

Leaders and Dwarfs in Israeli Politics — October 2026 edition

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 18 October 2026

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Nine days out

In August I updated an argument I first made in 2021: that Israeli party politics has drifted into a pattern of leaders and dwarfs. One known face stands at the top of a list. Behind him stand names most voters could not pick out of a lineup, chosen for loyalty more than for any test they passed in front of the public. On Tuesday, 27 October 2026, Israelis vote for the 26th Knesset. The lists are closed and the ballot letters are assigned. What remains is to see whether the past seven weeks have weakened the diagnosis or confirmed it.

They have confirmed it, and in a sharper form than I expected.

The original diagnosis, briefly

In the elections to the 13th Knesset in 1992, Rafael Eitan's Tsomet won eight seats. The press called the list "Raful and the seven dwarfs": a famous former Chief of Staff at the top, and seven largely unknown candidates beneath him. Within the term, Tsomet split. Two of the MKs elected on its list left to form a faction of their own, and their votes were part of the narrow majority by which the Knesset approved the Oslo II agreement on 6 October 1995. Voters who had chosen Tsomet's hard line on territory found that the seats they had filled were used to pass the opposite policy.

The lesson I drew then still holds. When a list is one man and his chosen companions, the voter is not really choosing representatives. He is ratifying a package. If the package comes apart, he has no recourse until the next election, and the package was never his to shape.

What September and October added

The lists closed. The window for submitting lists to the Central Elections Committee closed on the night of Tuesday, 8 September 2026. The Central Elections Committee approved the lists and their ballot letters on Sunday, 27 September 2026. There were no last-minute mega-mergers. Reporting that night centred, as it always does, on reserved slots: which places at the top of which list the leader would fill personally, and with whom. In most parties the question "who chose this candidate?" has a one-word answer. The exceptions, chiefly the Democrats' open primary and Likud's residual primary, which I described in August, remain exceptions.

A candidate walked off a list. On the evening of Tuesday, 13 October 2026, Davidi Ben Zion, deputy head of the Shomron Regional Council, announced that he was leaving Ofer Winter's Amcha Yisrael list. His stated reason was concern about wasted right-wing votes if the list falls below the threshold. The party said he had been under pressure, including pressure on his family. Prime Minister Netanyahu and Minister Smotrich welcomed the move, and the Prime Minister urged others to follow. Winter answered from Eilat: "we go to the end."

I don't judge Mr. Ben Zion's conscience, and I am not in a position to weigh the claim of pressure; both sides have stated their versions publicly. The structural point is what matters for this essay. A candidate's name was printed in the CEC's list file, and five weeks later it was a political event that he left. Voters who intend to vote Amcha Yisrael on 27 October will be voting for a list one of whose named candidates has publicly asked them not to. In a list built around one leader, the candidates beneath him are, in practice, removable parts. Here a part removed itself, and the leaders of neighbouring parties treated his leaving as a weapon in the threshold fight.

A leader refused a surplus agreement. On Tuesday, 13 October 2026, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir said that Otzma Yehudit would not sign a surplus-vote agreement with Winter, calling him "Bennett 2." Earlier, on Thursday, 8 October 2026, Yoaz Hendel had publicly called on Winter to sign a surplus agreement with his own list instead. Likud and Religious Zionism–Zehut signed theirs on Tuesday, 6 October 2026. The filing deadline for surplus agreements was Friday, 16 October 2026. When it passed, Otzma Yehudit, Winter's list, the Reservists–Economic list of Hendel and Zelekha, and Blue and White had all filed no agreement. Each stands alone; there were no last-minute deals.

I mention this not to take a side in the quarrel between Ben Gvir and Winter. I mention it because of who decided. A surplus agreement can move a seat. Whether it is signed is decided by two men, and the hundreds of thousands of voters on whose ballots the seat depends have no say at all. It is the dwarfs problem one level up: the voter cannot see into the list, and he cannot see into the deals between lists either.

The arithmetic, shown

Because so much of this cycle turns on a few tens of thousands of votes, I want to set out the rules exactly. The live tracker at <https://aryehleibtoren.com/elections/> shows the same equations with each poll as it comes in. The numbers in this section are hypothetical. They are not a projection.

Threshold. A list must win at least 3.25% of valid votes. If V is the number of valid votes, the line is $0.0325 \times V$. Every vote for a list below the line is discarded.

Quota. Let $V_{\text{qualifying}}$ be the total votes of all lists that passed. Then $q = V_{\text{qualifying}} / 120$.

Whole seats. Each qualifying list i with v_i votes first gets $\text{floor}(v_i / q)$ seats.

Remaining seats (Bader-Ofer). Each leftover seat goes, one at a time, to the list with the highest $v_i / (s_i + 1)$, where s_i is the number of seats it already has.

Surplus pairs. Two lists that signed an agreement are treated as one list for steps 3 and 4: their votes are combined, and the pair's seats are then divided between them by the same method. Both partners must pass the threshold; if one fails, the agreement does nothing.

Hypothetical example. Say there are 5,000,000 valid votes. The threshold is $0.0325 \times 5,000,000 = 162,500$. Lists below the line take 200,000 votes, so $V_{\text{qualifying}} = 4,800,000$ and $q = 4,800,000 / 120 = 40,000$.

List X has 170,000 votes and List Y has 165,000. Both pass. Standing alone, X gets $\text{floor}(170,000 / 40,000) = 4$ seats and Y gets $\text{floor}(165,000 / 40,000) = 4$. In the remainder stage, X competes with $170,000 / 5 = 34,000$ and Y with $165,000 / 5 = 33,000$.

If they signed a surplus agreement, they compete as one list of 335,000: $\text{floor}(335,000 / 40,000) = 8$ seats, and in the remainder stage the pair competes with $335,000 / 9 \approx 37,222$, which is higher than either alone. If the pair wins that ninth seat, it is divided within the pair. The pair's quota is $335,000 / 9 \approx 37,222$. X gets $\text{floor}(170,000 / 37,222) = 4$ and Y gets $\text{floor}(165,000 / 37,222) = 4$. The ninth seat goes to the higher of $170,000 / 5 = 34,000$ and $165,000 / 5 = 33,000$, so X takes it.

Now suppose Y had won 160,000 votes. That is 2,500 below the line. Every one of those 160,000 votes is discarded, and X's agreement with Y is worth nothing.

That is the whole drama of Winter and Hendel, who both go into the vote standing alone, in five lines of arithmetic. It also shows why a candidate leaving a list near the threshold is not a personal footnote. At 3.25%, a few thousand votes decide whether roughly four seats exist at all.

Fragmentation. A second measure helps here: the effective number of parties, $N = 1 / \sum p_i^2$, where p_i is each party's share of seats. Take a hypothetical Knesset of four parties with shares 0.40, 0.30, 0.20 and 0.10. Then $\sum p_i^2 = 0.16 + 0.09 + 0.04 + 0.01 = 0.30$, and $N \approx 3.3$. With dozens of lists on the ballot and more than a dozen polling near or above the line, the next Knesset is likely to have a high N . In a fragmented Knesset each small list is a potential kingmaker, and in a leader-owned list the kingmaker is one man.

Two ways of being righteous: Noah and Avraham

On Shabbat, 17 October 2026, we read Parshat Noach. This coming Shabbat, 24 October 2026, three days before the vote, we read Lech Lecha.

The Torah says of Noah: "Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with G-d" (Bereishit 6:9). It is high praise. Yet the text records no one outside his own household whom Noah formed, persuaded or brought along. He was righteous alone. When the flood came, the ark held his family, and the generation outside it did not have one person he had made into a partner.

Lech Lecha opens differently: "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם, לֶךְ־לְךָ" — "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Bereishit 12:1). Three verses later: "Abram went forth as ה' had commanded him, and Lot went with him" (Bereishit 12:4). Avraham goes first, and someone follows him by his own choice. Lot is no dwarf placed beneath him. He is an adult who chose to walk, and the Torah goes on to record his later choice to part ways, openly and in daylight.

I read the two parshiyot as two models of leadership, and neither is the leader-and-dwarfs model. Noah is the private tzaddik: personally upright, publicly alone. Avraham is the one who goes first, in front of everyone, so that others can see where he is going and decide whether to follow. The leader-and-dwarfs list resembles neither. It has the authority of a leader without the visible journey, and followers who were assigned rather than persuaded.

The daily page: a gift that may not be sold

The Daf Yomi for Thursday, 15 October 2026 was Bechorot 27. On 27a the Gemara discusses tovat hana'ah, the owner's right of discretion over gifts such as terumah: the owner may give his terumah to any kohen he chooses. The baraita teaches that if an Israelite offers the owner a sela to give the terumah to his daughter's son, who is a kohen, it is permitted. If a kohen pays for the right to receive it, it is forbidden.

The gift is sacred. The owner has real discretion over where it goes. But that discretion has limits: the one entitled to receive may not buy his way to the front. I take a political point from this, and claim no more for it than an analogy. A seat in the Knesset is a trust that the voter places in the list. The list leader has discretion over who fills it, because closed lists give him that. He holds that discretion on behalf of the voters who gave the trust, and it is not his to trade. When candidates leave in the last weeks, and when surplus agreements are signed or refused by two men without any account to the voters, it is fair to ask whose discretion is being used, and for whom.

I put that as a question, not a charge. Each party will give its own answer. Voters are entitled to hear it before 27 October.

The fix remains accountability to voters

My conclusion in 2021, and again in August, was not that strong leaders are bad. Israel needs them. My conclusion was that a leader should answer to the voters for the people he brings in with him. Concretely:

Name the selectorate. Every list should say publicly, before list submission, who chose each candidate: an open primary, a central committee, a council of sages, or the leader alone. Several parties already do. All should.

Publish surplus intentions early. A list that refuses or signs a surplus agreement should say why, in writing, well before the deadline, so that voters near the threshold know what their ballot will do.

Tie the seat more closely to the package. The question of whether a seat belongs to the MK or to the list is old. The Oslo II episode showed what it costs when an elected package dissolves mid-term. Proposals that make leaving a list costlier, or that return the question to voters sooner, deserve serious debate after this election.

Vote with the arithmetic in view. The threshold, the quota and the surplus rule are public. Before 27 October, every voter can check where his list stands and, if it has a surplus partner, what that partner adds. The tracker is there for that purpose.

Noach was saved, but he saved no one else. Avraham went first, and people followed him with their eyes open. On 27 October each Israeli voter can ask of each list: who here is going first, and did anyone choose to follow?

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Sources

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