**A Populist Leader Under Neo-Liberal Logic: On the Leadership Styles of Benjamin Netanyahu in the 2019-2020 Elections**

On May 17, 2012, the cover of *Time* magazine crowned the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, with the title “King Bibi” (Stengel, 2012). This was his second term as Prime Minister, as the head of Israel’s 32nd government. Both in Israel and in international media, Netanyahu was considered to be a strong and stable leader, who intelligently and carefully planned out his steps in confronting his rivals.

In hindsight, it is difficult not to gain the impression that his conduct during his second term was the result of lessons learned from his first, between 1996 and 1999. Netanyahu’s first term proceeded against the background of a stormy ideological and political conflict between the right and left in Israel over the nature of the Oslo Accords, and in the shadow of the trauma of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

His first term began with a slim victory (of less than half of one percent) over Shimon Peres in Israel’s first direct election for prime minister. It ended within three years, with the disintegration of his right-wing-Haredi coalition, a police investigation into gifts he had received, and defeat in the 1999 election to the candidate of the “One Israel” list, Ehud Barak. During his term, Netanyahu had conflicts with many Likud ministers, including David Levy, Yitzhak Mordechai, Dan Meridor, and Benny Begin, who left or were dismissed from his government. Following his defeat, Netanyahu took a break from politics.

During his second term as prime minister (2009-2013), Netanyahu preferred a unity government, which was joined, intermittently, by the Labor Party and Kadima. The Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs were placed in the hands of his rivals on the left, Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni. Netanyahu maintained, at least publicly, an intact working relationship with the President of Israel, Shimon Peres, the last senior representative of the historical Mapai leadership on the Israeli political scene. Many of the Likud ministers who served under Netanyahu were members of what is known as the “second generation of fighting families” (including Michael Eitan, Dan Meridor, Benny Begin, Uzi Landau, and Limor Livnat), who felt connected to the original Revisionist ideology, which combined strident nationalism and liberal values. The central subject at the top of the government’s agenda was the product of this consensus: preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The only disagreement was on how to do so: through diplomatic means, clandestine methods, or a military attack. Even the issue that had been a permanent part of Israel’s political agenda since 1967 – the future of the Occupied Territories – was balanced by Netanyahu. In his 2009 Bar-Ilan speech, he agreed to the creation of a Palestinian state, but saddled it with conditions that functionally eliminated this possibility, as it was expected that the Palestinians would oppose them. Thus, he satisfied both the right and the left, and the administration of US President Barack Obama.

During his term, *Israel Hayom*’s circulation expanded. *Israel Hayom*, a newspaper founded in 2007 by the American billionaire Sheldon Adelson and designed to support Netanyahu, was also distributed for free. As a result, Netanyahu gained significant media backing, following his claim that during his first term he suffered from hostile coverage, mainly from *Israel Hayom*’s competitor, *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

Two of *Israel Hayom*’s most prominent writers, the veteran journalists Mordechai Gilat and Dan Margalit, were known for their support for a strong and independent judicial system and expressed this in their articles. Due to the disclosure of what is known today as Case 2000 (Weitz, 2019), in hindsight we know that the editorial line of *Israel Hayom* was dictated by Netanyahu’s office. There is no doubt that the prominence of writers who supported an independent judicial system was not by chance. In light of all of this, one can say that when Netanyahu returned to the premiership in 2009, he chose, knowingly and intentionally, to avoid conflicts with the judicial system. Netanyahu sought to create a wide consensus around his government and policies, both in Israel and in the international arena, in order to avoid what he considered to be the mistakes of his first term.

I opened this article with well-known, if partially forgotten, aspects of Netanyahu’s first and second terms in order to highlight the blunt and polarizing manner in which he operated during the three elections that have taken place in Israel between April 2019 and March 2020. - The focus of this article - was not essentially to Netanyahu’s personality or worldview, neither was it the result of loss of his senses, nor of his political path.

Netanyahu’s populist conduct was calculated, planned, and, to a large extent, influenced by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016. Netanyahu, who was quoted in the minutes of police investigations as explaining that the United States is the only important country in the world (*The Marker*, 2019), is known for his American orientation. It appears that Netanyahu’s political confidence increased following his victory in the 2015 election, which he won despite predictions to the contrary. As a result of this victory, and following Trump’s entry into the White House, Netanyahu adopted the US President’s populism as the currently appropriate standard for a political leader. The fact that prior to the Trump Era Netanyahu prevented the passage of the “Nation State Law,” but then pushed for its approval following Trump’s Election, is telling. This serves as additional evidence that Netanyahu’s change of policy was calculated and anchored in varied contexts.

One of these contexts, which has not yet received meaningful treatment in the literature, is the generational change in Israel’s right-wing during the more than eleven years that Netanyahu has been in office. This must also be considered in order to understand Netanyahu’s polarizing rhetoric and his pattern of political behavior. In this light, a comparison can be made between the development of Netanyahu’s political path and that of the founder of the Revisionist Movement, Ze’ev Jabotinsky.

In *Jabotinsky’s Children,* Dan Heller sought to clarify why, starting in the 1930s, Jabotinsky made statements that could be associated with Fascism and that contradicted the liberal and socialist values that he had expressed earlier in his life. The answer that Heller found was not necessarily that Jabotinsky changed his ideas. Instead, Heller claims that Jabotinsky was compelled to adapt to the processes of radicalization that took place among his supporters, the young guard of Beitar, and to balance his desire for their support and his original liberal positions (Heller, 2018). Indeed, examining the changes that take place among the inner circle and the audience of the leader, any leader, is an important tool to understand changes in their political behavior, and is critical in Netanyahu’s case in recent years as well.

However, when he joined the Israeli political scene, at the end of the 1980s, Netanyahu was surrounded by advisers from the American neo-conservative camp, national religious figures from the founding generation of Gush Emunim, and descendants of “fighting families” and the Revisionist Movement (Pfeffer, 2018: 215-252). In recent years, they have given up their places to a new, younger generations—including, for example, Netanyahu’s son, Yair, members of the Im Tirzu movement, and national-religious leaders such as Shimon Riklin and Erel Segal—who seek to intentionally challenge what they consider to be the “ruling elite” and the hegemony. Thus, for example, during the 2015 election, Netanyahu’s chief campaign strategist was Gil Samsonov, a right-wing activist from the second generation of fighting families who was raised on Jabotinsky’s liberal nationalist ideals. In 2019, in contrast, Netanyahu’s senior communications adviser was Erez Tadmor, a founder of Im Tirzu and author of the book *Why Do I Vote Right and Get Left?* The book’s main thrust is the accusation that former Likud leaders, including Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, did not take advantage of opportunities since 1977 to boldly reorganize the political system, and even “surrendered” to continued left-wing dominance within the systems of the establishment, despite the right-wing’s victory in elections (Tadmor, 2017).

Tadmor is a characteristic example of the younger right-wing figures who have surrounded Netanyahu in recent years, due to his command of the secrets of new media and his disdain for the previous generation of the Revisionist Movement. In practice, many of Netanyahu’s blunt speeches against the left, Arab citizens of Israel, and the judicial system were written by Tadmor or similar advisers (Schneider, 2018). Just as many of Netanyahu’s opponents on the left have criticized his unrestrained attacks on the judicial system and sadly compared Likud’s current state to the Begin era,[[1]](#footnote-1) so too have members of the older generation of the Revisionist right-wing. However, both groups have ignored the fact that figures such as Begin, and definitely Jabotinsky, are not role models for the younger right-wing generation. Instead, they are examples of what must be fixed. This is a new right-wing generation inspired by Naftali Bennett’s crushing slogan from the 2013 election, “No Apologies.” Most are between 20 and 40 years old, and their worldviews are more influenced by the terrorist attacks of the Second Intifada than Jabotinsky’s writings or Begin’s leadership style (Del Sarto, 2017). Like Jabotinsky’s response to the radicalization of the young guard of Beitar in the 1930s (including one Menachem Begin), Netanyahu is sometimes dragged along by the younger generation, sometimes he restrains them, and sometimes he leverages them in order to confront his rivals.

The intellectual elite on the Right has also changed during Netanyahu’s years as prime minister. During his first term, Netanyahu enjoyed the intellectual backing of the Shalem Center (where Dr. Michael Oren, Prof. Uzi Arad, and others worked as researchers before joining Netanyahu’s policy staff), which insisted on relatively moderate statist conservatism, and published *Azure* an elite journal that published conservative thought from the past and present. During the last decade, new, rougher frameworks have emerged, including Im Tirzu, the Mida website, and the Shibolet publishing house. All are characterized by more aggressive, nationalist, and populist positions (Sagiv, 2020).

Netanyahu’s populist leadership style, which reached its height during the 2019-20 election, was nursed by political trends, both local and international, as well as sociological and technological (new media) developments that have taken place over the course of the last decade. The change in Netanyahu’s political behavior–from nationalist conservativism to blunt populism—was intentional, the result of the calculation that polarizing and confrontational rhetoric against his rivals and the rule of law would better serve him. Recognition of this fact is important in order to understand Netanyahu’s actions, as I will show throughout this article.

**A decline of the old statism, and the rise of neo-liberal logic**

On the eve of the first day of his trial, Netanyahu summarized the position that he had expressed throughout the election campaigns in a simple statement: “What is on trial today is the attempt to thwart the will of the people: to take down me and the right-wing. For more than a decade, the Left has not succeeded in doing so at the polls. In recent years it has found a new invention. Actors in the police and the attorney general’s office have joined together with the Left’s newspapers to invent ridiculous and insane cases against me.” (Eichner & Zimuki, 2020).

Although it is possible to read these words as populist posturing and an attempt to directly represent the people in their struggle against the elites in democratic institutions, Netanyahu is actually attacking statist institutions. The indictment against him opens in a formal manner – “The State of Israel vs. Benjamin Netanyahu.” Beyond his personal interest to put pressure on the judicial system, his readiness to bluntly attack state institutions can be understood in the context of processes that resulted in the decline of the old Zionist statism, led by David Ben-Gurion. Despite deep political disagreements, this statist framework was originally accepted by “all of the Jewish groups in the country” (Bareli & Keidar, 9:2011).

The old statism, which placed the state’s institutions above sectoral-political interests and considerations, declined in favor of what can be called, “Neo-Zionism” (Ram, 2011), according to which state institutions lose their prestige in favor of the individual and sectoral considerations of various groups that claim to “really” represent Zionism. Since this decline, it has become convenient to attack state institutions, even for the prime minister who is meant to represent these very institutions. The settlers serve as a characteristic example of this process. Although they claim that they are the sector realizing the true ideology of Zionism, they frequently attack IDF soldiers, representatives of the Zionist state. (Dayan, 2020: 87-123).

Accordingly, in the “Neo-Zionist” era, it is no coincidence that Netanyahu is the first prime minister to come out against Israel’s traditional (and problematic) position in calling to open the classified files concerning the Yemenite Children Affair (Bender, 2016); no previous prime minister had dared to contradict the position of the IDF Chief of Staff, as Netanyahu did when he supported IDF soldier Elor Azaria before and during his trial (Levinson, Lis & Cohen, 2017). These two incidents are connected to Netanyahu’s approach toward the judicial system during the 2019-20 election campaigns. They expose part of the deeper political process that characterizes the right in the Netanyahu era: support for the interests of groups or individuals, even when they are in conflict with what are perceived to be state interests, or the collective interests of Israeli society as a whole.

The attempt to weaken the institutions responsible for the necessary checks and balances in a liberal democracy is accepted by the public with an attitude that ranges from forgiveness to active support, as a result of the internalization of neoliberal logic. In turn, this internalization leads to a process of “marketization of democracy.” In other words, it leads to a situation in which even regulatory institutions are seen as “traders” in accordance with market demands, and not according to moral and idealistic values, which cannot be measured in terms of their immediate and concrete “profit” to the average citizen (Brown 2017, 17).

In other words, if the judicial system damages the successful “merchandise” that the prime minister provides to the public, who are perceived as consumers, one can demand that the judicial system adapt itself to market demands—meaning the will of the people/“consumers.”

Therefore, for example, the IDF Chief of Staff’s position that it was necessary to put Azaria on trial could have been perceived in the past as justified, requiring the suffering of an individual soldier to preserve the “values” of the army and the general public. Under neoliberal logic, the need to “win and gain profit” the soldier out of jail becomes more important.

There is a great deal of scholarship on neoliberalism, both as global phenomenon (Zuidhof, 2016; Cornel, 2015) and within the Israeli context (Filk & Ram, 2014; Krampf, 2016). Accordingly, it is possible to conceptualize this phenomenon in various ways. For the purposes of this article, I relate to the basic meaning of neoliberalism, as an ideology that manages various fields of public and cultural life (which are traditionally are not conducted exclusively according to the logic of the market). This ideology informs decisions that seek maximal efficiency and lift up the ideal of competition – who wins and who loses – as an organizing principle of life (while the state shrinks or changes its role in relation to society) (Davies, 2014).

As an aside, it is important to note that the connection between neoliberalism and the Netanyahu era in Israel can be understood in a policy context as well: the hawkish foreign policy of his government has created an additional incentive for adopting a more extreme version of a neoliberal regime. Despite deepening inequality in the social sphere, “neo-liberalism is meant to shrink dependence on external forces and improve the state’s durability in times of crisis” (Krampf, 2018).

Netanyahu’s castigations of the judicial system can be understood, therefore, against the background of the decline of statism, and in light of the processes of sectorialization and privatization that emerged as a result of the dominance of the neoliberal approach. In certain cases, the anti-majoritarian character of judicial review assists in advancing neo-liberal states (Gross, 2000). However, this is not necessarily clear to the wider public, which is ready to accept attacks on the court if its position endangers what appears to be, according to the internalization of neoliberal logic, a more profitable formula – in other words, continued rule by Netanyahu.

**Netanyahu and the personalization of politics**

Israel has a parliamentary system of government, which places a great deal of weight on political parties. However, since the 1950s, Israel has experienced many elections where the person, the leader, was at the center, not the party. Mapai’s campaign in 1959, led by Ben-Gurion, adopted the slogan, “Say Yes to the Old Man [Ben-Gurion],” and the short-lived change entailing the direct election of the prime minister between 1996-2001, are prominent examples.

However, the complicated process of “personalization”—in which the political weight of a specific actor rises and that of the party declines (Rahat, 2019), and which can be seen outside of Israel as well—has been especially apparent in the last three election campaigns (See Rahat, in this book).

The existing literature demonstrates that the personalization process does not necessarily result in a shallower decision process among voters. It can also sharpen the choice of certain candidates according to wider political considerations (Huber, 2015). However, the Israeli case during the 2019-20 elections displays superficial discourse and content. In practice, no central ideological or political issue was the focus of disagreement between the two parties that competed for the prize, Blue and White led by Benny Gantz, and Likud led by Netanyahu (in this context it is important to note that since the 2013 election, Likud has not published a platform). The personalization process, and the identification of the party with the leader, is also connected to Netanyahu’s ability to prevent the emergence of political “successors” from within his party – as a threat to his candidacy is considered heresy, as the leader is the essence of the party itself. As a result, the personalization process has contributed to Netanyahu’s survival in his position from an internal-Likud perspective.

In any event, because Netanyahu’s success in surviving in his position is considered to be “evidence” of the fact that the public identifies with his policies, Blue and White did not offer alternative ideas. Gantz did not dare, for example, to say that he, in contrast to Netanyahu, would promote a Palestinian state; when Netanyahu took pride in Trump’s “Deal of the Century” as proof of the success of his policies, the leaders of Blue and White also supported Trump’s plan; and when Netanyahu announced that the plan created the possibility of annexing parts of the territories, Gantz did not rule out annexing the Jordan Valley (Schneider, 2020). When Likud claimed that Blue and White was designating Avi Nissenkorn, former chair of the Histadrut, as the next Minister of Finance, and as a result would promote more socialist policies – Blue and White denied this (Pollak, 2019).

The election was, therefore, entirely personal, with no principled disagreement.

**Intermediate: What, really, did Netanyahu claim, and how did he make his case?**

Netanyahu has focused on four central claims throughout the election campaigns, although their use has changed according to various circumstances. The first claim is connected to his status as leader. The central slogan that opened the election campaign of March 2019 was “Netanyahu, A League Apart,” which was distributed alongside pictures of Netanyahu with world leaders, including Vladimir Putin and Trump. With this slogan, Netanyahu sought to differentiate himself from other politicians, by presenting himself as an international statesman, with the power to ensure Israel’s status and future.

The second claim was developed in the lead up to the September 2019 election, following Netanyahu’s failure to build a government and Lieberman’s decision to abstain from a narrow right-wing government led by Netanyahu. This claim emphasized that any alternative to a right-wing government led by Netanyahu is illegitimate. Netanyahu claimed that this type of government would be forced to rely on the support of the Joint Arab List, which had become, in public-political jargon, “the Arabs.” In this context, the slogan “Bibi or Tibi” became more popular. This slogan essentially differentiated between the “real nation,” i.e., Jewish citizens, and non-Jewish citizens, whose votes are not worthy. Although the “Bibi or Tibi” slogan was already employed in previous election campaigns, this time, as spoken by the Prime Minister himself, it had greater significance, especially in light of the possibility of creating a government with the Joint List.

The third claim centers on the struggle with the media, which is presented as an arm of the left-wing elite that constructs an alternative reality, in order to control the consciousness of Israel’s citizens. For example, the caption, “They Won’t Decide” was placed next to pictures of senior journalists and distributed on billboards, and Netanyahu often repeated the claim that media reports were “fake news” (Tucker, 2020).

Similar to other populist leaders who seek to skip over the intermediaries of the media in a direct appeal to the people, (the most prominent example is Trump and his frequent use of Twitter (Moffitt, 201)) – the 2019-20 election campaigns brought Netanyahu’s activity on new media platforms to new heights.

Many of Netanyahu’s supporters were influenced by these claims in distributing strange unconfirmed rumors, against Gantz (Misgav, 2019). It appears that their main goal was to create a public sense that really “everyone is suspect of something,” and to blur the importance of the concrete indictment against Netanyahu. Creating an accusatory discourse was meant to create a sense of revulsion from political conflict in general, so that the average citizen would have no choice other than to vote according to the public “common sense.”[[2]](#footnote-2) I use this concept in accordance with Antonio Gramsci’s definition of hegemony as based on the shared sentiment and common sense of the masses, who consider themselves to be partners in a certain political project [Gramsci, 2004]. In other words, flooding public consciousness with “fake news” is meant to cause the voter to abandon choosing according to ethical/moral dimensions, as “everyone is corrupt” anyway. Instead, it seeks to force the voter to be satisfied with the logical question: who is strong, experienced, and talented enough to lead? Thus, the distribution of fake news against Gantz fits nicely with the idea behind Netanyahu’s central slogan: “Netanyahu. A League Apart.”

Netanyahu’s fourth claim is more direct: in light of the Attorney General’s decision to adopt the recommendations of the police and indict Netanyahu, Netanyahu and his supporters attacked the judicial system and rule of law – “investigate the investigators!” (Schneider 2019). Netanyahu argued that the Attorney General and the police were preventing the realization of the will of the people, by indicting Netanyahu due to political and personal considerations. Netanyahu presented himself as embodying the will of the people and as the defender of democracy. He sought to blur the fact that he was referring to a narrow democratic model, based on one element, majority rule, while weakening the values and institutions that are essential to the functioning of a liberal democracy. A broader definition of democracy mandates a system of checks and balances, including equality before the law and an independent judicial system.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how Netanyahu’s claims expose the style of a populist leader who operates with an internalization of neoliberal logic. This background, together with the common public conception that Israel has benefited under Netanyahu’s leadership, serve as the main explanations of the source of his political power.

**Populism and neoliberalism in service of Netanyahu**

The rise of populism around the world can be explained in a variety of ways, which are not within the narrow focus of this article (Gandesha, 2017). One of the central reasons, in any event, for the rise of populism that does relate to the Israeli case is as a response to the instability and trends of competition created by the neoliberal economy. Additionally, populism in Israel was advanced by the neoliberal tendency towards massive privatization (which Netanyahu promoted during his time as Minister of Finance, 2003-2005), and the failures of social-democratic movements, which flourished during the 1990s, to present a relevant alternative to the sectorialization of society (Ali, 2015). It is important to emphasize that neoliberalism integrates and strengthens populist trends. Advocates of neoliberalism see institutions and regulations as restraints on the acceleration of the economy. Similarly, populist leaders tend to accuse statist institutions of limiting the freedom to represent the will of the people in their personal way. These leaders often seek to create a direct foundation for their power, based on popular support (Weyland, 1999).

Populism, in contrast with its common one-dimensional image in public discourse, is a complex concept, and its historical and theoretical significance is controversial in the literature. The various ways of defining populism, as well as defining the nation that the populism relates to, have implications for how it is understood or experienced in various places around the world (Canovan, 2005). For example, Begin and Netanyahu can both be characterized as populists. However, the populism of Likud’s founding father is of an inclusive type. In other words, by emphasizing the “Jewish” narrative as an alternative to the pioneering-socialistic narrative of the Labor Movement, Begin included the Mizrahim and the religious sector within “we the Israelis.” His government even used distributive economic politics to expand the dimensions of inflation in order to “improve its standing with the people.” In contrast, Netanyahu’s populism is more exclusionary in character. Under his leadership, the ethnic-cultural-Jewish conception of Israel has become even more extreme, to the point of rhetorically separating between “the real Jews,” i.e., supporters of the Right, and Arabs and even liberal Jews who oppose Netanyahu. This has found expression in legislation like the “Nation-State Law” and the law denying the entry of BDS activists into Israel (Filk, 2018: 154-155).

Without going too deeply into the complexity of populism, I will briefly describe several classic elements that are relevant for this discussion. The organizing principles of populism include: the placement of the “nation” and its rights at the center of the ideological and political discourse, while differentiating between “them,” the elites, and “us,” the real nation; a special relationship to the leader, who by the power of his charisma can skip over supervisory institutions; polemical and polarizing rhetoric, in a language that everyone can understand, that often borrows from the nation’s mythic past, which serves as a role model for the present.

Researchers of this phenomenon disagree on whether to define populism as an ideology, discourse, rhetoric, policy, or narrow ideology that can borrow here and there, as suggested by Mudde and Kaltwasser. They define the populist understanding of the democratic model as a direct expression of the sovereignty of the nation, or what Rousseau famously defined as the “general will” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). I relate to Netanyahu’s populism primarily as an expression of rhetoric and narrow ideology that borrows here and there according to what it needs. Netanyahu’s populism also includes a claim to directly represent the will of the people, in certain cases. For example, Netanyahu opposed deals to release terrorists when he was in the opposition, due to the need to safeguard public security. However, under the pressure of the social protests and the public desire to see the kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit freed from Hamas captivity, he acquiesced to such a deal in 2011, with the justification that he was safeguarding the security of all IDF soldiers.

As previously stated, there is a strong connection between neoliberalism and populism (Frank, 2000). Within the framework of the neoliberal project, the accumulation of capital among economic elites has increased and inequality has risen. This has led to two contradictory political trends: on the one hand, a call for renewed support for socialist ideologies (Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain, for example), and on the other hand, a flourishing of nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-institutional ideologies that revolve around a charismatic leader who seeks to directly represent the people – like Trump and Netanyahu in his second term. Thus, the primary focus of the recent election campaigns for Knesset centered on Netanyahu’s claim to represent the will of the people, so that he could continue to act in his own interest, in light of the dangers that he faced. According to Netanyahu, this conflicted with the interests of the elites who sought to replace him through various mechanisms (the media, the judicial system, and the rule of law), or, in his words:

“The left knows that…they cannot beat us at the polls. They are hunting me and trying to bring down the right-wing government that I lead, and to advance a left-wing government led by Lapid and Gantz. It falls to the Attorney General to say that he is considering indicting me, when there is nothing”(Haaretz, 2019).

Alongside a clear personal interest in disparaging the system, because of his ongoing trial, Netanyahu’s expressions are characteristic of the tension that exists in populism; between a perception of democracy as the unmediated expression of the will of the people, and anti-majoritarian mechanisms.

**Us and them**

The results of the election for the 21st Knesset brought Likud and Blue and White the same number of seats (35). However, Lieberman and his party, Yisrael Beitenu’s (5 seats) refusal to join a right-wing-Haredi government, prevented Netanyahu from being able to reach the necessary majority to form a coalition. Lieberman began his political journey as Netanyahu’s adviser, was the first politician in Israel to outline an exclusionary form of populism and is famous for his proposal to conduct a population exchange of Israeli Arabs. As a result, Lieberman also refused to join a government led by Gantz, as it could not succeed without leaning on the votes of the Joint List of Hadash and the Arab parties. Netanyahu was concerned that Lieberman might change his mind. Accordingly, Likud’s campaign for the second round of elections, for the 22nd Knesset, emphasized not just the difference between the “nation” and the elites, but also between the “nation” in its ethnic-cultural meaning, i.e., the Jews, and “the nation of Israel” in its civic meaning, which also includes Israel’s Arab citizens. Netanyahu sought to represent the Jews, in contrast to the Left, which serves the interests of Arab citizens, and is excluded from the circle of people that belong to the “real” nation. This differentiation is apparent in Likud’s distilled slogan, “Bibi or Tibi,” a play on words between the Prime Minister’s nickname and Ahmed Tibi, the leader of the Ta’al party, who held the third spot on the Joint List’s election slate. From the perspective of Likud’s propaganda, this slogan signified the real meaning of voting for Gantz. Netanyahu adamantly rejected the legitimacy of Israeli Arab participation in all aspects of Israel’s political game. In a Likud conference in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu compared the possibility of a government led by someone other than him, to a terrorist attack.

“The leaders of Blue and White have decided to create a minority government that will depend on the members of the Joint Arab List…If this kind of minority government happens, they will celebrate in Tehran, Ramallah, and Gaza, just like they celebrate after every terrorist attack. But this will be a national, historical terrorist attack in Israel, and it is forbidden that it should happen” (Calcalist, 2019).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The distinction between Jews and Arabs is also anchored in populism, which not only differentiates between the “nation” and the “elite,” but also between the nation in its ethnic and local meaning (“natives,” in European versions), and “foreigners,” who are separate from the nation. This is because populism is an “ideology that claims that the state’s population must be made up of those who belong to the local nation and is suspect and jealous of non-local elements” (Mudde, 2007:9).

However, as an aside, it is important to note that the Israeli context of populism makes the “nativism” element more complicated. From a historical perspective, the Arabs are actually the locals, and the Jews are immigrants, even though from an epistemological perspective, the Zionist conception identifies the Jews as the original locals.

**Identity politics in service of Netanyahu’s populism**

Neoliberalism also strengthens engagement with identity politics. At neoliberalism’s core, there is an inherent tension between the ideal of a competitive market and “every man for himself,” and the political representation of collective interests. The latter idea stands in contradiction with the principle of the responsibility of individuals and specific communities for their economic-social situation (Amable, 2011). Because the economic sphere influences the social sphere, competition between various groups within a society serves as fertile ground for a populist politician, who can maneuver between groups, embodying the tension between the groups of the “nation” and the “elite.”

For Netanyahu, these election campaigns were characterized by a pivot toward identity politics, and the use of polemical and polarizing discourse. In addition to the religious/ethnic divide that Netanyahu created between Jews and Arabs, he also sought to divide the Jewish population by sectors. This effort connects to additional dimension that characterizes populist movements: a preference to define the nation as “ordinary people,” the common folk, over the elites, who represent the top percentages of the society.

The class dimension of voting in Israeli elections is well-known and was covered in a [paper](https://adva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/bchirot2019-socioeconomic-1.pdf) by Yaron Hoffman-Dishon of the Adva Center. His paper analyzed the breakdown of votes in the 2019 election, in each of the ten socio-economic clusters that organize various communities in Israel. Blue and White received a majority in well-off communities – clusters 10, 9, 8; cluster 7 showed parity between Blue and White and Likud; and Likud received a majority in clusters 6, 5, 4 (as well as a slight advantage over Blue and White in the lowest clusters, where there was a high rate of votes for Haredi and Arab parties). This voting pattern continues the pattern that was evident in the 2015 election (Kashti, 2015). It shows that right-wing-religious governments are based on the support of the lower socioeconomic classes within the Jewish population, while higher socioeconomic classes support center-left governments.

In Israel, the class element overlaps, to a great extent, with a Mizrahi/Ashkenazi divide. Accordingly, it also overlaps with the traditional/secular divide, and continues to this day, due to historical-sociological contexts that have influenced Israeli society since the previous century (Shamir & Arian, 1982). As a result, the populist discourse that differentiates between “elites/ordinary people” in Israel serves as a fertile platform for the discourse of identity politics in ethnic and religious contexts. Accordingly, Netanyahu, who himself is a prime example of the elite (as an Ashkenazi man, born in the Rehavia neighborhood to a professor father, educated in the US, and a soldier in Sayeret Matkal) adopted polarizing and polemical rhetoric on these issues.

I will now relate to two prominent examples. The first is Netanyahu’s response to Yoaz Hendel’s (a member of Blue and White) statement during the third round of elections, in March 2020, that: “in Israel there are people who have come with a mentality of *darbukas*, and there are people who came with the mentality of concert halls” (Hecht, 2020). Drumming on *darbukas* is identified as part of the music of North African immigrants, who in Israel are considered to be part of a homogenous group that includes all Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries (Yadgar, 2010). As a result, Hendel’s words were perceived as an attack against the nation, even though he claims that he did not intend to suggest a cultural hierarchy. His statement was perceived as a “privileged” Ashkenazi criticism of Mizrahi culture. As shown by sectorial/class voting patterns, Mizrahim have been a serious element of Likud and the right-wing’s voter base since the *Mahapach* in 1977 (Shapira, 1989). Netanyahu responded through his spokesperson and declared that “he [Hendel] related to Likud voters as a ‘mentality of *darbukas*.’ This is how he relates to the people who came home, to the Land of Israel, with a rich and magnificent culture. He should be ashamed!” (Rut-Avneri, 2020).

Additionally, it is important to pay attention to Netanyahu’s less direct and more sophisticated response. This response demonstrates how his populism plays on the seam of nationalism/traditionalism/Mizrahi identity, in contrast to what is perceived to be the universalist/secular/Ashkenazi position of the other side (Grinberg, 2004).

A week after Hendel’s statement, Netanyahu was filmed with three journalists, Shimon Riklin, Erel Segal, and Yinon Magal, as they sang together the song “Praise Jerusalem.” At the end of the song Netanyahu asked, “Wait, you didn’t bring *darbukas*?” to the laughter of the others.[[4]](#footnote-5) The musical clip quickly went viral. However, while the media was primarily occupied by the fact that journalists took part in political propaganda, the clip itself is interesting because it serves as musical outreach to the collective subconscious of the public in the context of identity politics. The song “Praise Jerusalem,” is a clear mixture of religion, nationalism, and Mizrahi identity. The words of the song are from the book of Psalms, and as a result connect to the traditional image that Netanyahu sought to attach to himself; the subject of the song is Jerusalem, and dividing Jerusalem is considered to be a threat to nationalism; and the melody, to which Netanyahu wanted to add *darbukas*, is a clear Mizrahi melody. Thus, Netanyahu connected himself to three important identity groups, which highlighted the divide between Likud supporters and Netanyahu’s rivals according to origin, tradition, and nationalist position.

The song “Praise Jerusalem,” (which became a sort of campaign anthem for the third round of elections and was sung in Netanyahu’s office as the election results came in) is about the strings of connection between religion, national identity, and ethnicity, and is meant to emphasize the difference between the Left and the Right in these areas. Thus, Netanyahu sought to divert the public discourse from the question of his trial, to the question of Israel’s identity – a field with electoral potential, not only because of the tension between Jews and Arabs, and Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, but also because the relationship with religion is an acute subject for most Israeli Jews, as is demonstrated by surveys that have been conducted since the 1990s.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Netanyahu is consistent in playing in the field of identity politics. In 1997, he whispered to the Kabbalist Rabbi Kaduri that “the Left forgot what it means to be Jewish” (Mann, 1998: 39). Netanyahu emphasized the difference between right-wing Jews and left-wing Jews “who forgot what it means to be Jewish,” during the current elections as well. In this context, Netanyahu’s populism is not part of the original populist idea, an aspiration for political equality between all citizens. Instead, it demands political power for equal groups (Urbinati, 1998:119).

Identity politics originate in the “New Left” and developed in the 1960s to seek cultural pluralism and the breakdown of inter-group hierarchies in society. However, Israeli identity politics are unique in that they were adopted by the populist Right in order to serve as an agent of nationalism and suppression of the “other.” In practice, similar to the way that the Right adopted the use of post-modernist relativism and related to the truth according to its needs, Netanyahu’s use of identity politics distorts the progressive agenda. In the context of national, ethnic, religious Jewish supremacy in Israel, Netanyahu’s emphasis of the discrimination of Mizrahim and traditional Jews at the hands of the Left is not intended to expand the Mizrahi discourse that could include, at least from a historical perspective, inclusive possibilities relating to Jewish-Arab coexistence; on the contrary, identity politics are intended to deepen the Jewish ethnonational hegemony in Israel and the territories beyond the Green Line.

**The “Sour Pickles Theory” as a leadership principle**

Thus far, we have dealt with the explanations for Netanyahu’s success, primarily dealing with how he engages with his rivals – his use of identity politics, exclusion of the Arab population, and opposition to statist anti-majoritarian institutions. However, the question remains: What is the “successful merchandise,” if we can stick to the neoliberal terminology, that Netanyahu provides to the public? According to the 2019 Israel Democracy Index, the public still holds a high level of confidence in the judicial system.[[6]](#footnote-7) However, Netanyahu’s electoral support has remained strong, and throughout these elections, 64% of Israelis have declared that the indictment against him has no influence on their vote (Orkabi, 2019). Why then, does the public still “buy” the claim that the judicial system is singling out Netanyahu? In my opinion, the answer is embedded in an additional significant data point, that was published in the same Israel Democracy Index: 50% of the public believes that Israel’s current state is good to very good.[[7]](#footnote-8) In other words, the public has more confidence in the benefit that is the result of Netanyahu’s continued leadership than confidence in the correctness of his claims. Therefore, it can be argued that Netanyahu does not gain support as a result of his attacks on the judicial system, which, are understandable as an internalization of neoliberal logic. Rather, Netanyahu gains support as a result of the widespread feeling, that in the “test of results,” under Netanyahu’s leadership, Israel is in a good state. This feeling is also influenced by neoliberal logic and is of course open for factual disagreement. According to this approach, at the end of the day, Netanyahu provides Israel with achievements.

This point is also important in order to avoid claims of “false consciousness” among Netanyahu’s voters, that cannot be refuted or confirmed, (moreover, since it is Netanyahu’s opponents, who belong to the higher classes, who actually benefit from his continued rule), and it allows for the discussion of Netanyahu’s supporters as subjective agents.

The public’s satisfaction with Netanyahu’s results is key to understanding his success. I will now discuss the most significant speech, in my opinion, that demonstrates this idea: a speech that Netanyahu gave in the Knesset in October 2017 and was referred to by the media as the “Sour Pickles Speech.” The central claim of the speech – according to which, Netanyahu’s government provides successes to the satisfaction of the majority of the public, and therefore, criticism of Netanyahu in the media and by his opponents is not anchored in reality – is essentially the “trump card” that Netanyahu plays in order to strengthen and justify his necessity as prime minister.

In his speech, Netanyahu said:

“This is Israel’s Golden Age. Israel is experiencing unprecedented diplomatic and economic momentum. These things are not obvious, and do not occur by themselves. In the region we are seeing states that are being split open by the sword, countries that are being flooded by waves of immigrants and infiltrators, nations that are shrinking demographically and losing their strength…within a decade we will become a state of ten million citizens and have a GDP of half a trillion dollars. This will give us power to ensure our future…but the depression industry still exists, and it has honorable representatives in this house, and in the media. Recently there is a renewal, a new wing – a wing of sour pickles…it’s hard for them, the pickles.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

The speech serves as the key to understanding Netanyahu, especially because it lacks ideology or any other principle, except for details of success (and therefore, the populist model of Mudde that was covered in the beginning of this article regarding populism as a narrow ideology, whose essence is policy, not loyalty to a solid worldview, fits Netanyahu). In the same speech, Netanyahu emphasized that in 2017, more than three million Israelis traveled abroad over the summer and during the holidays; he highlighted the low unemployment rate (around 3%); the surveys that place Israelis at a high ranking in the World Happiness Report; the quiet on the northern border; and the fact that Israel’s dominance helped to convince Trump to cancel the nuclear deal between world powers and Iran.

It is clear that from an empirical standpoint, the quality of Israel’s current state is beyond the scope of this article and requires a clarification of various facts and assumptions. However, if we stick to neoliberal logic (and capitalist logic in general), which boils down the understanding of reality to a solitary focus on economic growth, we can discover that the last decade, at least until the coronavirus pandemic, has indeed been good. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2009, the year that Netanyahu entered office, Israel’s GDP per capita was $27,512. In 2017, Israel’s GDP per capita was $36,250, and Israel advanced to number 35 in the world.[[9]](#footnote-10)

This is an increase of 40%. During the same period, the GDP per capita of OECD countries grew at an average rate of 30%. A decade ago, Israel’s GDP was 23.5% lower than the OECD average. In 2019, it was lower than the OECD average by only 13.9%.[[10]](#footnote-11) Additionally, according to research by the Taub Center, in 2019, the labor participation rate and employment rates were high (81% and 78%), and the unemployment rate stood at only 3.8%, while real wages continued to increase, although at a slower rate than previous years.[[11]](#footnote-12)

It is not just economic growth that radiates “Israeli success” under Netanyahu. Previous prime ministers, Ehud Barak (1999-2001), Ariel Sharon (2001-2006), and Ehud Olmert (2006-2009), dealt with the Second Intifada between 2001-2005, a war in Israel’s north, and a large military operation in the south, which took the lives of hundreds of soldiers during the three years of Olmert’s premiership. In contrast, Netanyahu has led Israel through a decade without wars. This assessment excludes military operations in Gaza, which are considered to be unavoidable. These operations have also explicitly avoided a massive ground invasion into the Gaza Strip in order to avoid risking the loss of soldiers. Netanyahu’s time has been relatively quiet from a security perspective. Netanyahu has succeeded on the diplomatic front as well. The forecasts that the lack of a two-state solution would lead to diplomatic isolation were proven false. During Trump’s time in the White House, even ideas that once sounded radical, like annexation, have been discussed as legitimate (and were removed from the agenda in exchange for excitement over the possibilities that peace agreements with Bahrain and the UAE opened up for Israelis, agreements that are also considered to be Netanyahu’s achievements).

Of course, the answer to the question, “Is Israel currently in a good state?” is relative. The data that I have presented do not calculate for values or morals, or the damage that Netanyahu’s policies are likely to cause in the future, due to the continued occupation. Economic growth comes at the expense of widening gaps. In the Gini Index, which examines inequality, Israel is ranked 102 out of 150 countries, for the year 2017 (42.8).[[12]](#footnote-13) (Although between then and now, inequality has slightly decreased). As a result of structural and demographic factors, the future growth of Israel’s economy is not certain (Rosenberg, 2018: 231-245). Even Israel’s definition as a “start-up nation” is a collective fantasy, as the technology-entrepreneurial sector contributes only 6% of Israel’s national GDP.

However, the fact remains that the general sentiment of citizens is positive, both according to surveys conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute[[13]](#footnote-14) and according to a survey by the New Economic Foundation (NEF). According to this survey, Israel is ranked 13 in the World Happiness Report for the year 2019, while in the previous two years, it had been ranked at 11.[[14]](#footnote-15) This positive feeling, despite many people’s disappointment with Netanyahu’s behavior, can be explained, as sociologist Hila Dayan has written, by the internalization of neoliberal logic. Even if socioeconomic gaps are widening, in any event, “the promise of solidarity and an egalitarian Zionist society in the original paradigm of Israel’s founding fathers was replaced by the country’s economic success story, which is measured by global ‘common sense’: a country is measured by its growth rate and its ability to encourage investment, not by its ability to shrink gaps and solve social and moral problems…in the neoliberal era, the value of ‘equality’ was replaced by the values of ‘competition and possibilities.’” (Dayan, 2020:100).

One can also arrive at an additional conclusion. Even when fields such as education, health, welfare, and good governance suffer (these being the fields that make up the standard of living according to a social-democratic model), in the neoliberal era, Israelis prefer to measure their standard of living by the possibility of going abroad, studying in academic colleges (which have thrived under Likud’s rule), and buying goods cheaply on the internet. This preference is demonstrated by the above data on the satisfaction of the Israeli public. They are less likely to measure their standard of living by the services provided by the state, listed in the beginning of the paragraph. Replacing this conception of “quality of life” is of course a subject that requires research and surveys beyond the scope of this article. However, for the purposes of our discussion, even without diving too deeply into the economic data, the claim that Israel’s current state is good from a security perspective, as well as diplomatically and economically (and that complaints are the result of the “sourness” of Netanyahu’s opponents, as demonstrated by the happiness indices), is the source of Netanyahu’s electoral strength. More than any other explanation, and despite political, moral, and ideological reservations, this is what makes it difficult for the political system to present a stirring alternative to Netanyahu.

**Summary**

This article seeks to characterize Netanyahu’s leadership style throughout his three campaigns for the premiership, and by doing so, to highlight the key to his success in serving as prime minister for more than 11 consecutive years. I presented his rhetoric and pattern of behavior together with a definition of Netanyahu as a populist leader who acts with neoliberal logic and has succeeded “in assimilating himself into the emotional blood circulation of the general public” (Shenhav, 2006).

The theoretical framework that I presented, both regarding the characteristics of populism and its unique rhetoric, and regarding the neoliberal logic that allows for Netanyahu’s success, functions within, and in practice expands, the explanation of Hobbesian logic (Hobbes [1651] 2003). This Hobbesian logic is based on the familiar social contract theory: in exchange for promising the personal security of citizens (in the Israeli case, both physical and economic security), the leader’s rule is ensured (Navot & Rubin, 2016). This dynamic characterizes the Netanyahu era. However, it is interesting to pay attention to the extent to which Netanyahu focuses on these two areas, security, and economics. In contrast to his passionate rhetoric against Iran and Hamas in Gaza, Netanyahu avoids, almost in principle, military operations that are likely to endanger human life. It is possible to understand his readiness to adopt the strict policies of the Ministry of Health following the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 within this context as well. Similarly, during his years as Minister of Finance (2003-2005), and as prime minister, he was active and involved in beginning neoliberal reforms to ensure economic growth.

Netanyahu continues to succeed in convincing the public that he ensures the security of Israelis against the dangers that seemingly face them in the Middle Eastern environment (which he considers reflects the “state of nature”). Similarly, Netanyahu continues to take credit for the continued growth of Israel’s economy. As a result, according to a Hobbesian approach, it is no wonder that Netanyahu defines attempts to replace him as an “attempted coup,”[[15]](#footnote-16) (which is how he has related to the indictment against him).

The fact that Hobbes’s conception of a “state of nature” is the source of John Locke’s liberal philosophy (Locke, 1632-1704), which in turn is the source of neoliberalism as a worldview (in a process that is not necessarily natural for Locke’s approach), helps in creating continuity between Hobbesian logic (which characterizes Netanyahu’s leadership), and neoliberal logic. This neoliberal logic has taken root in Israel and allows him to present his policies as a “success.”

The populist rhetoric and position that have characterized Netanyahu in recent elections, are therefore only the covering for deeper currents that exist in the consciousness of Israeli society and explain his leadership style and success in surviving in power.

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1. See, for example, this interview with Dan Meridor, in which he declares that for the first time in his life he will vote against Likud and for the Blue and White Party. Haaretz Podcast [Hebrew], November 19, 2019. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/digital/podcast/weekly/.premium-PODCAST-1.8152148>

See, for example, this interview with Benny Begin, in which he says that, “It is clear to people who have been raised to put ‘Mahal’ [the official acronym of the Likud party] in the ballot box, that he [Netanyahu] cannot be the Prime Minister.” “Meet the Press [Hebrew],” Channel 2, January 4, 2020. <https://www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2020_q1/Article-29258ebf9917f61026.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Snir, Gramsci understands the concept of “mass logic” as something that is not necessarily imposed on the public by an ideology “from above.” Rather, it expresses shared sentiments that are imparted through concepts, culture, and tradition. This mass logic is therefore slightly paradoxical: it emerges from the public’s freedom to interpret reality and to choose from among various alternatives, however, it also is the result of public consensus regarding what is considered to be the boundaries of the logical (Snir, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. YouTube Channel, 2020. “Exciting! The Prime Minister sings “Praise Jerusalem, [Hebrew]” February 13, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIPydB5SDKk> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This statement is anchored, inter alia, in surveys that were conducted by the Guttman Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research (that has operated in recent years as part of the Israel Democracy Institute), that demonstrate that at least since the 1990s – for most Israelis – Jews place great importance in maintaining Israel’s Jewish identity at the expense of the democratic-civic character of the state. See: Shlmoit Levi, Hana Levinson, Eliyahu Katz, *Beliefs, Keeping Mitzvot, and Social Relations Among Jews in Israel [Hebrew],* Jerusalem: Guttman Israel Institute of Applied Social Research, 1994; Shlomit Levi, Hana Levinson, and Eliyahu Katz, *Israeli Jews: A Portrait [Hebrew]*, Jerusalem: Avi Chai Foundation and Israel Democracy Institute, 2002; *Israeli Jews – A Portrait, Beliefs, Keeping Mitzvot, and Values of Jews in Israel [Hebrew],* (Head of Research Team: (the late) Asher Arian), Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute and Guttman Center, 2009. *The 2013 Israeli Democracy Index – A Project of the Guttman Center and its Measurements [Hebrew]*, (Editor: Tamar Harman), Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, pp. 84-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Tami Harman, Or Invi, William, Kevison, and Elah Heller, 2020. “The 2019 Israel Democracy Index [Hebrew],” Guttman Center: Jerusalem. According to the data, despite the attacks on its status, confidence in Israel’s Supreme Court rose from 52% in 2018 to 55% in 2019. The government and the Knesset have a lower level of public confidence, around 30%. <https://www.idi.org.il/books/29414> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The speech is on the YouTube channel, October 23, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yigG-NCDtog> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. “GDP per capita [Hebrew],” Israel Democracy Institute website. <https://www.idi.org.il/policy/world-comparison/indexes/gross-domestic-product/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. “Is GDP in Israel higher or lower than OECD countries? [Hebrew]” Globes, April 9, 2019. <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001281523> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Fox, Hadas and Gil Epstein. “Labor Market, An Overview, [Hebrew]” 2019. Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel. December 23, 2019. <http://taubcenter.org.il/he/2019-the-labor-market-an-overview-heb/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. “Gini Index [Hebrew],” 2017. Israel Democracy Institute website, <https://www.idi.org.il/policy/world-comparison/indexes/gini-coefficient/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. “Abstract of the Israel Democracy Index [Hebrew]” Israel Democracy Institute, 2018. <https://www.idi.org.il/media/11558/takzir-index-hebrew.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. “Israel is number 13 on the happiness index, Finland is the happiest of all [Hebrew],” YNet, 2019. March 20, 2019. [https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5481839,00.html](https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0%2C7340%2CL-5481839%2C00.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. The speech is on the YouTube channel, November 21, 2019, “Netanyahu in response to the indictment: attempted coup [Hebrew]” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgH51xnEzQQ> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)