?

Three factors take us a long way to answering this question. Israelis changed; Israel's geography and military approach changed; and in the midst of these processes, the Labor party has never developed a distinct approach to the socioeconomic challenges facing the country.

This brings us to the strange paradox of the Israeli Labor party. While the public have become more left-wing in the sense of growing support for a two-state solution, the Labor party itself has become less and less credible on the peace process.

### Demographics

The Israeli electorate has changed beyond recognition since the founding of the state. Israel's population at the time that the state was established in 1948 was just over a million. By 1977 the population had risen to over three and a half million.

The first Israelis were largely Europeans fleeing a hostile continent in order to found a Jewish state. The hostility of Europe was associated with the politics of the extreme right – it was therefore unsurprising that many Jews who came to what was then British controlled Palestine had been affiliated with the socialist parties in Europe.

## In Israel the experience of the left teaches us that there is a difference between winning the big public arguments on the one hand and earning the credibility to govern on the other

Once the state of Israel had been established, 'Mizrahi' Jews began to come from Arab and Muslim countries. These citizens had had very different political experiences to the Israelis who had come before them. They were more religious, more socially conservative and favoured the family unit over the state as a source of support. These new Israelis provided a growing block of voters for a right wing party of government to emerge. The first Likud prime minister, Menachem Begin, worked hard to make such voters a core part of his support base in 1977, taking advantage of resentment felt among the Mizrahi Jews towards the European 'Ashkenazi' elites that had dominated the state until then.

In recent years around a million Russians have moved to Israel. These Russian Israelis had only experienced the Soviet Union or the chaotic semi-democratic politics that has characterised Russia since the Soviet Union's collapse. Though Israeli Russian voters overwhelmingly supported Rabin in the early 1990s, the collapse of Labor in 2000 saw them gravitate towards the current prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as well as the hawkish Soviet-born Avigdor Lieberman.

The large numbers of new Israelis have continually and significantly altered the electoral dynamics of the country, providing a more natural support base for the political right.

### Occupation

The second important factor in understanding the decline of the left and the rise of the right in Israel is the occupation of the Palestinian territories that began in 1967. In particular, Israel gained control of East Jerusalem – the home of the old city and of sites with huge religious significance to Jews as well as Christians and Muslims. In many ways, this changed the focus of the Israeli defence forces.

From 1948 till 1967, Israel was a state that had maintained a strong military to defend its borders. From 1967, the experience of occupation shifted the geography as well as the politics of the country. It ultimately created a climate in which the right's strand of nationalism could flourish. The religious significance of East Jerusalem and the culturally significant expanses of land that Israel had occupied allowed the right in Israel to appeal to a vision of a stronger and 'greater' Israel.

It was after 1967 that Israeli politics really began to polarise around what should be done about the occupied territories. The left advocated territorial compromise while the right advocated ongoing occupation.

### Social democracy and the paradox of the Israeli left

The third factor in the decline of the left was the tension around the extent to which the Labor movement believed in social democracy. This factor has grown in its significance as the centre ground in Israeli politics following Rabin has been towards a two-state solution. Indeed, as Hagit Ofra points out in her article in this collection, even Netanyahu must bow to public opinion in endorsing a two-state solution.

This is the central paradox of the left in Israel today. It has largely won the public argument on the two-state solution with polls regularly showing a majority of Israelis in favour of the creation of a Palestinian state. But politically the left has been weak and often in opposition.

To understand this paradox we must look at what happened in the late 1990s. Ehud Barak was the Labour leader and prime minister in 1999. In 2000 the negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) that Barak had led on collapsed. The collapse of negotiations was followed by what is known as the second intifada. This period saw increased violence between Israel and Palestine, increased restrictions

on freedom of movement for Palestinians and the eventual resignation of Barak from his post as leader of the Labor party. Barak's resignation followed a crushing election defeat at the hands of Ariel Sharon, the leader of Likud.

In 2007 the Labor Party turned to Barak once again in search of someone who could be a credible prime ministerial candidate. As leader of the party Barak cemented a reputation for being a tough and competent minister of defence in a coalition government. During this period he oversaw Operation Cast Lead – a military operation against Gaza that while seen within Israel as a military success also saw large scale damage and the deaths of just under a thousand Palestinian civilians. In the 2009 elections Barak led the party to a disappointing return of 13 seats. The party then descended into in-fighting before Barak split from the party in 2011.

In many ways the departure of Barak from the Labor party provided an opportunity to take stock. In one sense, much as the departure of Blair helped lessen the importance of Iraq in how UK voters viewed the British Labour party, the split of Barak from the Israeli Labor party has created space for renewal.

The 2013 elections in January make this a useful moment to examine the left in Israel. On the one hand, the Israeli Labor party increased their representation in parliament whilst fellow leftist party Meretz doubled theirs. But the election still returned a Netanyahu-led government. And whilst the rise of the centrist party Yesh Atid (there is a future) represents a thirst amongst Israeli voters for something new, party leader Yair Lapid is by no means a social democrat. Lapid's economic advisor Manuel Trajtenberg has been touring Europe explaining how a reduction in the size of the public sector has been the motor of Israel's success in recent years. Evidence for such a view is scarce and more importantly Trajtenberg has little in the way of practical solutions for Israel's squeeze on living standards. Furthermore, as David Lammy notes in his contribution to this collection, the state has had a key role in fostering entrepreneurial activity in Israel.

Despite this mixed picture, the outcome of the election confirms that with 11 fewer seats in parliament, faith in Netanyahu is weaker than it once was. Furthermore, the election was dominated by debate about living standards and questions of social



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justice relating to the contribution of the ultra-religious in Israel. This is ground on which a credible centre-left party should in theory be able to build a coherent vision for the country.

### The art of renewal

Israel has changed demographically, geographically and politically almost beyond recognition in its 65 year history. The left has faced constant renewal in the context of such extraordinary changes. It is fair to say that success has been limited in the last two decades.

The left in Israel now faces some monumental challenges as it seeks to rebuild and become ready to govern again. Some of these challenges will be familiar to the left across Europe. It must develop a coherent and attractive programme to address the cost of living crisis that is undermining both the economy and social stability. The left must also renew the way it does politics: the lack of a geographical link between members of the Israeli parliament and voters entrenches a type of politics that is very distant and technocratic. The parties must make municipal government a more important part of their overall strategy – a step that it looks as if Meretz is already taking as their leader Zahava Gal-On outlines in this report.

But as expected, the left in Israel faces some unique challenges. It must develop a coherent position on the peace process with the Palestinians. It must also find a leader who can reassure the labour movement of the party's social justice credentials but also someone who can reassure voters of their security credentials as well as competence on

the economy. The truth in the last election is that there did not appear a viable alternative prime minister to Benjamin Netanyahu.

In Israel the experience of the left teaches us that there is a difference between winning the big public arguments on the one hand and earning the credibility to govern on the other. This should serve to remind us in the UK that the left must constantly reflect, renew and democratise to stay relevant. The danger of not doing so is that you allow your political opponents to define you.

As the social-democratic left throughout the world faces a series of challenges in an age of austerity, there is much that the British left can learn from Israel and that the Israeli left can learn from us. We must both engage in the process of renewal if we are to once again earn the right to serve. **F**

### Notes

1. Israel's voting system is a proportionally representative one in which all parties submit a national list of candidates and receive an allocation of seats based on their share of the vote. The permanence of governing coalitions places less importance on party unity and as a result new parties form and old ones decline according to very short timescales when compared to the UK.
2. Technically the Labor party only came in to existence in 1968 out of a merger between the workers party of the land of Israel (known as Mapai); the Israeli Workers List (Rafi) and the Labour Unity party (Ahdut HaAvoda). In reality much of the personnel and indeed the leadership remained the same pre- and post-1968. For the purposes of simplicity the Labor party in this article will be thought of as indicating Mapai before the official founding of what is now called the Labor party in Israel.

*Thanks to Alex Yakobson for his comments on early drafts of this article.*

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# How to fight a living standards election

*James Morris* is a pollster and adviser to both the Israeli and UK Labour parties. Here he reflects on fighting a living standards election in Israel and the lessons for the British Labour party in 2015



*James Morris is a campaign pollster and strategist. A former speechwriter to Labour leader Ed Miliband and advisor at the Number 10 Strategy Unit, Morris runs Greenberg Quinlan Rosner's London office and advised the Israeli Labor party during the 2013 election*

**I**F IN THE UK the 'middle' are being squeezed, in Israel they are being crushed. One in five working families with kids live in poverty. The cost of housing rose 70 per cent in 10 years and now outstrips most American cities. A country founded in part by idealistic socialists has the highest poverty rate in the OECD. Even if you look at the 90th–99th highest earning percentiles, incomes are flat. You can guess where the income growth was.

Despite that, the conventional wisdom is that Israeli politics is all about peace and security. However our first survey for the Israeli Labor party in the run up to the 2013 elections showed that things were going to be different. Israelis were nearly twice as likely to prioritise the economy as prioritise peace.

This looked like being good news for the Labor party. While Likud, Israel's major center-right party and home of Netanyahu, led on issues around peace and security, in

a forced choice between Labor, Likud and Hatnua (a centrist pro-two-state party), 47 per cent thought Labor the best party on the 'standard of living' and 52 per cent thought them the best on 'prices'.

Eagle-eyed Israel-watchers will notice two parties missing from that forced choice list: Beit Yehudi a nationalist and religious Zionist party, and Yesh Atid a party seeking to represent the secular middle class. It turned out that the turbulence of a living standards election would lift Labor, but lift these other parties even more. While Hatnua – Tzipi Livni's muscular peace-focused party – made no progress, the economy-focused Labor doubled its representation in parliament. But the parties that sailed furthest were Yair Lapid's anodyne, middle class first, Yesh Atid and Naftali Bennett's right-wing populist Beit Yehudi.

Lapid's success was partly a result of parochial facts about Israel's geopolitical situation and electoral system. The inevitability

of coalition government meant Lapid could publically state that he wasn't running to be prime minister and hence avoid the kind of scrutiny faced by Labor leader Shelly Yachimovich as she put her name down to make decisions on Iran, Hamas and Syria as well as the price of cottage cheese. Peace scored so low as a priority in part because people had given up hope that it could be achieved, rather than because it wasn't desirable. At key moments, Labor's campaign was overshadowed by the defection of former leaders – hopefully something that won't happen to the British Labour party in 2015.

Still, it's not all parochial. In fact we are going to see more and more living standards elections in the next few years. As my colleague Stan Greenberg lays out in his book *It's the Middle Class, Stupid!*, progressive parties around the world have consistently failed to defend the interests of not just the poor, but also middle-income families. The link between macro-economic growth and



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growth in people's incomes broke at some point around the turn of the millennium. Then the financial crisis hit.

As Britain heads towards its own living standards election, there are lessons to be learnt from the dynamics that played out in Israel. I want to pick out four:

### **1. Passion for the middle not against the top**

Hebrew may be an older language than the English, but it hasn't had the same time to evolve. Unused as a spoken language for over a thousand years, it doesn't have the words we do. So, sensibly, Israelis borrow. And one of the words leftist politicians borrow most is 'tycoon'.

The facts are shocking. Half of the stock traded on the Israeli stock market is owned by just 20 families. The share of wealth controlled by the country's 10 largest companies is higher than in any other OECD country. Under Benjamin Netanyahu's neo-conservative economic policy, flat indirect taxes like VAT have overtaken progressive direct taxes like income tax as a source of government income, boosting the incomes of the wealthy while hitting the poor.

So yes, Israelis are angry with the tycoons and they rightly believe that the state has made this extreme concentration of wealth and power a reality in their country.

However, their political passion is not against the rich. It is reserved for a politician who they believe will fight for the middle class. By a margin of 85:9 Israelis wanted a politician who would stand up for the middle class over one who prioritised standing up against the tycoons. Simply switching the order of sentences in a message, so the middle class focus came before attacking tycoons, added 10 points to its power.

A politician fired up with anger against the top is compelling; one fired up by a passion for ordinary working people is one people will vote for.

The same is true here in the UK. While railing against the 1 per cent, corporate avoidance and the rest is powerful stuff for NGOs seeking to create noise and build their supporter base, voters are looking for something more from politicians. Robin Hood is a great identity for a folk hero but not a cabinet minister.

You can't win a living standards election by simply being defined against the top. You need to be defined as being for the middle. Ed Miliband's early adoption of the

'squeezed middle' as central to his project shows exactly the right prioritisation.

### **2. Once identified with the middle, the left can gain from highlighting unfairness at the top**

Focusing on the middle doesn't mean giving the elites a bye. Voters in Israel absolutely bought into the idea that their struggles were a symptom of stitch-ups at the top.

However, when addressing the privileges of the elite it is important for politicians to show that they are on the side of the producers. People who contribute, pay their taxes, create jobs and so on are valued by voters who understand the need for a vibrant economy. The problem comes when the concentration of wealth and power tilts the playing field against ordinary working people. A tax cut for millionaires may or may not be wise in and of itself but it becomes a campaign issue when it is at the cost of tax rises for people on middle incomes and lower.

There is also a lesson for the right here too. Capitalism is about competition. Free-market liberals should be just as incensed about concentrations of power as the left. That is not how it has played out in Israel, America or the UK but it is a space that some smart thinkers in the Conservative party are getting into. Unfortunately for Britain, they don't seem to have any influence on Tory policy.

### **3. For voters, living standards means prices**

The real inflation problem is not that it is too high, but that it is too low. If it was higher our debts would go away faster. Moreover, according to the economists, looking for a living standards answer in prices (of food, fuel, housing etc) is looking in the wrong place. The real problem is wages.

In Israel, salaries for people with degrees have fallen 7 per cent in real terms in the last decade. The official unemployment rate nearly doubles when you take into account people who have simply quit looking for work or who are working part time when they want full time – a problem that is particularly acute for women. In the US, productivity has doubled over the last 30 years while wages have barely increased in real terms (except for the top 1 per cent, who saw incomes nearly triple). The excellent work of the Resolution Foundation shows a similar pattern here in the UK.

Fine. But that's not how voters see it.

Voters are sceptical that the government can boost wages at any great speed. They buy that we need to be a high-skill economy to avoid competing on wages with the rising economies to our east and south. But that is an issue for the country, not for them as individuals.

While the 'cottage cheese' protests were about food, the issue that mattered most in the election was housing. Labor actually had a very powerful message on housing with a concrete plan to make a difference by releasing public land to be built on, but it didn't communicate it as well as it might have.

Here in the UK in 2015, issues surrounding food, fuel and housing will inevitably be central.

### **4. Answers must be serious and long-term as well as delivering help now**

The final lesson I want to focus on covers everything that is not living standards. Voters across much of the developed world are feeling terribly squeezed. They want action on living standards.

But that hasn't made them forget about everything else. In Israel they didn't forget that the prime minister has to do more than manage the economy. They also need to deal with the country's security. While the economy trumped peace as a voting issue, it only tied with security.

Here in the UK the contextual issues are less focused on security and more on other aspects of the economy. Voters want a living standards answer that is also a debt answer and a competitiveness answer. The same is true in the US. Our polling consistently finds that short-term solutions and throwing money at problems rather than addressing root causes does not help. Voters want to know that plans will work in the long term.

The Israeli election has important lessons for progressive round the world. The focus on living standards ought to be bad news for the right, but if and only if, parties of the centre-left can show that they have the passion and policy to do something about it. By getting the balance right between showing who you are for and what you are against, providing practical concrete policies on the key issues and locating it all in the context of economic seriousness, the left can get back in power and win a mandate to create a more just, more rewarding economy. **F**



## Pride in the unit

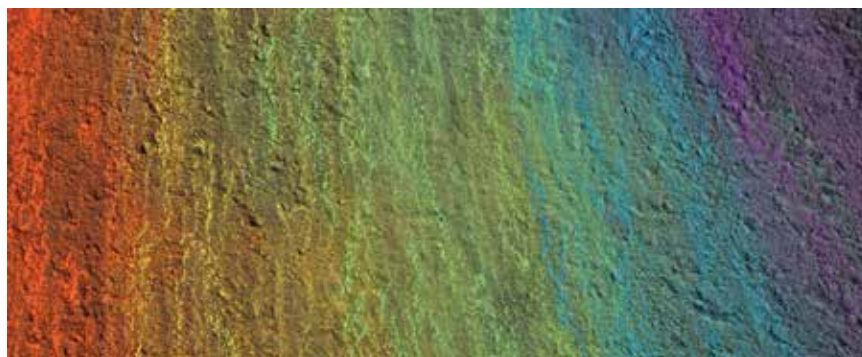
*Zahava Gal-On, the leader of Israel's left-wing, social-democratic political party, Meretz, explains why she believes a new centre-left coalition can be built in Israel and why it's important for the left to be proud*

**Y**OU CAN'T TALK about social justice in Israel without talking about ending the occupation and you can't talk about ending the occupation without talking about social justice. For too long the left in Israel has been apologetic, even ashamed. This has to change. We in Meretz are the left in Israel and we have been proud to say this.

But if we avoid talking about the peace process then we cannot make a coherent argument about social justice – this was the central failure of the Labor party in the last election and it is what allowed Meretz to double its representation in the Israeli parliament.

The left must keep talking about the links between social justice within Israel and in our relations with the Palestinians. When you think about the billions of dollars spent by the Israeli government to maintain the occupation you get a sense of the injustice. I have some ideas about other ways in which we could be using this money to advance social justice in Israel.

But politics is not only about how we re-allocate money for social justice – we must also practice a politics that is more grounded in people's everyday experiences. That is why Meretz has been placing an emphasis on selecting the best candidates to run for local government. It may be unbelievable to a UK audience but Meretz is almost the only party to run local candidates under its party name. The other parties in Israel rename themselves for local elections to sound non-party political (for example 'the movement to change Haifa' is how the Labor party runs in that city). When people



© Dennis Hill

vote in the local elections they should do so by associating change in their communities with the change they want to see nationally – parties should have a comprehensive and coherent approach, not hide themselves from the voters.

For Meretz this is part of a wider strategy to restore to the left what the Israeli army calls 'pride in the unit'. The failures of the peace process and the rise of Hamas in the Gaza Strip after the disengagement in 2005 greatly demoralised the left. Right wing parties waged a campaign to delegitimise the left as disloyal or extreme. Shelly Yachimovich responded by trying to define Labor as a centrist party, rather than being on the left.

### **If Meretz is an extreme party then Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu's right wing party, is an even more extreme party. The tide is starting to turn**

In Meretz we took a different approach. We should not feel embarrassed to be passionate about social justice. We should not feel embarrassed about wanting to end the occupation. The right in Israel have a slogan, 'smolanim habayta' that roughly translates as 'leftists go home' – but Meretz incorporated this slogan into its campaigning material. We are calling with pride on leftists to come home – and that home is Meretz.

Even before the election, with all the damage done to the brand of the left over the last few years, our polling found that nearly 20 per cent of Israelis defined themselves as leftists, as opposed to centre or right. After the growth in support for

left wing parties in the election, I have no doubt that polls would show even higher numbers of people identifying as left-wing now. New members are coming to Meretz. In a recent recruitment drive in Tel Aviv we had 2000 join in just six weeks. This was the same amount as we usually get in a year. Perhaps more importantly, most of these members are young Israelis who are becoming politically active for the first time. Students and first time voters are the biggest sources of new members of Meretz.

We are also tackling the way the left is defined by the media. The political right in Israel have been very disciplined by always referring to politicians on the left as 'left-wing extremists'. As a result, journalists started to adopt this language. We decided that it was not good enough to allow the media to be dominated by the view that wanting to end the occupation is an extreme position. Over the last year I have met over 30 journalists and engaged them in a discussion about what it means to be an extremist. If Meretz is an extreme party then Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu's right wing party, is an even more extreme party. The tide is starting to turn.

I believe that the next election in Israel is the best opportunity that we've had in a long time to construct a centre-left coalition. Yair Lapid, Israel's minister of finance and chairman of the Yesh Atid party, is a political chameleon – and one can easily imagine his party joining a coalition of centre-left parties. Meretz doubled the number of parliamentarians it has in the last election. I believe that we can double our number again at the next election. We will have to work hard but we are building a home for the left. **F**

*Zahava Gal-On is leader of the left-wing Meretz party*



## Striking a balance

Fatigue with the familiar political faces, and the yearning for something new, is a threat to all the major UK parties at the next general election. The Israeli elections showed why we need to keep talking to swing voters in language they identify with, argues *Dermot Kehoe*

IN THE WAKE of the social protest movement which swept Israel in the summer of 2011, its Labor party looked poised to be the main beneficiary. The shift in the political agenda away from issues of security to issues of socio-economic fairness and opportunity appeared a perfect fit for Labor's new leader Shelly Yachimovich – a former TV journalist who built her reputation in parliament championing social issues. Shortly after becoming leader she was riding high in the polls and was predicted to win over 20 seats. It was therefore disappointing for Labor that it reached only 15



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seats in this year's general election, and was overtaken by another former TV anchor, the telegenic and popular Yair Lapid, whose newly formed Yesh Atid (there is a future) party got 19. What explains Lapid's rise, and what does it mean for the left in Israel and in the UK?

There is a very mixed assessment by those on the Israeli left of what Yair Lapid and Yesh Atid means for their agenda. He is regarded by many as a populist figure with conservative instincts, who will not ultimately stand up for anything the left believes in. On the other hand he represents an alternative to Benjamin Netanyahu and has taken votes and seats from the right, and brought with him into the Knesset (Israeli parliament) some new left-leaning MKs (member of Knesset) open to speaking up for the peace process and other progressive causes.

Either way, Lapid did a better job than any other candidate of tapping into the issues that provided the political energy of the social protest movements – the middle classes' sense that they were being ripped off by tycoons and did not see fair return for what they put into the state through their taxes and their army service.

Lapid also benefitted from the universal political fascination with the new and untainted. 'New politics' was one of the buzzwords of the election, and he built a diverse list of candidates who had not served in the Knesset before. It was not only Lapid that benefitted from the desire for fresh faces. Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home party, and to some extent Labor – whose list included young leaders of the social protest movement like Stav Shaffir – also increased their vote. A remarkable 47 out of the 120 members of the Knesset have never served before.

But it was Lapid's headline issue – bringing about equality in national service by drafting the ultra-Orthodox who are currently exempt – which best captured the mood of the volatile middle-class electorate. It is an issue the major parties have neglected for generations, not wanting to alienate potential ultra-Orthodox coalition partners, and Labor was more reticent when addressing it in the election. In contrast to Lapid's appealing rhetoric, Labor's economic plans, which included proposals for expanding public spending, left the electorate nervous about whether Labor could be trusted with the public finances.

Fatigue with the familiar political parties and faces, and the yearning for something new, is a threat to all the major UK parties at the next general election. Though the issues and setting are different, Britain also has its own non-political politician wooing the middle class, in the form of Nigel Farage. Though Britain's first-past-the-post system will prevent Farage sweeping into a government role, like Lapid or Bennett, the UKIP leader is proving adept at connecting to voters with 'common sense' talk on the issues the major parties have been uncomfortable getting to grips with. The results of the Israeli elections were a forceful illustration, if any were needed, of the need to keep talking to middle-class swing voters about the issues that irk them and in language they identify with.

At the same time, the challenges that Lapid has faced in his first months in office offer another important lesson. The popular messages that get you into office do not necessarily serve you well once you get there. A key slogan for Lapid in his campaign was 'Where is the money?' Even after assuming the post of finance minister in the new government he was still playing the anti-political campaigner. He fired out a much discussed Facebook post on the need for officials in the finance ministry to stop poring over spreadsheets and think about the average middle-class working mother, 'Ricky Cohen', and how to make her life easier.

The stark reality of the public finances, however, forced Lapid to pass a budget which seemed to do the opposite of all he promised: taxes raised, budgets for services cut, and left Ricky Cohens all over the country with less money in their pockets. When Lapid gives the defence that he did not know the state of the finances until he entered office, members of the public want to know why he had not done his homework. Lapid has time to turn his fortunes around, but his trust with his voters has taken a major knock.

Striking the difficult balance between articulating a message which chimes with the public mood, but which does not create unrealistic expectations that cannot be met in government, will be a key challenge for Ed Miliband going into the next election. ■

*Dermot Kehoe is the chief executive for BICOM and a former Programme Director at the Fabian Society*



## Equality now

*Nadia Hilou* tells her story from becoming the first Israeli-Arab woman to go to university in Tel Aviv to becoming a Labor party politician and why she still continues to fight for equality

JAFFA HAS BEEN the centre of Palestinian culture and commerce for hundreds of years and is where my family have lived for many generations. It is here, where we were one of the few families that stayed after our town was absorbed into the state of Israel that I became the first Israeli-Arab woman to go to university in Tel Aviv. Soon after, I began my journey into politics as a trade union organiser representing fellow social workers. Along with my comrades in Jaffa we organised childcare to help other Israeli-Arab women who wanted to work and went from supporting tens to supporting hundreds of Arab women.

When Yitzhak Rabin became the leader of the Israeli Labor party for the second time in 1992 I felt compelled to move from community organising to party politics. Rabin was the first prime minister who was very clear about equality for Israeli Arabs – this showed immense courage on his part. But the momentum of the peace process also gathered pace under Labor and Rabin. And it was then that I felt that I could no longer be an observer of party politics. I had to try to influence the process of furthering equality for Israeli Arabs as well as advancing the peace process.

The Israeli Labor party has always ensured through a quota system that there would be an Israeli-Arab representative in a realistic position on the party list for Knesset elections. Arab members of the party would vote for that representative. But I felt uncomfortable with this as, for me, it meant compromising on what I took equality to represent. Since Israeli-Arab members of the party vote for Jewish candidates in the

main primaries to select the party list, then why would Jewish members not vote for an Israeli Arab also?

I decided to compete for a place on the party list alongside the Jewish candidates. No one had ever done this before: Ora Namir, the Labor party's welfare minister at the time, told me I was brave to run head to head with ministers and other senior members of the party, and stressed that she didn't mean it as a compliment.

But I eventually succeeded in winning a place in the Knesset as part of the Labor list and served from 2006 to 2009. From within parliament, and now from without, I have fought for equality for Israeli-Arabs. I am quite clear that the biggest challenge facing the state of Israel at the moment is the status of the minorities. When we look at the numbers doing well at school, the numbers going to universities, the numbers getting jobs in the public and private sectors, we see huge gaps between Jewish Israelis and the Arab minorities.

The solution has to be a political one. Since Rabin, no government has put the issue of equality at the heart of its programme. We have 9000 unemployed Israeli Arab female graduates. 60 per cent of Israeli-Arab children live under the poverty line.

These levels of inequality are undermining Israel's economic as well as social progress. A recent OECD report singles out two groups that are underrepresented in the labour market to an extent that it is harming GDP growth: Arab women and the ultra-orthodox Jewish community. We are not speaking about small numbers. A 10 per cent increase in Israeli-Arab

women working would bring in significant amounts of tax revenue for the state.

A new drive for equality will come from the next generation of Israeli Arabs. They are young and have been educated in Israel. They are citizens of Israel. They have absorbed the democratic values of Israel and they have learnt about equality. They will see the gaps in outcomes for Jews and Arabs and will want to close them. They will not compromise and nor should they.

But it will be the Labor party that will represent the most important opportunities for changes to be made. The Arab parties have no influence. Not because they are bad but because they are always in opposition, and do not participate in negotiations to form coalition governments.

Playing a role in the opposition in the Knesset, as the Arab parties do, is important and a significant part of the democratic system, but it is not enough. What is necessary to achieve equality is gaining control of policy within the government.

Perhaps the saddest thing about Labor's failure in the last election is that for the first time in its history it has not one Israeli-Arab member of parliament among its ranks. The party looks set to divert a lot of energy internally over the coming months as it rebuilds after the election. The future for the party may be unclear but I am determined that we do our best to recruit campaigners for social justice and strong advocates of Israeli-Arab equality. We will need them to help address the problems facing this country. ■

*Nadia Hilou is a former Labor party member of Knesset (Israeli Parliament)*



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## No fear

The British Labour party can build its own version of Israel's start-up nation, argues *David Lammy*

**I**N 1984, ISRAEL was in the midst of economic abyss. Inflation rates averaged 450 per cent over the course of the year, there was a banking crisis and investors were hastily evacuating their money. But by the mid-1990s it was profiting from the tech boom and today Israel has the highest number of companies listed on the NASDAQ after the USA and China (despite having a population of just 7.8 million). The 'start-up nation' has done plenty to earn its moniker.

Those combing the Israeli statute book for the secret to becoming the most innovative and entrepreneurial nation on earth needn't look far for easy explanations. The two great drivers of Israel's economic success have been the armed services and immigration. As the country began to come to terms with the economic crisis of the 1980s, army engineers and scientists were laid off and left to use their skills in civilian life, which led to an abundance of talent in the private sector. Moreover, national service throws young Israelis in the most formative periods of their lives into high-pressured, high-responsibility environments before they've even had a chance to enrol into university. Ethical or not, there's no denying that this rite of passage has been the hotbed for innovation, with the army's intelligence unit (Unit 8200) playing the role of Cupid to many of Israel's most successful business relationships.

Of equal importance was the arrival of almost one million Jews from former Soviet bloc countries after the collapse of communism. Not only did this population spurt boost demand as the working age population of Israel increased by 15 per cent, those that arrived were highly qualified with 30 per cent boasting at least one degree.

Britain need not mimic this approach: it is not desirable to reintroduce national service nor it is it advisable to wait for the arrival of a million highly educated foreigners that zealously endorse the values and cultural underpinnings of our country. But it isn't just a constant existential threat and the sudden influx of new immigrants that made the 'start-up nation' possible. It is the right form of governance that meant Israel could take advantage.

**What struck me on my trip to Israel last October was that the politicians, civil servants and entrepreneurs all have something in common: no fear of failure. Or to put it better, they had no fear of failing for the right reasons**

Without a banking sector capable of financing private sector expansion, it was the state that invested into its own venture capital fund ('Yozma'). 20 years on from the government's initial \$100m investment (which has since leveraged billions more from private finance), Israel now commands more than double the amount of venture capital investment per head than the USA and eight times that of Britain. Similarly, a culture of consistently investing in research and development (R&D) (at a rate of five per cent of GDP, double that of Britain) did not develop without the Office of the Chief Scientist, a government agency. This office is the one that provides structured support to inventors by providing seed money for their ideas, absorbing risk and exposing them to investors.

To those of us that believe the state can be an accelerator, rather than a handbrake, to economic growth, there is a temptation to simply copy and paste these policies to the table office in the House of Commons. But which government has the courage to admit to what such a growth agenda entails, which leader has the resolve to stick by it in barren times and which media organisation would tolerate it? In Britain, our entire political culture is ensnared not only by short-termism but by the need for ministers to appear utterly convinced



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that their bill will solve absolutely every problem, fill every gap and answer every question. Can you imagine hearing this from the despatch box:

*"We are not sure when this programme will break even, if at all. We are certain that many – in fact most – of these investments will fail and the money invested will be squandered. But I hope that in time – how long I don't know – we will have created an environment where creativity and finance will be fused together, each spurring the other in a virtuous cycle of innovation and investment. Only then will we thrust Britain to forefront of the global economy and create jobs and prosperity for decades to come".*

What struck me on my trip to Israel last October was that the politicians, civil servants and entrepreneurs all have something in common: no fear of failure. Or to put it better, they had no fear of failing for the right reasons. There is an acceptance that the state can – when used in the right way – be the great enabler of growth and that you can 'pick winners' of sectors and succeed.

Before the Labour party can dream of a Yozma fund and government backed R&D subsidies, we have to achieve a consensus with the entire political class on what public spending can enable. Just as Clement Attlee did not try to re-lay the Western Wall brick-by-brick when he promised to build a 'New Jerusalem', the modern Labour party must lay the foundations of our own 'start-up nation', not construct a replica. **F**

*David Lammy is MP for Tottenham*

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# The challenge and chance of the Israeli peace camp

There has never been a greater readiness for peace. The left must connect the hope from the social protests to public faith in the two-state solution, writes *Hagit Ofran*



*Hagit Ofran runs the Settlement Watch program at Peace Now movement in Israel  
[www.peacenow.org.il](http://www.peacenow.org.il)*

**M**Y POLITICAL JOURNEY began when I was discharged from the army in 1995. Yitzhak Rabin was the prime minister. The vote in the Knesset (Israeli parliament) on the Oslo accord (the interim agreement framework setting out terms of future peace with the Palestinians) went down to the wire, decided by just one single vote. What shocked me then was that two Knesset members from Rabin's Labor party voted against the Oslo accord – this was a vote against the peace process.

I joined the Labor party to try to stop it ever coming so close again. I wanted to

participate in the primaries so that I could influence the makeup of the parliamentary Labor party in Israel.

This was how I became active in what is called the Israeli left but what I prefer to call 'the peace camp'. During the early 1990s the peace camp was one half of an extremely polarised political climate in Israel. The right wing found parliamentary representation in the Likud party – today headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. The peace camp was led by the Labor party. The dividing line between the two sides was clear – on the one side there were Israelis

who saw hope in the chance to make peace with our Palestinian neighbours while on the opposing side were those who only feared the consequences of doing so.

The second intifada (Palestinian word for uprising) ripped up the playing field. Just when we were closest to peace, terrible violence interrupted. Fear and anger removed any sentiment of hope among the peace camp. Ariel Sharon was elected as prime minister and the failure of hope was confirmed when the Labor party joined his coalition. By joining a government led by one of the most aggressive leaders of the

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right, the Labor party contributed to the destruction of the peace camp. Shimon Peres, a leading Labor figure and Nobel peace prize winner, was appointed foreign minister in Sharon's government. Those of us who had been so hopeful in the peace camp looked on in desperation as Peres explained to the world that Israel had no partner for peace. The implication was that fighting the Palestinians was the only option available to the Israeli people.

What was a politics of two opposing camps dissolved under a unity government that pursued a politics of fear and aggression towards the Palestinians. The political consensus that Israeli had no partner for peace went unchallenged.

It seemed that, to all intents and purposes, the right had won the struggle for the hearts and minds of Israelis.

But despite their dominance in parliament, the right cannot claim to have won that struggle. The Israeli public has, in many ways, shifted left in its attitude to the peace process since the capitulation of the Labor party in the mid 1990s. Support for a two-state solution has grown and polls consistently show a majority of Israelis (and Palestinians) supporting the two-state solution and the concessions it demands.

Political consensus in recent years has moved to reflect this. In 2008 Ehud Olmert, the right-wing former mayor of Jerusalem, led negotiations which promised concessions the right would never have envisaged offering; Olmert himself had vehemently opposed former prime minister Ehud Barak when he tried in 2000. The shift in Olmert's stance represents just one example of a widespread phenomenon in Israeli politics. Even Netanyahu today openly states his support for a two-state solution. He does this not because it is what the right believes but because this is what the Israeli public wants.

Here lies the central paradox of the left in Israel: the political decline coupled with the triumph of majority support for a two-state solution. This is the great opportunity and challenge of the Israeli peace camp. On the one hand Israeli political discourse is more right wing, racist and angry than ever before while on the other hand there has never been a greater readiness for peace.

Israelis see a willingness to make peace as a basic and fundamental aspect of their identity: Israelis see themselves as good people. People who want peace, not war.

People who do not want to occupy and control Palestinians. But while this is true, it is clear that the Israeli public lacks all faith in the Palestinians' capacity to agree any peace. This despair is what gives rise to the right-wing rhetoric which dominates Israeli politics. The overwhelming feeling is defined by recurring expressions of despair in the bars and cafés of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: 'we tried negotiations and got violence'; 'we tried withdrawing (from Gaza) and we got rockets'; 'we have no choice but to continue the occupation'. When it comes to peace with the Palestinians, Israelis seem to suggest 'it's them, not us'.

## As soon as there is leadership which will bring an agreement, the majority of the public will support it

How should the peace camp respond to this? I believe that we must argue that peace is possible but that it depends on us to a greater extent than most Israelis are willing to accept. This is a very difficult message to sell. It's difficult because it calls into question the true will of Israelis for peace. This challenges a core component of how Israelis like to view themselves – as people of a peace seeking nation.

In the context of Netanyahu's continuing place at the head of the government, the result is that the peace camp is almost constantly pushing difficult and negative messages. It's a purely oppositional stance that sees us reeling off a list of reactive slogans: 'The occupation is wrong', 'The settlements are wrong', 'Israeli policy is wrong'. The public increasingly identifies the messages of the peace camp as a message that Israel is wrong. In a country as patriotic as Israel, this is difficult. People don't want to be told that they live in a country that is governed by decisions that are fundamentally wrong. Accepting that Israel could end the conflict but is choosing not to do so is a very difficult thing for Israelis to hear. It is far easier to listen to those who lay the blame at the shores of Gaza and the heart of the West Bank. Blaming the Palestinians solves the conflict between the crisis of Israeli identity and

the failure to take the brave actions toward renewing the peace process.

Against this background the right has sought to repeatedly and explicitly delegitimise the peace camp in Israel. Organised and well-funded right-wing pressure groups consistently publish breakdowns of funding sources for peace organizations and paint them as 'foreign agents' if any money comes from outside of Israel. These campaigns play into the politics of fear and exploit the space created by the conflict psychology in Israeli public discourse. This conflict psychology is defined by the characterisation of us (Israeli Jews who want peace) and them (the Palestinians, who don't want peace).

This cynical framing by the right in Israel leaves the message of the peace camp as one pitched in favour of the Palestinian opponents to peace – and in this way the right seeks to paint the peace camp as fundamentally unpatriotic.

But I am optimistic in our ability to overcome the politics of fear. The problem is the cultural psychology of conflict – the roots of Israeli identity are still about peace. But to tap into this the peace camp must forge a new language and politics that paints Israeli and Jewish identity as one constantly striving for justice and peace. If we do it properly we can create pride in this identity. Crucially we can look to do this without being seen as those who always criticise Israel. If successful then the peace camp will be able to affect real change. But there can be no doubt just how hard this challenge will be.

I feel there is room for optimism. The Israeli public today is ready for peace. As soon as there is leadership which will bring an agreement, the majority of the public will support it. The last elections have given the peace camp some breathing room. No longer a marginal few but a significant number of Knesset members from centrist parties support peace. The social justice protests of summer 2011 were, in my view, an example of this Israeli identity residing within large parts of the population: Israelis who care about justice, who care about what happens here, who aren't despairing of politics and who don't think that our destiny is in others' hands.

Our challenge is to connect this identity to what is apparently the most challenging subject – returning to public faith in the two-state solution and the possibility for peace. I believe it is possible. **F**



## Solidarity across boundaries

British trade unions must be a critical friend to the Israeli and Palestinian Labor movements – on issues of boycotts and beyond – on the path to meaningful solidarity, argues *Emine Ibrahim*

FOR THE LAST few years one of the most contentious issues within the trade union movement has remained the boycott of the Histadrut (General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel). It is no surprise that every year at Unison national delegates conference we see a clamour of well-meaning branches from across the regions coming forward with carefully prepared speeches to show solidarity with the long-suffering Palestinian people. What is really positive and reassuring is that there is always a good strong debate with valid impassioned and well argued points made by both sides.

Are we actually having a debate about Israel and Palestine and are we disagreeing about the need for justice for Palestinians? The answer is no, but this debate goes right to the heart of how the left, and indeed socialism, attempts to engage with its most important ideological underpinnings, the concept of internationalism and solidarity.

Trade unions do a lot of good international work justified by the principle that ordinary working people have more to share with each other than the respective social, economic and cultural elites of the nation states they identify with. An Israeli school teacher and a Palestinian school teacher share the same hopes, fears and, most importantly, economic obstacles. Under challenging conditions these obstacles are more profound for the Palestinian. However, the simple argument being made here is that boycotts and divestment can punitively punish and at the same time

damage feelings of solidarity between two peoples whose future must take a common path if we are to see any semblance of hope in a conflict, which often appears as though it will remain intractable for another generation.

I am a second generation Cypriot Turk and the Cyprus question is another stalemate which has plagued the same corner of the world for over 50 years.

The tragic events of 1963 and 1974 have meant that one side of the conflict has faced an international trade embargo since the unilateral declaration of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Yes, international law was broken in 1974 and yes, the UN must not recognise the redrawing of international borders – these are facts beyond question if we are to be making credible arguments for credible solutions. However, in reality what has the trade embargo achieved for the possibility of peace beyond continued political, cultural, social and economic isolation? This manifests itself in a paranoia and a sense of victimhood that fails to recognise the same sense of injustice on the other side. These are not the dynamics under which communities can effectively foster and maintain meaningful solidarity with each other. During the recent Cypriot banking crisis many Cypriot Turks lacked empathy for the Cypriot Greeks, as a result of the limited solidarity they have felt since 1963. Many of us on the left challenged this and called for sensitivity during the collapse. However, it takes a huge leap for the majority to take this position. But it's often the biggest leaps which reap dividends for peace and progress.

The argument can be levelled that our international work should, by its nature, oppose nationalism and one cannot and should not disagree with this. However, let's take stock of the debate, step back and really analyse how this rhetoric is actually played out on street corners and in the meeting rooms of the left. We are often too tempted by the simplistic arguments about the Middle East conflict that are lazy and do not challenge us into making that bigger jump toward a different and far more balanced narrative.

We must also never treat any form of nationalism as unique and peculiar to any ethnicity and somehow more sinister. Jewish nationalism is no different to my experience of Turkish and Greek national-



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ism. No nationalist phenomena are the natural bedfellow of internationalism and Zionism must be challenged on exactly the same terms.

Those of us who are opposed to the boycotts of the Israeli Labor movement must seek constructive ways forward. If we believe that boycotts damage and obstruct the possibility of effective dialogue on both sides of the Middle East conflict, the answer is no longer to simply attempt to have the motions voted down. The trade union movement must begin a programme of gradual reengagement and this should start by activists and grassroots delegates calling for the commissioning of reports into the future path of international work within our movement. The questions we must begin asking are: what can we do and how can we help? We cannot with any meaningful impact say what we believe is the right answer. The answers remain solely with the Palestinians and Israelis.

British trade unions must be a critical friend of the Israeli and Palestinian Labor movement, which could be the one of the most important contributions they can make. **F**

*Emine Ibrahim is chair of Redbridge Unison*





## In it together

Within the UK Jewish community there is a growing sense of urgency around the necessity to forge an agreement with the Palestinian people, and an increasing discontentment with the notion that being a friend of Israel means supporting all the government says and does, writes *Hannah Weisfeld*

**E**VEN BEFORE THE establishment of the Estate in 1948, diaspora Jewish communities and Israel have always been in partnership. And no community has been historically more important than British Jews. Home of Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, birthplace of the Montefiores and the Rothschilds, the Jewish philanthropists who made the early days of statehood financially and politically viable: British Jews have played a crucial role in Israel's short life.

Since Israel's independence 65 years ago, Anglo-Jewry has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her. Often in the face of war and terrorism, the community has sent volunteers, financial assistance, and created communal institutions whose role it is to make Israel's case to the wider world. 95 per cent of British Jews have visited Israel and 90 per cent believe it to be the ancestral home of the Jewish people. There is no doubt the bonds are firmly in place.

And yet, over the past few years, there has been a shift in this relationship. Within the UK Jewish community a growing sense of urgency around the necessity to forge an agreement with the Palestinian people, and an increasing discontentment with the notion that one's primary role as a friend of Israel is to express support for all that the government of the day says and does, have been catalysts for this change. There are those that wish to label this change as



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a weakening of the bond. However this is a misinterpretation of a desire to create a new means of expression of love and support for a country the community cares deeply about.

**For the majority of people, who are concerned by a 46-year-old occupation, seeing that there is a healthy debate inside Anglo-Jewry, and of course Israel itself, is crucial**

Many members of the community are taking heed of the strong words coming from voices inside Israel and the international community about how little time is left to make a two-state solution a reality. They wish to talk about the impact the occupation has on Israel itself, and to confront the day-to-day reality of life in the West Bank for the Palestinian people. The days of support for Israeli government policy being synonymous with support for the very existence of a Jewish state are seen by growing numbers to be a thing of the past. This type of relationship may have been appropriate in the early days of statehood, and at moments where Israel's very existence was under immediate existential threat. But today, many believe that one of the biggest threats

to Israel is the lack of a political agreement with the Palestinian people.

Yachad was launched in May 2011 to give a voice to this growing feeling, and to provide the community with a broader understanding of the conflict. An educational and campaigning organisation, it has at its core the notion that diaspora Jews must do all they can to support a two-state solution.

There are, of course, those who believe that this new type of relationship with Israel is problematic. They argue that debating the issues in public plays into the hands of those that have nefarious motives for their criticism of the Jewish state. And of course there are some whose criticism of Israeli government policy is in fact a thinly veiled criticism of the concept of a Jewish state itself. But for the majority of people, who are concerned by a 46-year-old occupation, seeing that there is a healthy debate inside Anglo-Jewry, and of course Israel itself, is crucial. For there is a great difference between supporting the right of Israel to exist and supporting the policies of any one government. And both Jews and non-Jews alike can express their concerns, criticism, and desire to see a just and viable resolution to the conflict, all within the context of supporting the security and survival of the Jewish state. **F**

*Hannah Weisfeld is director of Yachad, the UK's pro-Israel, pro-peace movement*



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## The view from outside

The tools that citizens are using to advance human rights in Tel Aviv and beyond are evolving. As a descendant of refugees and a social activist at the heart of Israel's protest movement, *Yigal Shtayim* writes on why the formal political process is not always the best way to effect the change we want to see in the world



*Yigal Shtayim is an artist and activist living in Tel Aviv*

I LOVE THE STATE of Israel and I consider myself to have leftist sensibilities. I've always been in constant conflict between patriotism and pacifism, torn by the moral polarisation between the essence of Israel and its actions. Only this, it seems, can explain the fact that I am opposed to the occupation, but I served in the army; that I am an independent artist, but that I was ignoring my surroundings; and that at the age of 45, I finally woke up.

In August 2010, a year before the outbreak of social justice protests in Tel

Aviv, I felt fed up. An article published in the *Haaretz* newspaper by former Knesset member Yossi Sarid detailed how Israel's immigration police were set to search in closets and attics of Israeli homes for the children of migrant workers. These children were then to be deported. I couldn't believe what I was reading.

Without much thought, I took the desperate step of many a would-be revolutionary and formed a radical group on Facebook, registered under the name: 'The group to hide 400 children of foreign workers facing

deportation from Israel.' Within 24 hours it had become a group with thousands of angry and determined members, generating a sudden media buzz. There was broad coverage in the Israeli media, and even CNN showed up. These few moments of fame earned me the status of a social activist in the name of human rights.

My inbox collapsed due to the number of people providing details of accommodation where they intended to provide refuge for the children along with their parents. Interior minister Eli Yishai sounded stressed

when he blurted out during a live interview on national radio that he had received a list of 400 rebellious citizens who were planning to hide the 400 children. I hooked up with older organisations operating in the field – after all I was the new kid on the block – and we held a demonstration with 10,000 people, triggering campaigns which strengthened activists, increased pressure on decision makers, and shook Israeli public opinion out of its apathy.

Then in January 2012 I reached the most dramatic turning point. Amidst the fervour created by the protest movement, symbolised by the chant “the people demand social justice”, a law was enacted which broke the camel’s back. Among a succession of undemocratic laws enacted by the previous right-wing government, the low point for me was a law which criminalised refugees arriving at Israel’s border, eliminating the universal concept of ‘refugees’ and replacing it with a word which sounds bad in all languages: ‘infiltrators’. It was against all logic, and I believe contrary to Jewish history, culture and conscience.

In response, I called for a demonstration on Facebook, without co-ordination with the police – a common event during the protests – and a few hundred people came to the city square. The road quickly became blocked, and as I was relaying events to lazy journalists who could not be bothered to come themselves, I photographed a woman holding a sign reading “Your grandmother was an infiltrator.” When I posted the photo the next day, the woman, Orly Feldheim, tagged herself, and so I found a partner in a new initiative. We decided to provide hundreds of thousands of hot food dishes and tonnes of clothing for hundreds of refugees being deposited from government buses in south Tel Aviv.

But from what budget? There was no budget. Also no offices. No kitchen. No cars. We used a combination of home cooking offered spontaneously by members of the public and collections from restaurants and bakeries. The mobilisation was exhilarating. Tonnes of equipment flowed into my studio and people started cooking and bringing their pots to Levinsky Park in south Tel Aviv. Others collected from restaurants and bakeries every day and brought food to the park in shifts, where we provided up to 850 meals in a single evening.

The group we created, ‘Marak Levinsky’ (Levinsky Soup), embedded itself more

deeply into Israeli society and the mass media than the ‘Group of 400’, which has since been almost forgotten. The Marak Levinsky venture has become an emblem for social initiatives which empower citizens to stand up and do something.

For more than 500 days we have managed daily shifts in the park to distribute food and clothing for hundreds of refugees who were unemployed and arrived from prison (where they were held after crossing the border into Israel) with few clothes and sometimes barefoot or only with flip-flops. We were refused assistance from the municipality, who had earlier that year closed the soup kitchen for Africans. But we got help from aid organisations including the Red Cross and connected with older Israeli organisations who were here long before us, and together with them and the help of Facebook, directed this whole system in open and closed groups.

Even in Israel,  
where people do not  
tend to rise up ... there  
is an answer to the  
question: what can I  
do, when the state and  
the municipality ignore  
the problems?

All the Israeli media, and many from around the world, have come to witness this phenomenon: Israelis bringing food and clothing from all over the country. At first they questioned how long we’d last, but after 500 days, the answer is no longer in doubt: until there are no more refugees in the park. Even in Israel, where people do not tend to rise up, perhaps because most of us passed through military service, there is an answer to the question: what can I do, when the state and the municipality ignore the problems?

What made me do all this? I guess there is significance to the fact that like most Jews, I am a descendant of refugees. I am the first child of my family born in Israel after who knows how many generations. My parents and older brothers were born in Chile and Ecuador, my grandparents were born in Germany on one side and Russia on the other. I

guess that with such a family history it would be sad if I could not empathise with people fleeing their homeland when it was burning.

Of course we took a lot of poison and fire from right-wing elements in power, as well as from the southern neighbourhoods of Tel Aviv, and of course in the virtual town square: Facebook. There were many who did not like the assistance we were giving to the new poor people in the southern neighbourhoods of the city. A Knesset member from the ruling right-wing Likud party – Miri Regev – stood on a stage in the town square and shouted words that are unthinkable to Jewish ears: “The Sudanese are cancer.” No wonder that a molotov cocktail was then thrown at a nearby kindergarten for refugee children. This terrible act led volunteers from Marak Levinsky to establish an organisation that focuses exclusively on supporting kindergartens for refugees – an appropriate response to those who discriminates against children because of the colour of their skin or civil status, and who deny refugee status to refugees.

But all this has not led me to become a politician. I was invited by the left-wing Meretz party in Tel Aviv to participate in the primaries to stand for municipal elections, and at first I agreed. Meretz is the party I have voted for since I had the right to vote but I could not, in the short time I spent thinking about the idea of running for city council, see how this could be a tool to advance human rights in Tel Aviv.

I know how it can work theoretically. You could, for example, see to it that all municipal soup kitchens stop closing their doors to hungry refugees. But it’s likely the state will undermine any attempt to guarantee the refugees human rights in the city, while thousands are imprisoned without trial for up to three years. Beyond that – if I’m already doing some good in the field – what good is it for me to sit in meetings at the town hall with a pen sticking out of my pocket? Even swift municipal legislation will not bring immediate equal rights, employment security or baby food.

So, after two years of activity I have returned, perhaps more rational, to the starting point. I am looking at the Israeli political system from the outside again and considering what a strange and ineffective tool it is and how the Jewish refugee lesson has not been adequately learnt. Again I am an outsider, and here I feel comfortable, until the next time. ■

