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The success of Naftali Bennett is the failure of the Israeli center-left

The big surprise of the 2013 election campaign is Habayit Hayehudi chairman Bennet, the rising star of religious Zionism, whose party's ratings are soaring among right-wingers.

By [Ari Shavit](#) | Dec.28, 2012 | 11:35 AM | 

 Naftali Bennett. When he drives to Jersualam via Ariel, he realizes that the establishment of Palestine is not going to happen. Photo by Eliyahu Hershkovitz



this story is by
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I am a despairing Israeli voter, I tell Habayit Hayehudi chairman Naftali Bennett. I am not lunatic left, but I believe in the kind of enlightened Zionism that is now going down the drain. I believe in the Jewish and democratic state that is evaporating. And I believe in the partition of the land, which you are trying to put a stop to. Plus, when I see the limpness and the wretchedness in my own camp and the energy and momentum in yours, I am horrified.

What can you, Naftali Bennett, tell me and people like me who see the end of our Israel in the rise of your Israel? Can you persuade me and my readers that you do not herald the end of the state we have so loved?

Since becoming a political star, Bennett, 40, has gained a bit of weight. After a long day of tiring campaign appearances, he sits across from me at a cafe somewhere in the center of the country. He orders a spicy Asian dish and types a fast facebook status on his laptop - in support of Avigdor Lieberman and against the State Prosecutor's Office. Then he looks at me with the eyes of a dedicated troop leader in the Bnei Akiva national religious youth movement, and tries to assuage my concerns.

"Zionism arose thanks to secularism," he says. "The dogmatic religious establishment in the Diaspora was not capable of initiating Zionism without [Theodor] Herzl's secular involvement. But secular Zionism was an existential Zionism that saw the state of the Jews as a refuge state.

"A state that is 64 years old cannot continue to exist on the ethos of a refuge state, on security alone. After all, if this were the reason for our existence, there are many places that are safer for Jews - like Melbourne, Australia, or New Jersey. They don't send children to the army there, and missiles aren't flying there. Therefore, the time has come to move from the existential Zionism that you come from to a Jewish Zionism. It is necessary to base our national life on a Jewish basis, and it is necessary to give the state a Jewish coloration.

"I don't support religious coercion, but I do believe that Judaism is our 'why': Judaism is the reason for our existence and the justification for our existence, and the meaning of our existence. I know that for your 'tribe,' this is difficult. It is difficult because your tribe established the state in a secular-socialist spirit. And as you see the society changing and the state changing, you feel like you are done for. Your feeling is that the home that had been your home is no longer yours.

"I am not indifferent to your distress. I am also personally connected to your ethos. When I was a child, I had Yoni's letters [the reference is to war hero Yoni Netanyahu] and [military commando] Meir Har-Zion's book next to my bed. So for me it's not tactics and it's not cosmetics. My whole life I've had one foot here and one foot there.

"You are right," he continues. "What is happening is a revolution. Behind the success of Habayit Hayehudi there are deep forces that are changing the face of the country. But for me in particular, it's important to be a bridge to you. One of the biggest challenges from my perspective is to connect you to religious Zionism, too."

But you are about to annex 60 percent of the area of the West Bank, I persist. Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir and Benjamin Netanyahu all refrained from taking this extreme step. Implementing the Bennett plan will bury the two states once and for all. Implementing the Bennett plan will perpetuate the occupation and make Israel a leper apartheid state. Though you are a high-tech person from Ra'anana who has seen the world, I continue, you are entirely ignoring the world. You will bring disaster down upon us by causing the international community to condemn us, and by causing a third of all Israelis to be entirely alienated from that new Israel you will shape.

The chairman of Habayit Hayehudi tells me the international reaction concerns him, and therefore he will not annex most of the territories right at the start of what will be a long process. He believes that, ultimately, the world is busy with the economic collapse of Greece, the United States' fiscal cliff and the slaughter in Syria, and thus it is possible to bring the world to come to terms now with facts on the ground and firm Israeli decisions. Back in 1981, when then-Prime Minister Begin was about to apply Israeli law to the Golan Heights, Shimon Peres and Amos Oz also warned him that it would lead to Israel becoming a leper state. He passed the Golan Heights Law, we received a few criticisms - and we carried on.

Bennett says the internal Israeli rift disturbs him far more. Consequently, he will conduct a dialogue with the center and the left just as he is conducting a dialogue with me right now. But after making the "right" noises, Bennett straightens up and declares we tried Oslo and we tried the disengagement - and we've seen what has happened. If a Palestinian state were to arise in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), it would threaten Israel both with missiles and refugees. When he is abroad and when he reads The Economist magazine, it seems to him, too, that the establishment of Palestine is inevitable. But when he drives to Jerusalem via Ariel, he understands that it is not going to happen.

It is not going to happen, he emphasizes. The 400,000 settlers in Judea and Samaria do not make this possible. And when the number of settlers reaches a million, there won't be a person in the country who does not understand that this is the reality. There will be a million - no doubt about that. After the annexation, the economic dynamic will have its effect and people will flock to those areas, which will become an integral part of the State of Israel.

But this does not mean apartheid. On the contrary, he says: The Palestinians will be able to travel in all of Judea and Samaria without barriers and without seeing any soldiers on the shared high-speed roads that will serve both them and the Jewish settlers. They will have freedom of movement and they

will have jobs and they will have economic prosperity. They will elect themselves, they will pay taxes to themselves, they will run their own lives in every respect. And in the end, Jordan will be Palestine. There is no chance that, between the river and the sea, a Palestinian state will arise. The two-state solution is dead. There is no need to bury the two-state solution because it is already buried.

Refusal debacle

And what if a different decision is taken, I inquire. If the moment of evacuation comes, will you refuse to obey the order or not refuse to obey the order? Will you behave the way you told (Channel 2's)

Nissim Mishal [and refuse], or will you behave the way you promised two days later?

Bennett talks with surprising frankness about the difficult days he endured after last week's refusal-to-obey-army-orders tempest. He admits that, when he said what he said, he spoke from the heart and expressed his true feelings. But last Saturday he thought it over quietly and concluded that since he is now a leader, responsibility of a different sort is incumbent upon him. He cannot bring about the shattering of the Israel Defense Forces or destroy proper governance and statesmanship.

What will he do when a leftist soldier refuses to obey an order and attributes his refusal to Naftali Bennett's statement?

He still believes that evacuating a Jewish village or an Arab village is terrible, and the act of expulsion of Jews or Arabs from their homes is an act that should not be carried out. However, if the government takes the decision, he will implement it. And he won't follow the instructions of the rabbis who preach refusal. In the difficult clash between contradictory values, the unity of the state and the army prevails.

And what about the rule of law, I ask. Where do you stand regarding the supremacy of the law and supremacy of the court?

Now the gloves come off. Bennett's eyes glitter. In his opinion, the constitutional revolution was a terrible mishap. It has paralyzed the country and it is still paralyzing the country. What former Supreme Court President Aharon Barak did, says Bennett, was to pour sugar into the motor. Judicial activism has meant that, today, it is impossible to do here what Finance Minister Pinhas Sapir did when he established the national water carrier. The Supreme Court justices and the attorneys general are silencing the whole system.

Take the case of Maj. Gen. Yoav Galant, says Maj. (res.) Bennett. Let's assume that Galant was the better candidate for chief of staff, but because of fear of the High Court of Justice, the better candidate was disqualified. Who takes responsibility for the damage this caused to the State of Israel and for the soldiers who are liable to get killed? This is an intolerable situation of authority without responsibility, and there is a need for a comprehensive reform. It is necessary to change the way judges are selected and the way attorneys general work. If he has sufficient political power, Naftali Bennett will bring about a judiciary counterrevolution.

I first met Bennett six years ago. He had returned, appalled, from the Second Lebanon War and wondered what he should do as a citizen in the wake of the war. The Bennett of 2006 was levelheaded, determined and rather impressive. And he wasn't alone, either. At that time, quite a number of reserve soldiers, reserve officers, academics and businesspeople – from the right and the left – felt they had to rehabilitate the country from the ruination they had just experienced.

However, while the protesters from the left lost their way or went home, Bennett first went to Benjamin Netanyahu as his chief of staff. He then went to the West Bank and founded Yisrael Sheli in 2010. Recently he took over Habayit Hayehudi and became the surprise of this election. He has managed to do for religious Zionism what no shining star has ever done for secular liberal Zionism. So, when Bennett closes his laptop, shakes my hand and vanishes into the night, it is clear to me that his narrative is not only the story of his upsetting success. The narrative of the 2013 election is also the story of our failure.