

A Good-Will Government Was Possible in Israel

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By Naftali Bennett Mr. Bennett was the 13th prime minister of Israel.



Naftali Bennett, center, in 2015, six years before becoming prime minister of Israel. Uriel Sinai for The New York Times

A year and a half ago, I made a difficult decision: to break from my political base and form a government with people I couldn't have imagined working with in my wildest dreams.

Israel was at one of its lowest moments, polarized and paralyzed: four rounds of elections in two years, massive riots in Arab and mixed towns, and killings of Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, plus hundreds injured. The Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas had just shot rockets into Jerusalem after the annual Flag Parade in the Old City.

We had near-record unemployment and an unprecedented deficit. We hadn't passed a budget for three years. Benjamin Netanyahu had failed to

form a government, and we were just days away from another round of elections and full-blown chaos.

I vividly recall the moment, a Sabbath morning, when I made the decision. I asked my four children to join my wife, Gilat, and me in the kitchen. I told my family, “Your abba is about to attempt something, and I don’t even know if I’ll succeed. A lot of people — including friends — will say a lot of bad stuff about your abba. So I want you to know that I’m doing it for Israel’s sake.”

An unrelenting propaganda campaign run by the opposition over social and traditional media tried to break me and my party, Yamina. The pressure worked. Just days before the critical vote, a member of my party bolted. As a result, we were down to the bare minimum necessary to form a new government.

On June 13, 2021, the Knesset voted to establish the new government with a majority of 60 votes, with 59 opposing votes and one abstention. At that moment, I became the prime minister of the most diverse government in Israel’s history. Right and left, religious and secular, Jews and Arabs, all working together.

We passed a reform-packed budget, brought hundreds of thousands of Israelis back to work and reduced the ballooning deficit to nearly zero. We delivered the quietest year in decades to rocket-battered southern communities close to the Gaza Strip. We blocked a dangerous nuclear agreement with Iran that would have, according to our calculations, poured over \$200 billion into the terrorist regime’s coffers while barely restraining its nuclear enrichment abilities. We achieved this while maintaining strong bipartisan support in the United States. And we became the first nation to distribute the third Covid booster shot, paving the way for the rest of the world.

How did we do it?

I established the 70/70 rule.

About 70 percent of Israelis agree on 70 percent of the issues. We all agree that we need better trains and roads, better education, more security and a

lower cost of living. However, we disagree on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, religion and state and the desired nature of our legal system.

So my government focused on getting the 70 percent done, as opposed to endlessly wrangling over the issues we didn't agree on. We all agreed that this government will neither insist on Israeli sovereignty for territories nor hand them over to Palestinians. Similarly, we decided we would not legislate on any disputed religious or legal matters.

When you neutralize the most politically sensitive issues, ministers from left and right saw each other as decent people working for the good of Israel and not as the demons we had been calling each other.

We called ourselves a good-will government. We proved to ourselves and to those outside our coalition that people with radically different political opinions can work incredibly well together. The world is more polarized than ever. The model we presented was one of cooperation and unity. Of transcending your tribe for the good of your nation.

Take Mansour Abbas, the leader of the Arab Raam party. The first time I met him was during the weeks before we formed the government.

Mr. Netanyahu had been secretly meeting Mr. Abbas in his attempts to form a coalition. Before I met Mr. Abbas, I had a negative opinion of him. I thought he supported terrorism. I heard from many that this wasn't true. They told me he was genuinely trying to create a pragmatic model for Israeli Arabs.

I called him and invited him to a meeting.

"Which secret apartment should we meet at?" Mr. Abbas asked me. He was used to huddling with people in secret, as they didn't want their discussions to be discovered.

"We're going to meet openly at my Knesset office," I replied. "You are not second-class. I am not ashamed to meet you."

I discovered a brave leader just about my age who turned out to be something of a mensch. We are both men of faith and quickly agreed that whatever theological disagreements may exist between Judaism and Islam,

we will let God handle those. We will work together here and now to provide better education, better jobs and safer streets for Israelis and Arabs.

After a year of progress, my government collapsed amid nonstop pressure from public protests and on social networks. Arab parliamentarians who joined my coalition in order to improve the socioeconomic future of Israeli Arabs were called traitors in their hometowns, as were members of Yamina in their communities.

Organized groups set up tents just meters from the homes of these members of Knesset, relentlessly harassing their families for months, calling them terrorist lovers. One of my party members reported that her husband's job was at risk and her children were being threatened at school.

At the same time, Israel incurred a series of Palestinian terrorist attacks in Tel Aviv and other major cities, taking the lives of about 20 people. The opposition claimed that this was a result of the government's hands being tied by the Raam Arab party. This is false, given that we've seen terrorist attacks in the land for over 100 years and my government was actually tougher than usual on the terrorists.

As a consequence, the Raam Arab party suspended its membership in the government. An Arab member of the Knesset from the Meretz party temporarily quit as well. A few members of my party, too, stopped supporting the coalition.

My government did a poor job fending off the enormous amount of misinformation that was being spread across Israel and blind sectarianism. This campaign succeeded and brought my government to its end.

A new government is now being formed in Israel, and I hope its leaders understand that the single biggest challenge for Israel is keeping all parts of Israeli society together.

The State of Israel is the third instance of a Jewish political entity in the Holy Land. During the time of the First and Second Temples, we managed to keep our nation together for only about 80 years, after which internal divisions tore us apart and we ultimately lost our independence. Israel is now in its 75th year. This is our third chance, and we're determined that this time, we succeed.

Though my government operated for only a year, I believe we imprinted a unique image and model of how a highly polarized society can cooperate.

That beautiful image, once engraved in hearts and minds, cannot be easily erased.