



Around the Shabbat Table

Special Issue
Adar 5766

This week's writers: Staff, Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York Nassau/Queens Center

Shalom!

Introduction

Because of the upcoming elections in Israel, this week's special *Around the Shabbat Table* will address itself to related issues.

Israeli Elections

On March 28, 2006, Israeli voters will elect members of the 17th Knesset (Israeli parliament). There are 31 parties on the ballot (listed on [Parties and Platforms](#)). The elections will also lead to the selection of a prime minister and of cabinet ministers.



How Israeli Elections Work

All Israeli citizens above age 18 may vote, meaning that there are 5,014,622 eligible voters. Unlike the U.S., Israel's Knesset does not have members that represent a specific part of the country. The entire country votes for the entire Knesset, which consists of 120 seats. Also, unlike the U.S., citizens vote *only* for a party, but not for individual candidates themselves. Each party has a list of 120 candidates determined by those parties far in advance, with the candidates ranked in order in which they are likely to be seated.

It should be noted that historically Israeli voter turnout is high. In recent Knesset elections, between 68 – 79% of eligible voters actually vote. Over the same years, Americans voted at a rate of 49 – 59% of eligible voters.

Once the vote occurs, each party is awarded a number of seats in Knesset, proportionate to the number of votes it receives. Generally, the first name on the list of the party that gets the most Knesset seats becomes the prime minister, and is asked to develop a coalition with a number of smaller parties. Rarely does one

party receive enough votes (61 or more) to form a government by itself. To govern effectively, the coalition needs to have a majority of Knesset seats. In exchange for joining the coalition, these smaller parties are often awarded cabinet positions and other perks for its constituencies.

Background & the Major Issues

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon – Prime Minister Sharon has had a long distinguished career as a military leader, Knesset member, cabinet minister, and prime minister. Selected as prime minister in 2001 as leader of the Likud party, he devised a controversial plan to safeguard Israeli security as well as the demographics of Israel as a Jewish country. The “disengagement” involved the complete withdrawal of Israelis living in a number of areas that had been under Israeli administration since 1967, including the entire Gaza area and in a number of towns in the West Bank.

In the aftermath of the “disengagement”, PM Sharon withdrew from the Likud party and formed a new, moderate party called Kadima (Forward). Sadly, PM Sharon had a series of strokes, which have left him in a comatose state for several months with no realistic expectation that he will return to the government. Since that time, Ehud Olmert, a government minister who followed PM Sharon into the Kadima party, has been acting prime minister. The elections will conclude with the selection of a new permanent prime minister based on how many votes each party receives (and who may very well be Olmert) and a somewhat new lineup in the Knesset.

Below is material from the Jewish Agency website, describing some of the major issues.

What are the major issues?

A. Law and order in the Palestinian Authority and Israel's security – especially since the heavy mortar attacks on Israel from Gaza and the Hamas landslide election victory in the PA. This tends to swing public opinion to the right, or to parties with experienced political figures having a security background, and it reinforces the far right.

B. Corruption in government; money and political power. This is another serious issue. However, it appears to be used to alienate some the public from other political parties with figures who have a questionable ethical record (Kadima, Likud, Shas). At the time of writing, it looks like the start of a major reciprocal and personal smear campaign between the parties, with minimal impact on the average Israeli voter.

C. The Peace Process, Territorial concession. This is a major part of party platforms on the left and in center, less so on the ultra-orthodox party platforms, but it is secondary to Israel's security on the right wing. The political left places greater emphasis on the issue of removing settlements, returning to the pre-67 borders.

D. Civil rights, Equality, Constitution. These constitute a major part of the platforms of the small center, liberal, and left-wing parties, as well as the parties representing Russian immigrants on the political right. Some of the parties address religious and gender-related issues in terms of equality.

E. Social policy, Education, Health. The left-wing and the sectoral parties (ultra-Orthodox, Arab sector) have commonalities on issues of social opportunity, poverty/economic gap, investment, employment, education, etc.



Some Texts to Examine

Some recent documents give us insight into one of the major issues: relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

In April 2004, PM Sharon and President Bush exchanged the following letters in reference to the Palestinian issue:

Exchange of letters between PM Sharon and President Bush

14 Apr 2004

During their meeting in Washington, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and US President George Bush exchanged letters aimed at achieving a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians in the context of the Roadmap and the prime minister's Disengagement Plan.

Letter from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to US President George W. Bush

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President,

The vision that you articulated in your 24 June 2002 address constitutes one of the most significant contributions toward ensuring a bright future for the Middle East. Accordingly, the State of Israel has accepted the Roadmap, as adopted by our government. For the first time, a practical and just formula was presented for the achievement of peace, opening a genuine window of opportunity for progress toward a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, involving two states living side-by-side in peace and security.

This formula sets forth the correct sequence and principles for the attainment of peace. Its full implementation represents the sole means to make genuine progress. As you have stated, a Palestinian state will never be created by terror, and Palestinians must engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure. Moreover, there must be serious efforts to institute true reform and real democracy and liberty, including new leaders not compromised by terror. We are committed to this formula as the only avenue through which an agreement can be reached. We believe that this formula is the only viable one.

The Palestinian Authority under its current leadership has taken no action to meet its responsibilities under the Roadmap. Terror has not ceased, reform of the Palestinian security services has not been undertaken, and real institutional reforms have not taken place. The State of Israel continues to pay the heavy cost of constant terror. Israel must preserve its capability to protect itself and deter its enemies, and we thus retain our right to defend ourselves against terrorism and to take actions against terrorist organizations.

Having reached the conclusion that, for the time being, there exists no Palestinian partner with whom to advance peacefully toward a settlement and since the current impasse is unhelpful to the achievement of our shared goals, I have decided to initiate a process of gradual disengagement with the hope of reducing friction between Israelis and Palestinians. The Disengagement Plan is designed to improve security for Israel and stabilize our political and economic situation. It will enable us to deploy our forces more effectively until such time that conditions in the Palestinian Authority allow for the full implementation of the Roadmap to resume.

I attach, for your review, the main principles of the Disengagement Plan. This initiative, which we are not undertaking under the roadmap, represents an independent Israeli plan, yet is not inconsistent with the roadmap. According to this plan, the State of Israel intends to relocate military installations and all Israeli villages and towns in the Gaza Strip, as well as other military installations and a small number of villages in Samaria.

In this context, we also plan to accelerate construction of the Security Fence, whose completion is essential in order to ensure the security of the citizens of Israel. The fence is a security rather than political barrier, temporary rather than permanent, and therefore will not prejudice any final status issues including final borders. The route of the Fence, as approved by our Government's decisions, will take into account, consistent with security needs, its impact on Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activities.

Upon my return from Washington, I expect to submit this Plan for the approval of the Cabinet and the Knesset, and I firmly believe that it will win such approval.

The Disengagement Plan will create a new and better reality for the State of Israel, enhance its security and economy, and strengthen the fortitude of its people. In this context, I believe it is important to bring new opportunities to the Negev and the Galilee. Additionally, the Plan will entail a series of measures with the inherent potential to improve the lot of the Palestinian Authority, providing that it demonstrates the wisdom to take advantage of this opportunity. The execution of the Disengagement Plan holds the prospect of stimulating positive changes within the Palestinian Authority that might create the necessary conditions for the resumption of direct negotiations.

We view the achievement of a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians as our central focus and are committed to realizing this objective. Progress toward this goal must be anchored exclusively in the Roadmap and we will oppose any other plan.

In this regard, we are fully aware of the responsibilities facing the State of Israel. These include limitations on the growth of settlements; removal of unauthorized outposts; and steps to increase, to the extent permitted by security needs, freedom of movement for Palestinians not engaged in terrorism. Under separate cover we are sending to you a full description of the steps the State of Israel is taking to meet all its responsibilities.

The government of Israel supports the United States efforts to reform the Palestinian security services to meet their roadmap obligations to fight terror. Israel also supports the American's efforts, working with the International Community, to promote the reform process, build institutions and improve the economy of the Palestinian Authority and to enhance the welfare of its people, in the hope that a new Palestinian leadership will prove able to fulfill its obligations under the roadmap.

I want to again express my appreciation for your courageous leadership in the war against global terror, your important initiative to revitalize the Middle East as a more fitting home for its people and, primarily, your personal friendship and profound support for the State of Israel.

Sincerely,

Ariel Sharon

Letter from US President George W. Bush to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

His Excellency
Ariel Sharon
Prime Minister of Israel

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

Thank you for your letter setting out your disengagement plan.

The United States remains hopeful and determined to find a way forward toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. I remain committed to my June 24, 2002 vision of two states living side by side in peace and security as the key to peace, and to the roadmap as the route to get there.

We welcome the disengagement plan you have prepared, under which Israel would withdraw certain military installations and all settlements from Gaza, and withdraw certain military installations and settlements in the West Bank. These steps described in the plan will mark real progress toward realizing my June 24, 2002 vision, and make a real contribution towards peace. We also understand that, in this context, Israel believes it is important to bring new opportunities to the Negev and the Galilee. We are hopeful that steps pursuant to this plan, consistent with my vision, will remind all states and parties of their own obligations under the roadmap.

The United States appreciates the risks such an undertaking represents. I therefore want to reassure you on several points.

First, the United States remains committed to my vision and to its implementation as described in the roadmap. The United States will do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan. Under the roadmap, Palestinians must undertake an immediate cessation of armed activity and all acts of violence against Israelis anywhere, and all official Palestinian institutions must end incitement against Israel. The Palestinian leadership must act decisively against terror, including sustained, targeted, and effective operations to stop terrorism and dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructure. Palestinians must undertake a comprehensive and fundamental political reform that includes a strong parliamentary democracy and an empowered prime minister.

Second, there will be no security for Israelis or Palestinians until they and all states, in the region and beyond, join together to fight terrorism and dismantle terrorist organizations. The United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel's

security, including secure, defensible borders, and to preserve and strengthen Israel's capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats.

Third, Israel will retain its right to defend itself against terrorism, including to take actions against terrorist organizations. The United States will lead efforts, working together with Jordan, Egypt, and others in the international community, to build the capacity and will of Palestinian institutions to fight terrorism, dismantle terrorist organizations, and prevent the areas from which Israel has withdrawn from posing a threat that would have to be addressed by any other means. The United States understands that after Israel withdraws from Gaza and/or parts of the West Bank, and pending agreements on other arrangements, existing arrangements regarding control of airspace, territorial waters, and land passages of the West Bank and Gaza will continue.

The United States is strongly committed to Israel's security and well-being as a Jewish state. It seems clear that an agreed, just, fair and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel.

As part of a final peace settlement, Israel must have secure and recognized borders, which should emerge from negotiations between the parties in accordance with UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338. In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion. It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities.

I know that, as you state in your letter, you are aware that certain responsibilities face the State of Israel. Among these, your government has stated that the barrier being erected by Israel should be a security rather than political barrier, should be temporary rather than permanent, and therefore not prejudice any final status issues including final borders, and its route should take into account, consistent with security needs, its impact on Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activities.

As you know, the United States supports the establishment of a Palestinian state that is viable, contiguous, sovereign, and independent, so that the Palestinian people can build their own future in accordance with my vision set forth in June 2002 and with the path set forth in the roadmap. The United States will join with others in the international community to foster the development of democratic political institutions and new leadership committed to those institutions, the reconstruction of civic institutions, the growth of a free and prosperous economy, and the building of capable security institutions dedicated to maintaining law and order and dismantling terrorist organizations.

A peace settlement negotiated between Israelis and Palestinians would be a great boon not only to those peoples but to the peoples of the entire region. Accordingly, the United States believes that all states in the region have special responsibilities: to support the building of the institutions of a Palestinian state; to fight terrorism, and cut off all forms of assistance to individuals and groups engaged in terrorism; and to begin now to move toward more normal relations with the State of Israel. These actions would be true contributions to building peace in the region.

Mr. Prime Minister, you have described a bold and historic initiative that can make an important contribution to peace. I commend your efforts and your courageous decision which I support. As a close friend and ally, the United States intends to work closely with you to help make it a success.

Sincerely,

George W. Bush

- From your reading of these letters, where do Israel and the United States agree?
- Are there areas in which there might be disagreement?

Israel's relationship with the Palestinians is complicated by the election to leadership of the Hamas party. The following are excerpts from the Hamas covenant:

Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it" (The Martyr, Imam Hassan al-Banna, of blessed memory)...

The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said:

"The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree, (evidently a certain kind of tree) would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews." (related by al-Bukhari and Moslem)...

There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors...

The Zionist invasion is a vicious invasion. It does not refrain from resorting to all methods, using all evil and contemptible ways to achieve its end. It relies greatly in its infiltration and espionage operations on the secret organizations it gave rise to, such as the Freemasons, The Rotary and Lions clubs, and other sabotage groups. All these organizations, whether secret or open, work in the interest of Zionism and according to its instructions. They aim at undermining societies, destroying values, corrupting consciences, deteriorating character and annihilating Islam. It is behind the drug trade and alcoholism in all its kinds so as to facilitate its control and expansion...

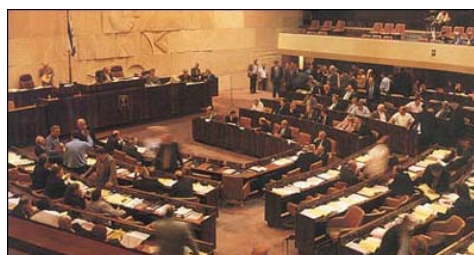
After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.

Unlike the previous Palestinian Authority leadership, controlled by the relatively secular Fatah party, Hamas is a religious movement, based on a particularly uncompromising and rigid militant orientation within Islam.

- Under what circumstances could or should Israel seek talks with a Hamas-led government?
- From what you've read about the parties running for Knesset, do most appear to favor discussions with the Palestinian Authority at this time? How can you tell?
- What parts of the Hamas Covenant that you've read advocate not only against Jews and Israelis, but against western society in general?

For your family's discussion:

1. Look at each issue described above separately. For each one, try to think if there is a comparable issue in this country. If yes, what is it?
2. Rank these issues in the order of their importance to you.
3. Do you think the order would be different if you were living in Israel? Why or why not?
4. Which parties' platforms do you find attractive? Is there any one party for whom you might vote if you were living in Israel? How can you justify your choice?



For more information go to the following sites, which express a variety of opinions and ideas about the elections in Israel:

[Israeli Elections 2006 Jewish Agency for Israel Site](#)

[Israel Votes 2006](#)

[HaAretz](#)

[Arutz Sheva](#)

SHABBAT SHALOM

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York Nassau/Queens Center. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

This project is supported through the generosity of Joyce & Fred Claar.

BJE is an agency of UJA-Federation of New York