

Editorial/comment

Electoral system to blame for Barak's failure

The demonizing of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak since last summer bears an uncanny resemblance to the anger toward former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his last few months in office. Knesset and other critics scorn Barak for making too many important government decisions on his own, without consulting cabinet colleagues; similar charges were levelled against Netanyahu before he was forced to call early elections two years ago, as Barak has again done, only 19 months into his own term of office.

The critics ignore the real problem in the Israeli political system - the inherent instability of almost any Israeli government, due to the country's unwieldy system of proportional representation, which in 1999 led to a whopping 15 parties being elected to the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

A prime minister has to cobble together a majority there out of a half dozen or more political parties, which often have only the most superficial ideological similarities - an almost certain recipe for government collapse, once tough decisions have to be made. Meanwhile, the Israeli and Diaspora Jewish publics quickly grow impatient with a prime minister

who doesn't make progress on the peace front - historically the most important cause in Israeli politics. To really advance on that front, that prime minister has to move boldly, thereby alienating more hawkish coalition partners, and often, more hawkish members of his own party.

Getting Israel's Knesset to reform itself without outside pressure will be next to impossible. The many smaller parties there, in particular, are likely to continue supporting the present system of proportional representation, which allows even relatively small political groups to get members elected.

It's questionable how much influence Diaspora Jews have in the area of Israeli parliamentary reform, but if they can exert pressure, perhaps by curtailing financial contributions to smaller parties, they would be doing the Jewish state a favor.

Until that reform happens, Jews in Israel and the rest of the world should stop blaming prime ministers like Barak who fail, politically, because their own coalition has fallen apart over how much territory to return in the never-ending peace process. It's not Barak who's at fault; it's Israel's chaotic, permanently unstable electoral system.



By-product of new violence: Jews shun Arab merchants

Fear, resentment prompt many to deal only with other Jews

While violent action continues to take place for the most part in areas relatively remote from central Israel, a second front, more quiet, but no less significant, has unofficially opened up within Israel's heartland, and particularly in areas of large Arab population.

by Israeli Arabs against the government and against Jews.

Typical was the letter written in a local Haifa paper by Anat Levi, of that city: "When I saw the Arab protest demonstration in the streets here, with the placard, 'Jews are Nazis', I vowed that my feet would never tread the streets of Wadi Nisnas (center of Arab population) and not one penny of my salary would ever go to them. Our neighbors, the Arabs, must learn that we, too, have pride."

Many other Israelis apparently feel the same way, as Arab restaurants and shops report drastic decline in Jewish patronage. Taxi companies report that many



An Israeli Arab woman October 4 reads an Arab newspaper in Jaffa, while a Palestinian flag flies nearby. Jewish Haifa woman wants Arab merchants there to fly Israeli flags, before she resumes shopping at their stores. *Isranet photo.*

requests for cabs are qualified with "no Arab driver, please."

Many Haifa Jews declare that their avoidance of Wadi Nisnas stems not from fear, but from their feelings of dignity as Jews. If local Arab storekeepers wished really to distance themselves from the recent riots, as they claim in private conversations, why was there no organized statement to that effect on behalf of the Arab community as a whole, denouncing the riots or expressing regret or even apologizing?

The reaction is not limited to Haifa. Nazareth and many Arab villages in the Galilee, which in the past were visited by Jewish patrons, report that their business has dried up. Arab garages and mechanics, even in the West Bank, which used to be frequented by Israeli car owners because of their lower prices, are now desert-

and seclusion of the Arab citizens is not the path, the paper declared.

That not all Israelis have these negative feelings is shown in a letter by Haim Rosenberg of Haifa, who urged that it is not fair to punish innocent Arab merchants who had taken no part in the demonstrations, and perhaps had even opposed them. Boycott, he wrote, leads to counter-reaction, and to hard feelings among many who would be our friends.

The reaction in the Jewish community was further exacerbated by the tendency on the part of a growing number of Arab citizens to call themselves Palestinians. The corollary is their demand for recognition, not merely for equality, but for "separate national jurisdiction and self-government for a national minority" within Israel, in the words of Professor Said Zaidani, an Israeli Arab from the Galilee, as quoted by Yosef Goell in *The Jerusalem Post*.

Feelings were not eased when an Arab member of the Knesset, Muhammed Baraka, called on Israeli Arabs not just to support the Intifada, but to join it. The sight of Palestinian flags flying in Wadi Nisnas did not help ease the bitterness. Reaction from the Arab community was not slow in coming. One of their political parties issued a flyer declaring that there

are racists among the Jews who are exploiting the opportunity to call for a boycott of Arab merchants, despite the latter's right to voice protests. Matters were further stirred up by Galilee Arabs who, indignant at what they felt was Israeli over-reaction to the riots, now seek to avoid patronizing Jews as much as possible.

Haifa's mayor, Amram Mitzna, published ads in the local press condemning any divisive actions.

But the man in the street seemed more in agreement with Yvette Sheiman, who wrote in the local press: "Before all this happened, I used to patronize Arab restaurants and stores in the Wadi. It never entered my mind. We were all Israelis. But now I understand they identify themselves with those who wish to destroy us, and cry out, 'Death to the Jews'. Now they ask us to come back as if nothing has happened. Let us not fall victim to pity. If they want to restore confidence, let them proclaim publicly that they have erred and that they are Israelis first. For example, let them hang Israeli flags outside their places of business."

It's going to be a long time before Jewish distrust of the Israeli Arabs will be removed. *The writer lives in Haifa, Israel.*

Comment



Freshly-baked "sufganiot" sprinkled with icing sugar at a Tel Aviv bakery: Observant and secular Israelis differ on how to celebrate Chanukah. *Isranet photo.*

The Chanukah controversy

Secular Israelis say events of 2165 years ago had nothing to do with God

Jews in Israel have no need to exaggerate the importance of Chanukah in order for it to compete with Christmas. But they have to define its meaning, and that is yet another issue about which observant and secular elements disagree.

The former naturally believe that the Almighty was responsible for the military success of the Maccabees, and that it was He who made it possible for one day's supply of sanctified oil to last for eight days. Where the latter are concerned, God had nothing to do with the events of 2165 years ago.

This dichotomy is reflected in Chanukah songs. The religious viewpoint is reflected in the most popular of them all, "Maoz Tsur." Its English version, which I remember from Sunday School days, says, among other things: "Rock of Ages let our song Praise thy saving power Thou amidst the raging foes Was our sheltering tower. Furious they assailed us But thine arm availed us And thy word Broke their sword When our own strength failed us."

Israelis sing "Maoz Tsur" as they light the Chanukah candles, but many of them mouth the words without really paying attention to their meaning. It is another song, popular here but little known in the Diaspora, which more accurately reflects the viewpoint of the secularist elements of the population. It is "Anu Nosim Lapidim" (We Bear Torches). Its second, clearly ideological verse goes:

"No miracle happened We didn't find a cruse of oil We went to the valleys Climbed the hills From the hidden springs of our past We brought back streams of light No miracle at all

No cruse of oil We drilled the rock Till our blistered hands bled And there was light."

Most Israelis - with the exception of those on strict diets - partake of traditional Chanukah dishes, with special emphasis on sufganiot (jelly-filled doughnuts and latkes (potato pancakes), both deep fried. Other traditional foods eaten here by immigrants from various countries include an Italian-Jewish favorite (chicken pieces dipped in batter and deep fried) and a Moroccan-Jewish delicacy (couscous with chicken that has been deep fried rather than boiled, as it is the rest of the year).

Since Chanukah is a time when kids have a week off from school and parents are desperate to keep them occupied, the producers of plays for youngsters make a killing. Among the productions being presented this year are "Hello My Princess" (in which several children help a princess look for her lost puppy), "Pim Pam Po" (the story of a loveable giant who sets off in search of yet another princess), "From the Kitchen with Love" (a comedy whose characters are kitchen appliances) and "What Happens When a Star is Sick"?

None of these plays have anything to do with the Maccabean uprising or the cleansing of the Temple. Moreover, they are usually third rate. But at least they keep the little boys and girls out of their mothers' hair while they are frying latkes.

*The writer lives in Rehovot, Israel.*

Walk on the singles' side  
A trip to a childhood home:  
Or, growing up is hard to do

By TERESA STRASSER  
LOS ANGELES (JTA) - They say you can never go home again. Well, you can. Only you might find yourself staying at a Travelodge, driving a rented Ford Contour and staking out your childhood home like some private eye just trying to catch a glimpse of the Johnny-come-latelys that are now living in YOUR HOUSE.

It's a familiar story. Kids grow up, parents sell the family home and move to some sunnier climate, some condo somewhere, some smaller abode. We grown-up kids box up all the junk from our childhoods - dusty ballet shoes, high school textbooks, rolled up posters of 1980s rock star Adam Ant - and wonder where home went.

I'm not a sentimental person, I told myself. I don't need to see old 3922 26th St. before we sell the place. I even skipped the part where I return home to salvage my mementos from the garage. I let my parents box up the stuff which arrived from San Francisco like the little package you get when released from jail. You know, here's your watch, the outfit you wore in here, some cash. Here's the person you once were.

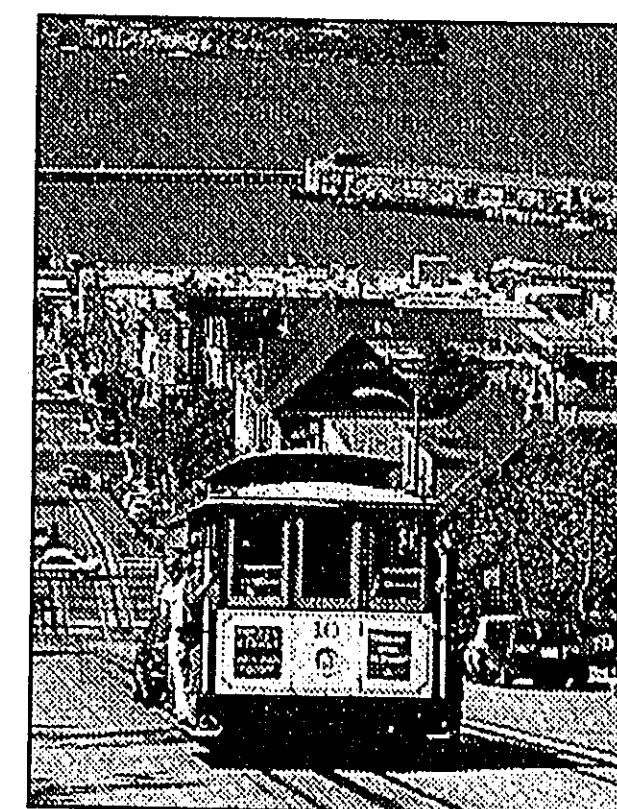
After a year, San Francisco called me home again. I missed it. High rents had driven all my friends out of the city to the suburbs so I made myself a reservation at a motel and drove there in a rented car. The next day, I cruised over to my old neighborhood. There was the little corner store my mom used to send me to for milk, the familiar fire station, the laundromat. I cried like the sap I never thought I'd be.

I sat in the car, staring at my old house, tears welling up. It had a fresh paint job, the gang graffiti erased from the garage door. New curtains hung in the window. I walked up and touched the doorknob like it was the cheek of a lover just home from war. I noticed the darker paint where our old mezuzah used to be. I sat on our scratchy brick stoop, dangling my legs off the edge, feeling as rootless as I've ever felt.

You can't go home in a lot of ways, I discovered that night, when I met up with an ex-boyfriend. "Great to see you," he said, giving me a tense hug. "The thing is, I only have an hour." What am I, the LensCrafters of social engagements? As it happens, his new girlfriend wasn't too keen on my homecoming. We had a quick drink, and he dropped me back off at my motel where I scrounged up my machine to buy some Whoppers from the vending machine for dinner.

I settled in for the evening to watch "Three to Tango" on HBO. "You had to watch a movie with a 'Friends' cast member," said my brother, nodding empathetically. "That's sad."

My brother and I met up at our old house, like homing pigeons. We walked down the street for some coffee and I filled him in on my trip. He convinced me to stay my last night at



San Francisco cable car: Teresa Strasser found some comfort, visiting her childhood neighborhood there. *Photo: San Francisco Convention & Visitors Bureau.*

his new place, just outside the city. I'll gladly pay \$98 U.S. a night just for the privilege of not inconveniencing anyone, but he actually seemed to want me. "I love having guests," he insisted.

So I went. It's surprising how late in life you still get that "I can't believe I'm a grown-up feeling," like when your big brother, the guy who used to force you to watch "Gomer Pyle" reruns, owns his own place. It was small and sparse and he had just moved in, but it was his.

The refrigerator had nothing but mustard, a few cheese slices and 14 cans of Diet 7-Up. We picked up some fast food, rented a movie, popped some popcorn. I fell asleep on his couch. Insomniacs rarely fall asleep on peoples' couches, I assure you.

I don't know why I slept so well after agonizing all weekend over the question of home, if I had one anymore, where it was. I only know that curled up under an old sleeping bag, the sound of some second-rate guy movie playing in the background, my brother in a chair next to me, I felt safe and comfortable.

Maybe that's part of what home is. But it's not the whole story. As much as I'd like to buy the cliches about home being where the heart is, or as the poet Robert Frost put it, "The place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in," a part of me thinks the truth is somewhere between the loftiness of all those platitudes and the concreteness of that wooden door on 26th Street.

I'll probably be casing that joint from time to time for the rest of my life. I'll sit outside, like a child watching someone take away a favorite toy, and silently scream, "MINE!"

Teresa Strasser is a 20-something writer and performer living in Los Angeles. She recently won an Emmy for her writing on ComedyCentral's "Win Ben Stein's Money."

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