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## A referendum indeed

By [Uzi Benziman](#)

Benjamin Netanyahu deserves a citation: He defined this election campaign and its outcome with regard to the future of the West Bank as a referendum. This is an understanding of democracy at its best, and Netanyahu deserves accolades for his insight and for the commitment that follows from it: accepting the public's judgment as expressed in the polling booths at the close of the 28th of this month. Whoever internalizes the fact that the election results should be seen as a referendum about Israel's continued hold over Judea and Samaria, and the scope of this, is in fact declaring that he will not question that if the time comes to translate the decision into deeds.

This is a commitment of supreme importance, and it is essential to fix it in the public mind: The political right is announcing that it will accept the verdict of the voters. There is an ineluctable conclusion from this: If a government is formed that wishes to bring about an Israeli evacuation from most of the West Bank (whether through negotiations with the Palestinians or through unilateral steps), the right-wing opposition will not have an excuse to question the legitimacy of the move. All that would be contrary to the reservations it had about Ariel Sharon's right to implement the disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip and to the accepted opinion, among at least part of the settlers, that no parliamentary majority has the right to decide the fate of the Land of Israel but only "all of the people of Israel." In realizing that these elections are a referendum about the future of the connection with the Palestinians and the territories in which they live, Netanyahu bound himself and the entire right-wing camp to the clear rules of the game: They will be able to oppose future withdrawals in the accepted framework of parliamentary debates, but they must refrain, morally at least, from trying to prevent such a move through demonstrations, disturbing the peace and confrontations with the army and the police.

Whoever states that the elections have the same status as a referendum cannot initiate or participate in a public campaign aimed at overturning the Knesset's decisions. This is a relevant reminder to the leaders of the camp whose incitement formed the backdrop to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and whose position forced the country to call up tens of thousands of soldiers and

policemen to implement the disengagement plan.

Netanyahu's definition also obliges both the left and the center: They did not disagree with it, and it indeed reflects the significance of the elections. If therefore it becomes clear in two weeks' time that the Knesset prefers to set up a right-wing government, Kadima and the Labor Party will have to humbly accept this result and wait for another time. If, on the other hand, these two parties form the axis of the next government, they will have to ensure that suitable administrative rules are kept when they lead a withdrawal initiative from the West Bank, so as not to harm its legitimacy. Sharon gave the right-wing excuses to reject the disengagement plan: He promised a referendum and then changed his mind, and he committed himself to accepting the Likud party's decision and then treated it with disdain, dismissing the ministers of the extreme right in order to create an artificial majority in the government.

While the disengagement plan eventually received the necessary majority vote in the government and the Knesset, as well as the sanction of the High Court of Justice, Sharon's conduct on the public and formal level was disquieting. If Ehud Olmert and Amir Peretz do indeed lead a withdrawal from the West Bank, they must not repeat his mistakes.

Granting the status of a referendum to the elections places an obligation on all the parties and the public that votes for them. The emerging balance of parliamentary power will reflect the voters' will and will give authority to the parties that form the government to act according to the platforms they presented. On the face of it, this is always the situation at the conclusion of an election campaign; how much more so when the vote is considered in advance to be a referendum about a defined disagreement, and when every party's position has been clearly formulated on the eve of the decision. These insights are binding on both supporters and opponents of withdrawal.

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