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Meretz's big chance

By [Shahar Ilan](#)

If there is any decision that Meretz-Yahad regrets to this day, it's ceding the struggle against religious coercion to Shinui. This decision was a contributing factor to Meretz's crash from 10 to six Knesset seats in the 2003 elections, while Shinui soared from six to 15.

A lot of bad blood has flowed in Shinui since then. The party's two factions are still breathing spontaneously, but may be regarded as political vegetables for all intents and purposes. Anyone who votes for them knows that it is almost certainly a lost ballot. While Avraham Poraz and Ron Leventhal are fighting for the treasure in Shinui's coffers, they have left its voters to the other parties to fight over. This is without a doubt Meretz's chance.

It was the leader of Yisrael Beiteinu, Avigdor Lieberman, who took advantage of the new situation and surprisingly turned the struggle for civil marriage and for public transportation on Saturday into his central messages. Is this Lieberman? Lieberman, who in 2000 was one of the leading opponents of the secular revolution of Prime Minister Ehud Barak? Apparently, more than Lieberman wishes to establish an alternative conjugal alliance, he wishes to unite in conjugal alliance with Shinui's Russian voters.

Meretz has a double interest in introducing a state-and-religion agenda to the election campaign, because it does not seem to have another niche. The role of making concessions to the Palestinians is already occupied. Sure, Meretz's people could say that had they been listened to in time, Hamas would not have risen to power. But it is doubtful whether anyone would be interested. After all, as far as the Israeli voter is concerned, Meretz's tendency to be always right is extremely annoying.

Peretz has grabbed the social niche from Meretz. Not that this is a matter to mourn over. Meretz already tried the social track in the previous elections, and fell flat. It does not appear to be doing Peretz any good, either.

However, if Meretz would only wake up and formulate a new state-religion agenda, it may be able to pick up two to three Knesset seats from orphaned secular voters. Yossi Beilin's ideology on religious issues is much clearer than Lieberman's. Beilin already suggested the conjugal alliance in the days of Barak's government, and he also tried to dismantle the Religious Affairs Ministry. He supports secular conversion. He already objected to the state's assistance to large families at the end of the '90s, when it was taboo.

The problem is that Beilin is entirely identified with the political

process. He gives the impression that he would always sell the secular revolution for a mess of pottage of a fake tiny progress in the peace process, just as Barak's government renounced the civil revolution for Shas' safety net. Another problem of Beilin's is that his secularity does not consist of catchy, blistering slogans. It is real, profound and coherent, exactly what is not needed in elections.

Anyone interested in gathering Shinui's votes will have to formulate a few especially vitriolic slogans. Shas desperately needs an enemy to take Lapid's place. Meretz needs Shas as a rival. Will Beilin be ready to soil his hands and grab that niche? Will he promise that his party will not join a government that won't pass the conjugal alliance law? Will he remind the voters that a large part of the funding Shas is demanding is not intended to fight poverty, but to encourage poverty and broaden illiteracy? Will he undertake to fight any attempt to increase children's allowances? Will he demand to stop financing ultra-Orthodox students who have not served in the army?

Meretz's people should start by making slight changes in their platform. The clauses dealing with state and religion are stuck somewhere toward the back. They should bring them forward - if not ahead of the foreign affairs and security chapter, then at least ahead of the chapter dealing with light drugs. Maybe they should also ask Shulamit Aloni for a bit of help in the campaign? After all, nobody knows how to lock horns with the religious parties as convincingly as she does.

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