

Electionscape: Is there an election message?

Anshel Pfeffer, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Where's the message? Yisrael Beitenu leader, Avigdor Lieberman sprung a surprise Monday at the press conference launching his party's election campaign. His strategic team consists of half a dozen former police officers and he's planning to run on a law-and-order platform inspired by Rudi Giuliani's "broken windows" theory.

When asked by incredulous reporters if his manifesto wasn't more appropriate for New York City Hall than the Knesset, he assured us that safety from crime was a major issue and his party surveys prove that it will bring in the votes. These kinds of questions would never have been asked abroad where all candidates want to prove that they're tough on crime, but in Israel it's a novelty.

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Lieberman might just be on to something here. The election season is already half over and not one party seems to have come up with a winning issue.

I had trouble yesterday trying to explain to a foreign reporter, here to cover the elections, why sticking to an agenda of improving education and helping the poor is going to lose Amir Peretz's campaign, because what is happening in the polls defies logic.

Labor's strategists are going crazy. All the surveys show that a large majority of Israelis are reconciled to withdrawing from most of Judea and Samaria and dismantling dozens of settlements, and as things look now, there isn't that much to choose from between Labor's peace plans and those put out by Ehud Olmert.

On the face of it, voters should be attracted to a party that is willing to address the country's pressing social and educational problems. But right now, everyone seems interested only in what we are going to do about Hamas.

A week's campaigning on Labor's plans for the school system is going down the drain and the latest polls show the party sinking again below the 20 MK line.

That doesn't mean that Likud is doing much better with its security-orientated ads. The latest posters showing an intense Olmert threatening to return us to the 1967 borders haven't registered with the public, who apparently didn't even realize that they were Likud posters. Even Jerusalem city officials thought they belonged to Kadima and fined the party for trashing the Capital. Likud is recycling its 1996 campaign where Shimon Peres would "divide Jerusalem" but the threats don't work anymore.

At the other end of the scale, Meretz also seems to be losing its voice. It tried out a provocative campaign this week with hoards around Tel Aviv popping off all the worst swear words used

against Leftists. But instead of inspiring loyalty among their dispirited grass roots, the slogans generated a slew of complaints.

Yossi Beilin's party was relying on his Geneva Agreement to prove that peace with a moderate Palestinian leadership is just around the corner. They too were not banking on a Hamas victory. Now they are left without a message.

Another victim of the message is of course the now-defunct Shinui.

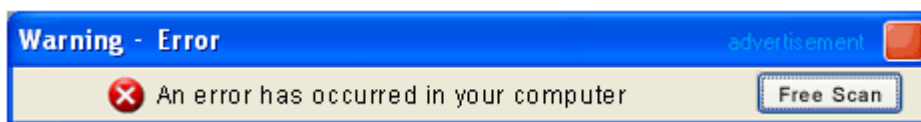
The ultra-Orthodox parties don't see such a threat right now from the secular middle-class and even without the patriarchal infighting, they were dwindling to obscurity.

Now too Shinui's arch-enemies, Shas, is left without an ogre to put on show to the voters. They are currently angling for the poor vote too, blaming Netanyahu's policies for poverty.

When it comes to Netanyahu-bashing, however, Shas is nowhere near as good as Labor and Kadima. Some of Bibi's colleagues within the Likud are also doing a good job of it.

So where's the message? There is none.

Despite Sharon's stroke and Hamas's victory, Kadima still seems set to win by a landslide with no message save for one - we are the consensus. And the public is buying it.



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