

The Government That Stays

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The ballots are in, the posters are coming down, and the talks have barely started. So who is running the country this week?

The answer sits in one sentence of Israeli law. Section 30(b) of Basic Law: The Government says that when a new Knesset has been elected, "the outgoing Government shall continue to carry out its functions until the new Government is constituted." The Hebrew is plainer still: תמשיך הממשלה הממשלה החדשה היוצאת במילוי תפקידיה עד שתיבון הממשלה החדשה.

So there is no gap and no empty chair. The ministers who held office on election morning hold it today, and they will keep holding it until a new cabinet wins the Knesset's confidence, even if that takes months. The army has a minister, the treasury has a minister, and somebody signs the papers.

That sounds dull. It is one of the quiet blessings of a working democracy, and other countries have learned to value it the hard way.

Britain voted on 6 May 2010 and no party won a majority. Gordon Brown stayed in Downing Street while the talks ran, and he went to the palace to resign on 11 May, once a new coalition was ready to take over. Five days, and the country was never without a government.

Belgium tested the idea much harder. It voted on 13 June 2010, and its next government was sworn in on 6 December 2011, 541 days later. All that time an outgoing cabinet kept the state running.

Israel knows the long version too. The 20th Knesset voted to dissolve itself on 26 December 2018. Three elections followed before a new government was sworn in on 17 May 2020. For almost a year and a half, an outgoing government carried on.

Staying on is a duty, and a limited one. A government that serves because the law says so is minding the house for whoever comes next. The healthy instinct, on every side, is to keep the country's ordinary business moving and leave the big new departures to the government the Knesset actually confirms.

For the rest of us the lesson is simple. Coalition talks take as long as they take. The Basic Law sets the clock, the parties fill in the substance, and meanwhile the state does not stop. That deserves a moment of gratitude, whoever you hoped would win.

Our Sages put it in one line: "Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive" (Avot 3:2). That covers the outgoing government as much as the incoming one.

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