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## **`Likud Kadima - that's a nice name'**

By Daniel Ben-Simon

It is difficult to tell what bothers the veteran residents of Beit Shemesh more these days, the increasing influx of the ultra-Orthodox, or the break-up of the Likud.

In the 1990s, Benjamin Netanyahu received a royal welcome in this bastion of the Likud. So did Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, in subsequent years. The two kings of the party were swept along in a wave of admiration and love by the residents of this immigrant town, founded after the establishment of the state.

Then came the split in the Likud, and with it, an identity crisis in Beit Shemesh.

One resident said the dilemma has torn his family apart. The shouting can be heard all the way down the street. Some, it is whispered, have decided to vote for Sharon's party.

"Come on," chuckled David Alon, the owner of a bargain clothing store. "Somebody's going to leave the Likud just like that? Why? What happened? After all, you don't leave your home. That's the mentality here. I grew up on it. In the 1950s, my grandfather of blessed memory was a member of Herut. The Mapainiks tried to keep him from getting a job. Why? Because he was a Herutnik."

Alon, 36, followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and joined the Likud, the legitimate son of Herut.

Alon worked tirelessly to get Netanyahu elected Likud chairman, and in the end the vote in Beit Shemesh was 625 for the new chairman, and only 186 for Silvan Shalom. Moshe Feiglin came in second, with 235.

"I have a scoop for you. After the elections the two parties will unite and will be called `Likud Kadima.' That's a nice name, isn't it? After they get together, they'll get another 15 seats for a total of 50. Do you get what Sharon did? Admit it's genius," he said.

The waves of immigration that landed here one after the other transformed the city both economically and demographically, tripling its population in a decade.

Beit Shemesh had been a city sunk in the struggles between its power-hungry party hacks, which brought about the collapse of the municipality and gave the town the reputation of a God-forsaken place somewhere off the road between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Then came the miracle. The town population mushroomed to 70,000. Many immigrants from France and the U.S. joined an ultra-Orthodox community founded some years earlier by former Jerusalemites who could not afford to live in the capital. The ultra-Orthodox presence is being felt more than ever before; in the last elections in 2003, the ultra-Orthodox candidate Natan Sheerit was short only 700 votes to unseat Mayor Danny Vaknin. Secular residents breathed a sigh of relief after the polls, but many feel they are on borrowed time.

And how is the Labor Party doing? Not well, thanks.

Time has not healed the wounds of the 1950s, although some felt the party might rally after Amir Peretz was elected chairman. He is also Moroccan-born, he also comes from an immigrant town, he is "one of us." But the miracle did not happen. Despite great efforts, only 350 people joined the party, mostly poor laborers who are members of the Histadrut labor federation.

"Come back on January 17 [when Labor has elections for its Knesset list] and you'll see what a great movement it is," said Shlomo Attias, one of the 350. He is almost 44, and he still remembers Labor's short glory days in Beit Shemesh.

"When we were in the city government, the whole town was with us, because the one in charge keeps all the members in his pocket. That's the way it is in a peripheral town. The mayor is the strong man. If he's [Labor] most of the residents will be. If he's Likud, they'll be Likud," said Attias.

Attias thinks Peretz will get around 1,000 votes in the town, double what Barak got in 2001.

"Not because he's the Labor Party leader," Attias said, "but because they remember how he protected them when he was head of the Histadrut."

And what of the Russian immigrants, who make up one-third of the town's population? Many are torn between loyalty to their community and admiration for Sharon.

"He's a strong man," said a city worker who immigrated from Ukraine 12 years ago. "Besides, he's from Russia and he speaks Russian very well. Besides, the Arabs are very afraid of him, and that's very good."

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