1.

The Left Wing’s Sorrow: Yossi Beilin and the Decline of the Israeli Left

2 Abstract

In September 1993, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat signed an historic declaration of principles that provided a framework for the establishment of Palestinian autonomy in the territories conquered by Israel in 1967, a preliminary stage towards a permanent agreement. The agreement, which was planned in secret meetings in Oslo at the initiative of then-Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, was intended to take advantage of the political window of opportunity created in the Middle East after the fall of the Soviet Union. Its ultimate goal was to bring about a historical reconciliation between the peoples, and to be a part of the dream of “a new Middle East,” as then-Foreign Minister Shimon Peres called it.

However, after the talks on a permanent status agreement ended in failure at the Camp David Summit in 2000, the Al-Aqsa Intifada erupted, with its suicide attacks, leading to aggressive responses by Israel. Since then, the political power of the peace camp in Israel is so diminished that now, towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it seems that no alternative exists to right-wing rule in Israel, which has continued uninterrupted, apart from brief interludes, for more than four decades. The hope for a political settlement seems to have been shelved.

This book attempts to unearth the reasons for the decline of the peace camp and to locate new possibilities for its revival. It is based on unprecedented and first-time access to Yossi Beilin’s personal archive, which contains minutes of meetings, records, and documents from the different parties involved in the negotiations, as well as those touching on political, economic, and social issues in Israel. It utilizes Beilin’s political biography, which manifests the essence of the Israeli left: secular, Ashkenazi, Tel-Avivian, and economically neo-liberal.

Alongside fascinating historical discoveries from the annals of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians and Arab states, the book investigates critical issues in understanding unfolding events in Israeli society and in the political sphere. These issues include: the influence of identity politics on right wing dominance; the meaning of the disconnect between the left and Jewish identity and tradition; the connection between the left’s loss of its socialist values and its current weakness; inter-Jewish ethnic tension as an expression of the central split in Israeli politics that influences the support for peace; the weakness of “the liberal peace paradigm” that served as the basis for the peace process; the way in which the complicated relations between religion, secularism, and nationalism in the Middle East have shaped and continue to influence events in the social, political, and diplomatic spheres in Israel; and how the blindness of the leaders of the peace process to issues touching on religion and Mizrahi identity [i.e. the identity of Jews originally from Islamic countries] contributed to its downfall.

3 Full Description

Against the backdrop of the dominance of the right wing in Israel in recent decades, *The Left Wing’s Sorrow* seeks to offer a comprehensive answer to the question: Why did Israel’s left wing and peace camp lose their power? The book presents a social-historical study based on archives and relevant scholarly literature, and aided by unprecedented access to the personal archive of Yossi Beilin — considered to be the architect of the Oslo Accords, and the individual who laid the ideological groundwork for the Labor Party’s social, economic, and diplomatic developments over the past decades.

The study’s point of departure is the thesis that while, on its face, the Israeli left and the peace camp represent the liberal stream, while the right-wing and hawkish parties are part of the conservative camp, the Israeli reality is more complicated. In many senses, connected to economic perspectives and to issues of identity and culture, it is counterintuitively the left that adopts conservative positions that serve the upper class. Conversely, the right offers populism and social policies that “benefit the people,” to borrow a phrase from the founding father of the Likud party, Menahem Begin.

In order to answer the question that has shaped the political system in Israel in recent decades — the decline of the left — the book seeks to identify a link between the failure of the peace process and the economic and social positions that characterize the left-wing camp. Aside from abandoning any connection with the original values of the Zionist left, namely - socialist policies, the left suffers from the fact that it is not identified with the Jewish dimension of Israeli political life, and is not considered to be committed to Jewish tradition. When Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu said to a Kurdish rabbi in 1997 that “the left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish,” he was, of course, engaging in a sly political maneuver. However, in the flood of criticism against him that followed, the fact that he had touched an exposed nerve was brushed aside. What left-wing leader puts his Judaism front and center? The Israeli left aspires to positively transform society according to the European model, and strives for peace in order to live in tranquility, just like in North America. This does not mean that the solutions it seeks are necessarily “not Jewish”; however, they are not conveyed to the public anchored in proof texts from Jewish sources, and they do not sound as if they flow from a concern for the continuity of Jewish existence and identity. The Israeli left has not forgotten to be Jewish, but, if it seeks to survive, it should remind us more often that it is an integral part of a diverse Judaism. The Israeli left suffers from the fact that, unlike the Jewish community in America, in Israel there is no liberal Judaism, and the right has become the flag-bearer for the “pro-Jewish” and “pro-tradition” position. Moreover, since 1967, the territorial dimension, that is, the attachment to Greater Israel, has become a defining feature of the “pro-Jewish” position’s identity. Due to the left’s willingness to compromise on the territories, and its failure to draw on support in the tradition for its positions, it is regarded as offering solutions that are detached from any connection to Jewish identity. In this context, the fact that the leaders of the left and the drivers of peace process were profoundly alienated from Mizrahi and Arabic culture also helped to undermine the process. In practical terms, the Israeli left apparently seeks peace with the Palestinians, but, on the other hand, it seeks to achieve it through a program of partition between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as disassociation from Arabic culture and space —a paradoxical position, to say the least.

4 Table of Contents

**Introduction**: The introduction provides a historical analysis of the peace processes from the Oslo period until today, while at the same time locating Beilin’s position, and that of the Labor Party since the 1990s, on the historical continuum of Israel’s foreign policy since its formative years. The introduction includes a methodological discussion and explanation of the choice of Beilin as the central protagonist of the study: because of the quality of his varied archive; because he played a decisive role in the formation and implementation of the ideology of the left from the 1980s until the first decade of the 21st century; and because his biography reflects the central character type of the Israeli left: Ashkenazi, secular, educated, and socially and economically liberal. The introduction also includes a discussion of the distinction between the liberal camp and the left-wing camp in Israel.

**Chapter One: On Broken Dreams**: The chapter opens with a brief trip back in history, to the first days of the Zionist movement at the beginning of the 20th century. The purpose of this section is to tell the story of Beilin’s grandfather, who participated in Sixth Zionist Conference of 1903, at which Theodor Herzl advocated examining a proposal to establish a refuge for Jews in Uganda. Beilin’s grandfather opposed the proposal, as the Land of Israel was the focus of his conception of modern Jewish nationalism. The chapter continues the story through the family’s immigration to the Land of Israel as part of the third *Aliyah* (wave of immigration), which was more bourgeois in its character. All these events are set against the backdrop of the development of the Zionist project in the period of the Yishuv.

The grandson, Yosef Beilin, represents the generation born in Israel with the establishment of the state in 1948. The chapter describes his teenage enthusiasm for the Zionist project and establishment positions. He even adopted certain religious customs, in which he saw a justification of his concept of nationalism, and as a soldier in the Six Day War of 1967 he was swept up in the joyous celebration of the victory and the conquest of the territories. His biography up until this point is the story of an entire generation of Israelis, who only experienced personal and national crisis in the wake of the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Beilin, who served in the war as a radio operator in the communication system for the high command, was horrified to hear the weakness of the leaders of the historic Mapai party (precursor to Labor) and its generals. In the wake of his disappointment, he abandoned religion, and became more suspicious of the Israeli establishment and its blindness to the need for a compromise and withdrawal from the territories in exchange for peace.

**Chapter Two: First Political Steps**: In 1977, a political upheaval took place in Israel, owing in part to the influence of the disappointment that resulted from the Yom Kippur War. For the first time in the history of Zionism, an embodiment of the Revisionist Party, the Likud, ascended to power. In the wake of the “upheaval,” the head of the Labor party, Shimon Peres, suggested to Beilin, then a journalist and a doctoral student in political science, to become his advisor and to rejuvenate the party with a younger and more vibrant generation. This chapter discusses at length the reasons for the political upheaval, the intra-Jewish ethnic rift that it uncovered, and the decline of the Labor party.

**Chapter Three: Diplomacy and Politics**. Beilin joined Peres in his diplomatic meetings with important figures in the Arab world and beyond. This chapter focuses on the notes from the minutes of those meetings and the surprising approaches that Arab leaders revealed to Peres and Beilin. Yet the Labor party still rejected negotiations with the PLO. While Peres had supported the Jewish settlement movement in the 1970s, Beilin attempted to bring him closer to more moderate positions

The second part of the chapter includes a discussion of the intra-Jewish ethnic rift in Israel that was at the center of the 1981 elections, in which the Labor party lost again. Against the background of the first Lebanon War and the peace agreement with Egypt, Beilin and the younger generation in the party prepared an ideological program to change the identity of the party in the economic and diplomatic fields. The chapter includes a discussion of the ideological change that occurred in the Labor party.

**Chapter Four: From Opposition to Unity**: The results of the 1984 elections led to a national unity government, and Peres was appointed Prime Minister for the first time, for a half-term. Beilin was appointed Cabinet Secretary. The chapter focuses on the economic program that was prepared by the Labor government, and which initiated the period of privatization in Israel and the transition to a less socialist economy. The chapter also discusses the story of the “London Agreement” — perhaps the most ambitious peace proposal to date — that Shimon Peres signed with King Hussein in 1987. The agreement was meant to found a tripartite federation of Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, and to rid Israel of the territories that Ben Gurion knew better than to occupy, as well as their inhabitants. But the prime minister at the time, Yitzhak Shamir, torpedoed the move. The chapter provides new testimony and documents on the agreement and its quashing by Shamir, and introduces the idea of a confederation into the historical context of peace proposals from the 1920s until today. In the fifty years since the Six Day War, there has not been a greater diplomatic missed opportunity than this.

**Chapter Five: In the Eye of the Storm**: The late 1980s brought a change in the global political map, with the decline of the Soviet Union and its considerable influence on the Middle East. The PLO announced for the first time that it recognized the idea of the two-state solution, but the Labor party was still led by the older generation who prevented changes in its positions. Essentially, left and right did not differ in their positions on the conflict. The outbreak of the Intifada in 1987, however, began to influence public opinion in Israel and to lead to the understanding that occupation has a price.

Part Two

**Chapter Six: The Big-Little Upheaval: From the Opposition to Oslo**

In 1990, while still members of the unity government, Peres and Beilin began devising a political plot that could return the left to power: to bring down the government and to reestablish the historical compact between Mapai and the ultra-Orthodox parties, until today the only available option for establishing a left-wing coalition government. The first part of the chapter focuses on an analysis of the failure of this initiative, with an emphasis on the complex relations between religion, nationalism, traditionalism, secularism, and Mizrahi identity in Israel. Following the failure of this initiative, and the Labor party’s return to the opposition, Rabin triumphed over Peres in the party’s internal elections, and Labor prepared itself for the general elections of June 1992. In those elections, fifteen years after the “upheaval,” the Labor party succeeded in returning to power with a coalition that included Meretz on the left and Shas, the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox party, on the right.

The second part of the chapter includes the story of the Oslo Accords, which were planned by Beilin. On the basis of never-before-seen documents, the chapter analyses the causes, benefits, and costs of the Oslo process from a diplomatic perspective.

**Chapter Seven: Peace Grapples with Reality**

This chapter deals primarily with the right’s opposition to the peace agreement, and analyzes the argument over the Oslo Agreement as a battle over the identity of the state: More Israeli or more Jewish? More traditional or more secular? More liberal or more republican? More Eastern or more Western? The chapter also discusses the attempt of the ruling elite on the left to cement its position and its values through the negotiated settlement and by use of the legal arena. Following demographic and social changes, it was clear that, from a political perspective, the right was expected to gain strength and the left to atrophy.

**Chapter Eight: In the Wake of the Rabin Assassination**

The assassination of Rabin, the ultimate *tzabar*, was carried out by a young, religious man from a Yemenite background, who opposed continued Israeli withdrawal from the territories. However, the chapter situates the motives for Rabin’s murder against a wider sociological and personal backdrop than political fanaticism alone, including discrimination against Mizrahi Jews. In this context, the chapter also discusses the change of elites in Israeli society, while at the same time providing an explanation for Netanyahu’s surprising defeat of Peres in the 1996 elections, and with it, the return of the right to power.

**Chapter Nine: The End of the Conflict and its Continuation**

In the 1999 Israeli elections, Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu and returned Labor to power. He chose to try to solve the conflict and to arrive at a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians at a summit held at Camp David in 2000. In addition to new documents, the chapter also relies on first-ever access to the diary of Akram Haniyeh, a member of the Palestinian delegation, which documents the conversations at the summit. Haniyeh analyses the failure of the negotiations in light of the differences that erupted over the different concepts of the meaning of time, history, and the relationship between religion and nationality — in order words, as a kind of struggle between “Western” and “Eastern” perspectives. He also describes how the “liberal peace paradigm” contributed to the failure of negotiations for a permanent settlement by striving for a functional solution based on partition and economic improvement, while ignoring dimensions such as religion and the connection to historical values and the land.

**Chapter Ten: Small Days**

The failure of the negotiations led to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000 and to the suicide attacks that returned the Likud to power. Beilin resigned from the Labor party and became head of the liberal Meretz party. Since then, the Israeli public has preferred the right, and Meretz has also become less significant. This chapter analyses, against the backdrop of Beilin’s resignation from politics in 2008, the changes underway in the Israeli left —the emphasis on ecology, the environment, and cultural values, and the abandonment of the diplomatic question — and analyses the decline of the peace camp in social, political, and identity-related contexts.

5. Audience:

The book is intended first and foremost for scholars of the Middle East, Israel studies, and Jewish studies. It will also be useful for scholars in fields related to political science and the study of conflict resolution. Since it deals with modern Israeli history and includes new historical discoveries about well-known episodes from recent decades, the book will also appeal to a broader audience. Insofar as the book provides background information on many episodes in Israeli history and politics, certain chapters will be useful to students interested in the Middle East and Israeli politics, and will provide further understanding of Israeli society. In this context, the book will serve as supplementary reading, rather than as a textbook.