

Zehava Galon: Still fighting for fellowship

By Pamela Peled

ZEHAVA GALON is worried.

This, of course, does not make Israel’s leading human rights activist, former Meretz party leader, and founder and first Executive Director of B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, unique. Every person with half a brain seems anxious today; and if climate change, pandemics, predicted economic doom, and Russian brutality aren’t enough to push you over the edge, mosey over to Israel where a flailing Government, violence in the streets and in the hospitals, and out of control mobs are added to the mix.

On top of all this Galon also frets over discriminatory laws against minorities, brutality in the West Bank, and all manner of human rights violations she says occur in Israel. However, bad as all this may be there is another equally scary danger, in her opinion, facing the Holy Land: former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“Netanyahu is using the same methods he used against Yitzchak Rabin before the assassination,” she claims, “delegitimizing everything that Prime Minister Naphtali Bennet does, stirring up hatred against the people who put him out of power and because of whom he can’t wriggle out of his court case. His endless hateful rhetoric can easily trigger a lone wolf to action.” Galon insists that Netanyahu is using the same “yes/no” tactics as he did with Rabin – participating in all the incitement and then declaring that he “saw nothing and heard nothing.”

Galon, the always elegant, always beautifully dressed mother of two sons and devoted grand-



MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

Zehava Galon, the former head of the Meretz party.

mother of six, is no stranger to death threats: at one point she was the most at risk Israeli member of Knesset, with a round-the-clock bodyguard and police checking her car each time she drove. Even today she is bombarded with warnings on her social media feeds; but nothing can stop the child of two Holocaust survivors, who came to Israel from Vilna, Lithuania at the age of four, from fighting for what she feels is a moral and just way to run a country.

Had Galon not loved Hollywood movies, politics in Israel might look very different today. But love them she does. Back in the days when she was a young working mother

of two little boys, and completing a degree in Special Education, Friday nights at the movies with husband Pessach Galon were sacrosanct. Then, in 1984, bowing to religious coercion, the Petach Tikve Municipality closed down the Haichal Theatre, the only cinema in town. Galon mobilized some friends and began weekly demonstrations; Hareidim left their Shabbos cholent untouched to amble over to the action and boo; Shulamit Aloni, at that time the Leader of the left-wing Ratz Party, began popping in to lend support to the demonstrators who were missing their movies.

Ultimately the cinema reopened, Aloni invit-



Workers cut freshly printed election campaign posters in Arabic that feature Isaac Herzog (top left), who headed the Zionist Union party, and Zehava Galon (bottom left), at a print shop in Baqa al-Gharbiya on March 2, 2015.

ed Galon to work for Ratz, and soon she was working alongside Yossi Sarid and Aloni protecting Israel's moral fibre. But what, exactly, does that mean?

"Israel is a hybrid regime," according to Zulat, the Think-and-Action Tank that Galon started in 2020 to fight for equality and human rights. While the country is not a pure democracy, she claims, it is not a pure authoritarian state either. The contentious Nation-State Law, for example, which basically states that all people are equal in the State of Israel, but Jews are more equal than others, has to be canceled, according to Galon. "Before this law Israel was considered a land for the Jewish people, and all of its citizens," she explains. "It was a Jewish, democratic country. This law determined that it's a Jewish country first, and only then a democracy." Galon proposes legislating a basic law of equality for all the citizens of the state.

Many of the Knesset members agree that the present bill needs at least to be changed: the leaders of Yisrael Beiteinu, Blue and White and Labour are determined to do just that; Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked and Justice Minister Gidon Sa'ar are intent on stopping them.

In 2018, when Likud MK Amir Ohana presented the bill to the Knesset, he proclaimed that "This is the law of all laws. It is the most important law in the history of the State of Israel, which says that everyone has human rights, but national rights in Israel belong only to the Jewish people. That is the founding principle on which the state was established." Today, with discussions pending on changing the bill to acknowledge other minorities in the country, Netanyahu is thundering from the Opposition that the unamended bill is necessary to stop a mass influx of millions of Muslims into Israel who would tip the demographic balance against the Jewish majority. With every issue becoming an existential threat, equality and human rights can get lost in the fog of fear.

"Take the Ukraine," elaborates Galon. She acknowledges that Israel is in a difficult bind: too much criticism of Russia might curtail Israel's ability to bomb stockpiles of weapons

in Syria in areas of Russian influence. Despite this, she claims, Israel has to take the moral high ground and unequivocally condemn Russia for its unprovoked hostility. "Otherwise how can we blame other countries for not helping Jews, when the need was great," the daughter of survivors wonders.

Galon is the President of Zulat, ("fellow," in Hebrew), which she established to strengthen the foundations of equality and democracy that she claims conservative right wing bodies are trying to erode. Galon believes that Netanyahu has grown a complete 'eco-system' backed and supported by ultra-conservative, right wing research institutes and think tanks in Israel and abroad to further his agenda, including the free newspaper "Yisrael Hayom," Kohelet, and Im Tirtzu; Zulat was formed to counter this agenda. Under Netanyahu's premiership the Knesset passed a series of laws which many in the country considered racist, discriminatory, and anti-democratic. Zulat's upcoming publication highlights laws from the last two decades that limit the Knesset's ability to monitor the government.

All the while, claims Galon, under Netanyahu's leadership, there was a relentless undermining of the gatekeepers in charge of the checks and balances, especially the Attorney General and the Judiciary, till the public just didn't know who to trust.

Golan believes that Naphtali Bennet, with his inclusive coalition, had a golden opportunity to work towards a solution. "A 55 year Occupation has eroded our democratic norms and respect for human rights," she says. "Bennet could have tried to end decades of military con-

trol over a civilian population and at least start a process." But, according to her, he has shown no interest in moving forward, even declaring that "Israelis don't wake up in the morning thinking about the conflict," and that his government "will not establish a Palestinian State."

Zulat is trying to keep the Israelis aware of what she views as the terrible side-effects of ignoring human rights. The members publish reports and policy papers of their own, and aim to create a legislative foundation for an eventual constitution. They hope to influence Israel's policy makers and the public by advancing Knesset reforms and creating a new narrative through interviews, podcasts, opinion pieces and social media. They have been active, for example, in advancing legislation requiring policemen to operate body cameras at demonstrations and make the footage available to the public, a draft bill on that passed a preliminary reading in January, 2022.

Yet, in this topsy-turvy land of the Jewish people, and other people, the only thing anyone can expect is the totally unexpected. By the time this article goes to print we might be headed for new elections and a whole new set of same-olds. At one point the unthinkable happened – a Knesset member of Meretz left the government, then half-heartedly came back, potentially paving the way for a Likud comeback under leader Benjamin Netanyahu. You could not make this stuff up.

Zehava Galon is not lacking material for her weekly column for Ha'aretz Newspaper, and her regular TV appearance on "Meet the Press." It's a drama a day here, that's for sure. We will live, and we will see how it unfolds. ■