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It's women's time

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It is not certain that the heads of Kadima and the Labor Party burst into cheers when they saw that the public would add to each of those parties about three Knesset seats if they were headed by Tzipi Livni and Yuli Tamir respectively. But the public's choice, however, is not surprising.

The two women, who are identified as the number two in their respective parties, have managed to stand out head and shoulders above their colleagues, both male and female. The public apparently that they have acquired their stature legitimately: through hard work, talent, stubbornness, loyalty to the heads of their parties, and with articulate communication styles that are both human and direct.

Livni and Tamir come from opposite ends of the political spectrum, but they have a lot in common. Both grew up in the heart of the elite, in ideological homes that were politically involved. Livni's father was an MK from Herut and her mother Sarah is the famous "little Sarah" from the song "To the Barricades." Tamir's father was a senior executive at Koor, and her mother, from the Golomb family, was a literary editor.

Both were officers in the army, reaching the rank of lieutenant. Livni is a former Mossad employee and successful lawyer, who earned most of her reputation as head of the Government Corporation Authority following her appointment by Benjamin Netanyahu. From there she was launched into government ministries: regional cooperation, absorption, housing and construction, justice and foreign affairs. She made her professional and ideological mark, running reforms in the legal system and the way immigrants are absorbed, and even tried to make changes in the Supreme Court.

Tamir, one of the founders of Peace Now and a former chair of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, holds a PhD in political philosophy from Oxford University and is a professor at Tel Aviv University. Ehud Barak invited her to serve as a minister in his government. Later, she was elected to the Knesset, and in the last primaries, she came in sixth place, without any preferential treatment. She is an energetic and diligent MK, active in social affairs and very

dominant in the election campaign.

These career arcs reflect a new phenomenon: more and more employers, at key junctions in public service and the private sector, recognize the special value of educated and talented women, and encourage them to advance to key roles for the sake of the organizations that they head. It's the case in high-tech, media companies, banks, government ministries, and elsewhere. The women who go far are usually from well-established veteran families in the country. They were given good opportunities and used them well. They are determined, work very hard, and outpace the average man in their environment with their excellence, dedication and ambition.

Now the phenomenon has reached politics, where Livni and Tamir continue in the path of the most impressive of groundbreakers, Shulamit Aloni. Like her, both could have developed careers in business and academia, and like her, they decided to put some of the old-new meaning into the term elite - an elite that serves the public.

That is good news, and it is to be hoped that it will eventually pave the way for women from less fortunate parts of society. But it is only half of the picture. The other half belongs to the public, which has chosen to place its faith in both women, and only a few months after the pollsters and commentators agreed that the public wants a strong, paternal leader, overflowing with authority, particularly a veteran general with a long history.

Wherefore comes the sudden tendency to count on two relatively young women (Tamir is 52, Livni is 48) who acquired their political experience only in the last few years? Maybe - the wild idea creeps into the heart - something in attitudes toward women has changed? It seems so. The same women who managed to stand out in senior positions convinced others that women can do the job just like men, and in certain spheres, even better. Therefore, innovation coexists alongside the grim reality of exploitation, repression and the enslavement of women, especially young and inexperienced women, in the rough, ruthless labor market.

It is also difficult to accept that only unusually determined and talented women, who grew up in the small circles of the elite, can break a path for themselves to places where mostly middling men hold key positions. Nonetheless, this is a change that bears good fruit, with the most welcome in the political arena. There's no doubt that a day after the elections, these two women will have to compete with some ambitious men who won't hesitate to use force to try and push the women out of the respectable places to which they have arrived.

The credibility of the leaders of the two parties will be tested, among other things, by their ability to remember who among all the people clamoring around them really did work from morning to night and demonstrated unquestioning loyalty. They should also remember the little poll that asked about the two women, because there is something refreshing that comes out of it: the Israeli public is no longer addicted to generals, whether old and tired or young and arrogant. Maybe, without anyone noticing, amid all the changes Israeli politics is going through, something that could be called a civic time has crawled in. Normal time. And some might call it women's time.

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