

{NOVEMBER 26, 2005}

# TWO EARTHQUAKES

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**A** political earthquake is itself a rare event. When two major political earthquakes follow each other in quick succession, this is almost unheard of. One such earthquake was the election of Amir Peretz as leader of the Labor Party. The other is Sharon's leaving the Likud and forming a new party. Suddenly, the political landscape has changed beyond recognition. Previously, there were two mountains. Now there are three – and none of them stands where either of the two was standing before.

The Likud has evolved over the last 28 years into a center-right party. Its extreme nationalist views have been diluted with opportunism and ever growing corruption. Its leadership became intertwined with the ultra-rich, who dictated its economic policy, even if most of its voters belonged to the underprivileged.

The Labor party has become its own tombstone. It has turned into a pale copy of the Likud, a kind of Likud 2. Its main gravedigger, Shimon Peres, was also its main representative, while also acting as Sharon's chief propagandist throughout the world.

This landscape does not exist any more.

In the new landscape there are three mountains, facing three different directions.

**THE LIKUD** has reverted to what it was before coming to power in 1977: a radical right-wing party. This is the classic Herut party, which believes in the Greater Israel (called in Hebrew "The Whole of Eretz YIsrael"), from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River (at least). It opposes any peace agreement with the Palestinian people and wants to maintain the occupation, until circumstances allow for the annexation of all the occupied territories. Since it also wants a homogeneous Jewish state, this contains a hidden message: the Arabs must be induced to leave the country. In right-wing parlance, this is called "voluntary transfer". However, the party takes care not spell this out openly.

The Likud may now prattle about "social" matters, in order to compete with Peretz for the "Eastern" (mostly North African) voters. But since the unification of the Herut

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Party in the 1960s with the defunct Liberal Party, it has served the interests of the very rich.

**THE SHARON PARTY** (called Kadima, "Forward") is built on a lie. Sharon has declared that the Road Map is its sole political platform. But the Road Map was dead before it was born. Sharon does not dream – and never intended – to carry out his part of the very first phase of its realization: the elimination of the hundred new settlements ("outposts") that were set up after 2000, and the freeze of all settlement activities.

Sharon does not make a secret of his real intentions: to annex to Israel 58% of the West Bank, including the ever-expanding "settlement blocs", as well as various "security zones" (the extended Jordan valley and the roads between the settlements) and Great-Great-Jerusalem, up to the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement. Since there can be no Palestinian partner for such a "solution", he plans to implement this by a unilateral diktat, backed by force, without any dialogue with the Palestinians.

As far as Sharon is concerned, social matters are a nuisance. He will, of course, publish some social program in order to compete with Peretz and the Likud, but it really does not interest him.

**THE LABOR PARTY** of Amir Peretz will concentrate on social-economic issues, hoping to attract the masses of the Eastern public who have until now voted for the Likud and Shas (the party of Orthodox Eastern Jews). The chances of victory lie here. Amir Peretz supports a serious peace program: negotiations with the Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state, on the basis of the borders of 1967. He will represent this in a social context: the money wasted on war, occupation and the settlements is stolen from the poor and increases the gap between rich and poor.

Peretz's advisors will try to convince him to "become centralized" (there is a new Hebrew word for this) and to dilute his peace message, in order to attract voters "in the middle". If he does this, he will appear to lack self-confidence, credibility and a clear program. But in any case, Peretz will try to emphasize social issues and relegate peace-and-security issues to second place.

One of the main principles of military strategy is that the side that chooses the battlefield has a better chance of winning the battle, since his choice will reflect, of course, their particular requirements. That is also true for the election battle.

Sharon is a victorious general, and therefore he is interested in placing "Security" in the centre of the election campaign. There he has a huge advantage over Peretz, who was a mere captain in the maintenance corps. When there is danger to the security of

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Israel, the people will trust Sharon, the Sabra (born in this country) from Malal village, who radiates the aura of a military leader.

Peretz is a trade union leader, a man born in Morocco who grew up in a small town of poor immigrants, and so is interested in placing the social-economic issues in the center of the elections. When hundreds of thousands live beneath the poverty line and see the social gap as their main problem, they may treat security matters as of secondary concern.

Peretz must get the masses to internalize the formula "Peace = Reducing the Gap". That is quite difficult. During my ten years in the Knesset, I made dozens of speeches about this, and did not succeed. In public consciousness, there exists a kind of mental block: when speaking about the economy, the national conflict is ignored. When speaking about the national conflict, they don't want to hear about the economy. Peretz must break through the partition and establish the connection between the two. After so many sacrifices of blood and money, the public may be ripe for this.

So the main battle will be about the battlefield itself: whether Security or the Social Gap will be its centerpiece. Peretz must stick to his agenda, even if all kinds of advisors and media-people urge him to deviate from it and respond the attacks of his opponents. And, of course, every "terrorist" attack will help Sharon and the Likud. (Sharon-haters assert that he is quite capable of provoking such attacks himself, by initiating military actions that demand retaliation.)

How does the new landscape differ from the old? Strangely enough, many commentators ignore the most manifest and most decisive fact:

The whole system has undergone a shift to the left.

The Likud nucleus is stuck on the right, where it always was. But all the others have moved.

The Sharon-party, which has split from the Likud, has given up its main article of faith: the Whole of Eretz Yisrael. It advocates the partition of the country. Sharon himself has established the precedent of removing settlements. However bad his political program is: compared to the former position of himself and of the Likud, it is much less rightist. He has not turned into "Labor 2", as his Likud opponents assert, but he has moved leftward.

The election of Amir Peretz constitutes a major movement of the Labor party to the real left.

This is true for the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as for the social problem. Not only does Peretz bring with him a social-democratic agenda, he also compels all the other parties to turn in this direction, or at least to pretend to.

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Even Shas has suddenly remembered that it is, after all, the party of the underprivileged Eastern Jews. After several years on the extreme right, it is now recalling that its sole leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yossef, years ago came out in favor of giving back territories for peace.

For years now an abnormal situation has prevailed in Israel and driven social scientists crazy: according to all public opinion polls, most of the public wants peace and is prepared to make almost all the necessary concessions, but in the Knesset this position has hardly been represented at all.

During all these years, my optimism has irritated many people. I told everyone: this will not go on. Some day, in a way that we cannot yet foresee, this abnormal state will right itself. One way or another, the political scene will attune itself to public opinion.

An earthquake causes changes on the ground, but is itself caused by forces deep in the earth. This is true in political life, too: the changes hidden in the depths of public consciousness eventually result in changes that are visible to the eye. The outcome is quick and sudden, but it results from a long, slow subterranean process. I am proud of the role that I and my partners have had in this.

What will happen now? That depends on many factors. On us, too.