

The Speech Came Home to a Ballot

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Qatar, the Campaign, and the Committee Week That Decided Who Is on the Paper

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Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to the United Nations on Thursday. The audience that will actually decide what the speech was worth is in Israel, and it votes on 27 October.

That is not a cynical reading. Reuters called it a campaign-style speech, carried live in evening prime time on all four of Israel's main television channels. The prime minister flew in, spoke for about forty minutes, and flew home for Sukkot. The walkout, the "moral cowards" line, the Hezbollah beeper, calling the genocide charge the lie of the century, the thanks to President Trump as Israel's greatest partner while Trump was hosting Xi in Washington: all of it played to the hall, and then landed in living rooms in Petah Tikva and Beersheba.

So the useful question the morning after is not what the world made of the speech. It is what the speech does inside a campaign, in a week when the Central Elections Committee has been deciding who gets to stand in it.

The line the opposition chose

The most pointed domestic response did not come from the left. It came from Naftali Bennett, who leads the Together (Beyahad) list.

Before the speech, Bennett had challenged Netanyahu to use the podium to declare Qatar an enemy state. After it, according to i24NEWS, he said the prime minister had missed a "historic opportunity" and had thereby "whitewashed and legitimized" Qatar. "Benjamin Netanyahu talks about Hamas," Bennett said, "but he tries to hide the truth: without Qatar, there is no Hamas." He repeated his own pledge: "We will declare Qatar an enemy, we will expel it from Israel and Gaza, and we will defeat Hamas."

Look at where that attack sits. Netanyahu did name Qatar from the podium. He accused it of spending heavily to turn opinion against Israel and the West and of hosting the Hamas leaders behind October 7. Bennett's complaint is not that the speech was too harsh on Doha. It is that the speech stopped short of a formal designation. He is running to Netanyahu's right on Qatar, and he is doing it on the ground Netanyahu chose to stand on.

That tells you a good deal about this campaign. On the central questions the speech raised, Iran, Hezbollah, the war over truth, and the charge of genocide, the largest challengers are not offering the public a different premise. They are offering a different degree of resolve and a claim to more credibility in carrying it out. The dispute is over execution and trust, not direction.

Doha, for its part, answered the speech too, calling Netanyahu's accusation an attempt to divert attention. A Qatari rebuttal is unlikely to hurt anyone at the Israeli ballot box. If anything, it helps both men who are competing to sound toughest on Qatar.

The quieter camps

At the time of writing, I have not found an on-record response to the speech from the other major opposition leaders, or a substantive statement of praise from coalition ministers carried by more than one outlet. That silence may itself be a campaign choice. Five weeks from election day, the leading challengers appear to have decided that fighting Netanyahu on the UN stage means fighting on his terrain, and they are keeping their fire for ground closer to home.

The coalition, for its part, has less need to amplify a speech that every channel already carried live. The prime minister's own voice is the campaign's loudest asset, and on Thursday night it had the whole prime-time grid to itself.

The same week, a different room

While the speech was being drafted and delivered, the Central Elections Committee was doing the less glamorous work that decides who can answer it at the ballot box.

On Wednesday, as I set out in "Two Lists, Two Candidates," the committee recorded four separate decisions: two lists barred list-wide, and two candidates barred as individuals. Those are four records, not one story, and they should stay that way.

On Thursday the committee turned to petitions from the other direction. It rejected the request by the Democrats and the Zulat Institute to disqualify Otzma Yehudit, by 19 votes to 10 with one abstention. According to the Jerusalem Post and Israel National News, it also rejected a bid to disqualify Religious Zionism–Zehut and, in the last vote of the day, Otzma Yehudit's own request to disqualify the Democrats. The Attorney General's representative told the plenum that some Otzma statements were troubling but did not add up to grounds for barring the whole list.

That is the committee record as it stands this week. It is not a verdict on anyone's worldview. It is a statement of who is, for now, on the paper.

The two stories meet here. A prime minister's speech abroad can shape the mood in which people vote. It cannot change who is on the ballot, and it cannot move a seat on its own. My Thursday essay on the four-seat hinge in the current polling argued that neither bloc reaches 61 without partners it has spent the campaign rejecting. Reuters on Thursday described Netanyahu's bloc as trailing in the polls. A forty-minute speech in New York does not alter that arithmetic. It can only try to move the margins on which the arithmetic turns.

What a republic owes its campaign

Covenantal republicanism begins with a simple point: legitimacy in a Jewish and democratic state flows up from the people through lawful institutions, and it answers to G-d, not to the applause or the absence of a foreign hall.

That cuts in several directions this week.

It means a speech to the nations is fair material for a campaign, but it is not a mandate. The mandate is given in October, by citizens, on ballots printed according to the law.

It means the committee record deserves to be read as a record: named decisions, named votes, kept distinct, without either celebration or panic. A republic that cannot keep four decisions and a day of rejected petitions straight will not keep its temper on election night.

And it means the Qatar argument between Netanyahu and Bennett should be conducted as a policy argument, with evidence and a plan, not only as a contest over who said “enemy” louder. If Qatar should be designated an enemy state, the case should be made in the Knesset and the cabinet, where designations are actually made. If it should not, voters deserve to hear why. Either way, the podium in New York was never going to settle it.

Before the holiday

Tonight Israel goes into the sukkah, and the campaign pauses, if only for a Shabbat and a festival day. The huts are temporary on purpose. So is every government, and so is every speech.

Netanyahu closed with *Netzach Yisrael lo yeshaker*, the Eternal One of Israel does not lie. That is a promise about G-d, not about any list. The republic’s job in the next five weeks is humbler: print honest ballots, count them honestly, and let the people decide who governs under the sky we all see through the *schach*.

Chag sameach.

Sources: Reuters and AFP reporting on the address and the campaign context (24 Sep 2026); i24NEWS on Naftali Bennett’s post-speech statement (24–25 Sep 2026); Israel National News and World Israel News on Bennett’s pre-speech challenge (24 Sep 2026); Qatar foreign ministry spokesman’s statement as reported by Reuters and ANI (25 Sep 2026); Central Elections Committee decisions of 23–24 Sep 2026 as reported by the Jerusalem Post, Israel National News and Channel 14; the author’s essays of 24 Sep 2026, “Two Lists, Two Candidates” and the companion piece on the four-seat hinge.

All glory to the Ribono shel Olam. Errors are mine.

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