

Toward a democratic, not Jewish, state

A civil alternative to the right's doctrines – one God, one people, one land and one leader – is urgently needed, and whoever has the courage and inspiration to stand at this front will win it all

Avraham Burg | Jan. 25, 2019 | 12:25 AM | 7

The spirit in the election atmosphere is the spirit of the time, the insane Netanyahu spirit. That's the wind blowing in the sails of his fervid supporters and defining his rivals. He is asking for the voters' confidence to do more of the same and his opponents say "Just not Bibi."

For 35 years Israel has had no opposition. We have no experience and memories of alternative thinking anymore. There is nobody to offer a different kind of hope at the end of all the despair.

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Many years ago I contended for the leadership of the Labor Party, which at the time was stuck in the mire of the national unity government. It was characterized by no governance and little unity. That is exactly where the destruction of democracy and the nationalization of the political discourse, together with its turn to ultra-nationalism, began.

At the time I planned to take Labor out of the government, to turn it into a civil alternative to the right's doctrines – one God, one people, one land and one leader. I was told then: Your ideas are premature. Today I'm telling us all: In a moment it will be too late. Because this is exactly what is urgently needed, even more than before.

In this sense Avi Gabbay is absolutely right to make the public commitment he is making – not to join Netanyahu's next government. But this is an empty commitment. It deals with title and status, not with content. To replace Netanyahuism one must present a comprehensive, complete worldview.

The right of recent years stands on five legs: sowing of fear, Jewish supremacy, abandonment of Western values, systematic weakening of the institutions of law and divisiveness.

After so many years of such thorough indoctrination it's not enough to say "I won't sit in the same government with him." It must be self-evident – what's needed is to "turn from evil." But what does it mean to "do good," what is the ideological content that will heal Israel from Netanyahu's curse?

The renewal of Israel must stand on a foundation of civil equality. There is no other supreme value capable of uniting the variety of our identities, with absolute commitment to a democratic way of life. To achieve it we must set up a coalition for civil equality including various parties, movements and interests, all of which have one ultimate goal: changing Israeli discourse from ethnic domination to equal citizenship for all. The coalition's agenda should include:

- Redefining Israel from "a Jewish-democratic state" to "a constitutional democracy in which part of the Jewish people has established its sovereignty and which belongs to all its citizens."
- Proposing a civil constitution including complete civil equality, secularizing the public sphere, separating state from religion, a fair distribution of public resources and decent, fair "rules of the game."
- Significantly minimizing the Law of Return and closing all the automatic fast tracks granted on the basis of (at times dubious) genetic connection to the Jewish collective.
- Changing the Israeli security concept, from the obsessive amassing of power to the constant striving for long-term political arrangements, including with the Palestinian people.
- Waiving the monopolies and privileges of Israel and the Jews between the Jordan River and the sea. Turning it into a shared space as much as possible in which every person is entitled to the same rights and every nation has the right to self-determination and confederate partnership in every walk of life.
- Implementing a policy of affirmative action and justice to redress past iniquities to the excluded and discriminated-against populations in Israel, centering on the Arab population, until the goals of civil equality are met.

Yes, all these things mean a painful parting from the Jewish comfort and supremacy zones. It's a dramatic evolution from the ideas of 1948 and 1967 to a new model of society, in a world of populist madness stretching from Washington to Ankara and from Moscow to Balfour Street in Jerusalem.

Anyone who has the courage and inspiration to stand at this front, and is ready to pay the price, will win it all. And make all of us winners.