

The Sukkah and the Ballot: Temporary Architecture, Commanded Joy, and the Moral Quality of Choice Thirty Days Before the 26th Knesset

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 28 September 2026

16 Tishrei 5787 / 27 September 2026 — Chol HaMoed Sukkot

The Sukkah and the Ballot: Temporary Architecture, Commanded Joy, and the Moral Quality of Choice Thirty Days Before the 26th Knesset

16 Tishrei 5787 / 27 September 2026 — Chol HaMoed Sukkot

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · Jerusalem | Pittsburgh Roots

I. The Present Hour

On 27 October 2026, Israel will elect the 26th Knesset. The date is the statutory terminus of a four-year term that the 25th Knesset completed without early dissolution, making this the first Knesset election held on its statutory date since 1988. The Knesset dissolved on 17 July. Party lists closed on 8–9 September. Surplus-vote agreements among the principal opposition lists, between the Joint List and Ra’am, and between Likud and the Religious Zionism–Zehut slate have been filed; the statutory deadline for remaining pairings is 16 October. Embassy voting begins 20 October. Official results are scheduled for confirmation on 4 November.

That calendar is already a civic fact. After the five consecutive snap elections of 2018–2022, after October 7 and the wars that followed, after the coalition crises over conscription and the legislative blitz that preceded dissolution, the polity has arrived at a scheduled contest. The institutions held the clock. The question now is whether the people will guard the quality of the choice.

This essay is confined to that cyclical layer. The standing foundations—sovereignty under higher law, the Jewish state’s particularist national responsibility, the republican demand of non-domination, the Torah’s insistence that power is limited and that a people is judged by the moral condition of its common life—are presupposed, not re-argued. What is at issue here is the present campaign in Chol HaMoed Sukkot, thirty days from the vote: the asymmetry of intended turnout, the arithmetic of blocs hovering near 61, the Central Elections Committee’s disqualification votes of 23–24 September, the opposition’s 26 September declaration of a “government of repair,” the integrity of lists and registries, the temptation of demobilization, and what this cycle discloses about civic virtue right now.

The season supplies the interpretive key. We sit in the sukkah: a dwelling that is commanded, temporary, and open to the sky. The festival does not abolish walls. It teaches that the walls we trust most are not the ones that pretend to be permanent. The ballot of 27 October will not build

a Temple. It will decide the temporary architecture of power under which a people already bound by covenant must live, deter, bury its dead, and raise its children. A sukkah that leaks is still a sukkah. A coalition that pretends to be a house of stone is already a theological error.

The Torah reading of the festival days returns Israel to the calendar of appointed times and to the offerings of the seven days (Leviticus 23; Numbers 29). The Diaspora second-day haftarah, I Kings 8:2–21, is Solomon assembling the people at the feast in the month of Ethanim and dedicating the House. In the Land, Zechariah 14 is read on the first day: the nations will go up year by year to bow before the King and to keep the festival of booths. Neither text is a campaign pamphlet. Both refuse two opposite simplifications that now infest the cycle. The first is that national life is only a fortress. The second is that national life is only a procedure. Sukkot insists that joy is commanded in vulnerability, that assembly is a political-theological act, and that the structures of power are judged by whether they shelter a people without claiming to replace Heaven.

II. What the Cycle Looks Like on 27 September 2026

Institutional facts

The outgoing legislature served its full term. That fact matters more than campaign rhetoric admits. Israeli politics had trained a generation to treat elections as emergency valves rather than as regular, bounded transfers of power. Completing the term does not confer moral credit on any party. It does confer evidence that the Basic Law clock can still constrain ambition. Limited power is not a slogan. It is a timetable that held.

The Central Elections Committee received the lists. No eleventh-hour mega-merger rewrote the map. Religious Zionism ran with Zehut. The reservists-and-economy slate of Yoaz Hendel and Yaron Zelekha entered as a distinct vehicle. Ofer Winter's Amcha Yisrael entered as a national-camp list. Blue and White submitted despite polling under or near the electoral floor. The process was crowded, last-minute, and recognizably Israeli. It was also, so far as the public record of filing shows, procedurally intact at the moment of deposit.

An institutional pressure point opened in mid-September and matured this week. The Democrats petitioned to bar Otzma Yehudit. Otzma Yehudit and Likud petitioned to bar Ra'am and the Joint List. On 23 September the Committee voted, by a reported 18–5, to disqualify both Ra'am and the Joint List as lists. It also voted to bar MK Ofer Cassif as an individual candidate. On 24 September the Committee declined to bar Otzma Yehudit. Those are the Committee's recorded acts, and this essay goes no further than the record.

This is the cycle's sharpest test of institutional integrity. A republican people may police lists that genuinely negate the state's existence or support armed struggle against it. It may not treat disqualification as a substitute for persuasion, nor as a turnout tactic aimed at an entire civic sector. The Committee is a body made up largely of party representatives, and its votes this week have put a hard question to the whole polity: whether the field of 27 October remains a contest among citizens or becomes a preliminary siege over who is permitted to stand.

Surplus architecture

On 10 September the four principal Zionist opposition lists completed a map of surplus-vote agreements: Yashar with the Democrats; Together / B'Yachad (Bennett–Lapid) with Yisrael Beiteinu. On 12 September the Joint List and Ra'am signed their own surplus pact. Likud signed with the Religious Zionism–Zehut slate. These agreements do not merge lists. They pool remainder votes under the Bader–Ofer method so that a bloc wastes fewer seats. They are the opposite of the mergers the nationalist camp has urged upon small right-wing lists hovering near the 3.25 percent electoral floor.

The distinction matters. A merger is a confession that fragmentation is lethal. A surplus pact is an admission that seats at the margin decide governments. Both are adult responses to arithmetic. The remaining gaps—Amcha Yisrael and the Reservists–Economic list still incompletely mapped; Otzma Yehudit's pairing still politically contested in some reports—are not theological disagreements. They are decisions about whether purity is worth donated seats. The surplus deadline of 16 October is therefore not clerical. It is the last lawful hour in which camps can choose not to burn their own votes.

Bloc arithmetic as of late September

Polling is not prophecy. It is a map of intention, and intention is not turnout. With that caveat, the picture on 27 September is consistent enough to be usable and unstable enough to forbid fatalism.

Public trackers and the major channels differ in detail, and Channel 14 remains the consistent outlier toward the outgoing coalition. Across most series, though, the two lead lists run close to one another, neither bloc shows a stable majority, and the gaps between pollsters are wider than the gap between the lead lists.

The governing architecture of the 37th government is repeatedly projected short of 61. The Zionist opposition is repeatedly projected in the low-to-mid fifties, touching 61 only if small nonaligned lists join it, if wastage below the floor on the right is severe, or if Arab lists are treated as available support rather than as quarantine. The difference between a deadlock and a government is four seats, the electoral floor, the final field of lists, and who actually appears at the polling station.

On 26 September, at Yair Lapid's home in Tel Aviv, Gadi Eisenkot, Naftali Bennett, Lapid, Avigdor Liberman, and Yair Golan signed a declaration that they would not attack one another, that they would work to raise turnout and “safeguard the integrity of the election,” and that they would form working groups on a future government's guidelines—including a state commission of inquiry into October 7 and the drafting of a constitution. They named no candidate for prime minister. They described the government they seek as “Zionist” and “statesmanlike,” a “government of repair.” Prime Minister Netanyahu answered by treating the meeting as proof of an illegitimate front and by circulating an image that inserted Arab-list leaders into the room. Both gestures are present-cycle data. One camp is trying to convert fragmentation into a temporary architecture of cooperation without settling the succession question. The other is trying to convert that cooperation into a charge of contamination. Neither gesture substitutes for votes.

Turnout as the hidden variable

Eligible voters have grown, and estimates of the late-October roll differ by definition until the final registry settles them. Either way it is a historically large roll.

The 3.25 percent electoral floor rises in raw votes as turnout rises. Small parties are not merely competing for identity. They are competing against arithmetic that punishes fragmentation more harshly as participation rises. Several smaller lists have spent September near that line. Votes burned below 3.25 percent do not merely disappoint a faction. In a contest decided near 61, they reallocate the majority.

Intention to vote is not uniform. Surveys through the summer and into September have repeatedly shown opposition-aligned respondents more certain they will vote than coalition-aligned respondents in several series. Arab-list identifiers vary widely by poll and by whether a unified list is perceived as real—and now, by whether those lists will appear on the ballot at all. Stated intention is not a ballot. In a contest decided by a handful of seats and by wasted votes below the electoral floor, differential turnout is not a footnote. It is the election inside the election.

The opposition's new working group on turnout is therefore not a public-relations garnish. It is an admission that the cycle will be decided by who treats the ballot as a duty and who treats it as optional. The coalition's answer will be mobilization of its denser, more disciplined publics—Haredi neighborhoods, settlement bastions, Likud machines—and a wager that the other side's enthusiasm is softer than its polls. Both wagers can be true. Only one will be counted.

III. Torah and Republican Criteria for This Cycle

Free will, not fatalism

Sukkot is a festival of commanded joy, not of resignation. “You shall rejoice in your festival” (Deuteronomy 16:14) is an imperative issued to a people that has just stood in judgment. Rambam, in the Laws of Repentance, grounds human accountability in the reality of choice: were a person compelled, command and punishment would be meaningless. A national election is not a mitzvah in the technical sense. It is a public occasion on which a people either exercises or surrenders the capacity that Torah treats as the condition of moral life.

Fatalism in this cycle takes several disguises. One is the claim that “the blocs are locked.” They are not locked. They are close, and closeness is precisely where agency concentrates. Another is the claim that “my vote is wasted if my preferred small party dies below the electoral floor.” That claim can be descriptively true and still be a refusal of the prior duty to weigh consequence. Another is quietism dressed as sophistication: the wars will decide, the Americans will decide, the street will decide. Each of those forces exists. None of them abolishes the citizen's act on 27 October.

The sukkah intensifies the point. One dwells for seven days in a structure that cannot pretend to be a fortress. The command is not to deny danger. It is to refuse the theology that only concrete is real. An election held four weeks after the festival is a civic analogue: the books of politics are not closed in late September. They are open until the last voter in line is counted.

Limited power under higher law

Republican non-domination is the political translation of a Torah axiom: no human office is owner of the people. Completing a full term is one expression of limited power. So is the electoral floor, which, for all its frustrations, is a rule announced in advance rather than a prize distributed after the count. So is the Central Elections Committee's ordinary work of receiving lists and policing symbols and names.

The threats to limited power in this cycle are specific. A last-session legislative blitz whose effects are timed to arrive after the vote raises the question whether caretaker and late-term power is being used as residual domination whose harvest is collected after the vote. Campaign language that treats the opposing bloc as illegitimate rather than mistaken raises the question whether rotation in office is still accepted as a republican good. Mutual disqualification petitions raise the question whether the field itself is being narrowed by lawfare. Attempts to keep marginal voters off the roll by administrative category raise the question whether the people entitled to stand hayom are being quietly redefined.

None of these is unique to one camp. All of them are present-cycle tests of whether the contest remains a contest or becomes a siege.

Solomon's dedication in I Kings 8 is the right cautionary text for a people that has just watched a full-term government close its books with a legislative rush. The king assembles Israel and immediately confesses that the House cannot contain G-d. "But will G-d indeed dwell on the earth? Lo, the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house that I have built" (I Kings 8:27). A coalition that behaves as if it owns the clock after the clock has run is making the opposite confession. It is treating the house as if it contained the Owner.

The quality of the people

The prophets do not grade governments only by borders and treasuries. They grade the people by justice, by the treatment of the vulnerable, by truth in the gates, and by whether the nation still knows itself as bound. Rambam's political chapters in the Mishneh Torah assume that kingship—and by extension any executive—exists to establish law and to fight the wars of the L-rd, not to become an end. Civic virtue, in the republican idiom, is the disposition that makes self-government possible: a willingness to share burdens, to tell the truth about tradeoffs, to lose an election without seceding from the polity, and to win one without treating opponents as conquered subjects.

This cycle's civic-virtue questions are concrete.

Will reservists, the displaced, the bereaved, and the young first-time voters treat the ballot as a continuation of responsibility or as a luxury they can no longer afford?

Will Haredi politics speak only the language of exemption and subsidy, or also the language of shared fate after years in which the rest of the people carried the war?

Will the national camp treat fragmentation below the floor as a theological right rather than as a practical threat to the very majority it claims to defend?

Will the opposition treat "anyone but" as a sufficient theory of government, or will it specify the limits of the coalition it would actually form—including whether it will govern with, beside, or against Arab lists, and whom it will name to stand before the President?

Will Arab lists be addressed as citizens inside the covenant of civic law, or only as arithmetic to be used or quarantined?

Will the parties now asking institutions to eject one another accept an adverse result without pre-delegitimizing the count?

The four species of Sukkot are the old midrashic answer to the last of these questions. The lulav, etrog, hadas, and aravah are bound together though they differ in taste and fragrance. The midrash in Vayikra Rabbah does not pretend that the four are interchangeable. It insists that the festival is incomplete if one is discarded. A campaign that can only win by making a sector disappear from the ballot is not practicing that discipline. A campaign that can only win by pretending that every list is equally fit for cabinet is not practicing it either. The republican translation is narrower and harder: every citizen entitled to stand must be able to stand; not every list is entitled to govern; the distinction must be made by argument and coalition, not by a preliminary purge.

Particularist national responsibility

A covenantal people does not vote as a random aggregate of consumers. It votes as a nation that must still raise children, bury its dead, deter its enemies, and remain a refuge. That particularism is not a license for contempt toward non-Jewish citizens, whose civic standing is a test of the republic's justice. It is a refusal of the fantasy that Israel can be governed as if it were a post-national administrative district. Campaigns that dissolve the Jewish majority's responsibility into generic progressive or generic strongman templates both fail this test. The 2026 cycle will be judged, in part, by whether the major lists can speak the language of a responsible nation rather than the language of a tribe bargaining over spoils.

Zechariah 14, read on the first day of the festival, is easily misused. It is not a brief for contempt toward the nations, nor a brief for dissolving the people among them. It is a vision in which Jerusalem remains Jerusalem, and in which the festival of booths becomes the measure of whether the nations acknowledge the King. A Jewish republic that cannot keep its own festival of accountability—its scheduled election, its lawful count, its willingness to lose and remain a people—has no standing to lecture the world about booths.

IV. Competing Approaches to the Present Cycle

Several theories now organize the campaign. Each captures something. Each fails the covenantal-republican standard where it treats the people as an instrument.

Pure power realism argues that only seats, vetoes, and foreign patrons matter. It is not false about arithmetic. It is false about the conditions under which arithmetic remains legitimate. A majority assembled by burning the field, by demobilizing a sector, or by treating the count as optional the moment it disappoints, is a majority that has already spent its authority. Realism without civic virtue is only a timetable for the next crisis.

Procedural liberalism argues that if the forms are observed—lists filed, ballots printed, results certified—the cycle has done its work. Forms matter. They are not enough. A procedure that is formally clean and substantively emptied of shared burden, of truth about October 7, of honesty

about conscription, and of clarity about who may govern with whom, is a procedure that will certify a government the people does not trust. Liberalism without particularist responsibility is a booth with no people in it.

Identity mobilization treats each camp as a fortress of grievance. It is effective at turnout in the short run. It is lethal to the possibility of rotation. A people that can be summoned only as a tribe cannot later be asked to share a state. The Haredi growth rate, the settler intensity, the reservist rage, the Arab sector's sense of siege after the Committee votes—each of these can be organized as identity. None of them, organized only as identity, can carry a Jewish republic through the next war or the next budget.

Quietism argues that the serious work is elsewhere: learning, family, local hesed, waiting for a larger redemption. Those goods are real. They do not cancel the public act. The sukkah is not a monastery. It is a temporary public dwelling. A citizen who can build a booth and will not walk to a polling station has misunderstood which vulnerability the festival is training.

Maximalist turnout theory argues that more votes are always better, regardless of their quality or their waste. High participation is a republican good. Uninformed, coerced, or purely vengeful participation is not automatically a virtue. The standard is not volume. It is the moral quality of collective choice: whether the people appears, knowing what it is choosing, and willing to live with the result.

Minimalist turnout theory argues that only the “right” voters should be encouraged, and that suppressing or shaming the others is strategy. This is the theology of the sealed books. It is incompatible with free will, with non-domination, and with the festival's command to gather the stranger, the orphan, and the widow inside the joy (Deuteronomy 16:14). A camp that needs the other side to stay home has already confessed that it cannot persuade.

“Anyone but” coalition theory argues that the only program required is negation of the incumbent. Negation can win a campaign. It cannot govern a state that must still fight, draft, house, and heal. The 26 September declaration is an improvement on pure negation insofar as it names repair, inquiry, and a constitution. It remains incomplete until it names a candidate, a red line on partners, and a theory of burden-sharing that includes those who did not sit in Lapid's living room.

Purity-over-floor theory, concentrated on the right this cycle, argues that a small list's distinct banner is worth the risk of disappearance. Distinct banners can be honorable. In a system with a 3.25 percent floor and a majority line at 61, honor that donates the government to one's opponents is not honor. It is vanity with a letterhead.

The covenantal-republican standard cuts across these theories. It asks four questions of the present cycle and of every actor in it. Does this move enlarge or shrink the field of lawful choice? Does it treat power as temporary architecture or as possession? Does it tell the truth about burdens—war, draft, October 7, the cost of living, the quality of the civil service—or only the truth that mobilizes a base? Does it leave a people that can still lose an election and remain one people?

V. What This Hour Reveals

Thirty days remain. The sukkah will come down. The ballots will not.

Three structural facts now dominate the cyclical layer.

First, the contest is close enough that turnout, wasted votes below the floor, and the final shape of the ballot after this week's disqualification votes are not decorations on the campaign. They are the campaign. A people that discusses only personalities while those three mechanisms decide the majority is a people talking past its own institutions.

Second, both camps are building temporary architecture in public. Surplus pacts, a no-attack pledge, working groups on inquiry and constitution, last-session statutes timed to outlive the vote: these are all sukkot. Some are built to shelter a people. Some are built to outlast a verdict. The distinction is moral, not technical.

Third, civic virtue is being tested in the register that Torah actually uses: not enthusiasm, but responsibility. The reservist who is tired, the Haredi voter who is being told that the state is only a threat to the yeshiva, the Arab citizen who is being told that the Committee has already decided he has no list, the Likud voter who is being told that an opposition meeting is treason, the opposition voter who is being told that naming a prime minister is premature—each is being asked to substitute a story for an act. The act is still available. It is dated. It is local. It requires standing in line.

Sukkot does not promise that the booth will keep out rain. It promises that a people can dwell for a set time under an incomplete roof and still be commanded to rejoice. The 26th Knesset will be such a roof. It will not be a Temple. The question of this cycle is whether Israel still knows the difference—and whether it still knows that the difference is not an excuse to stay home.

The standing foundation remains what it was: a Jewish state under higher law, obliged to non-domination, judged by the quality of its people, responsible for its particular life among the nations. The present-cycle question is narrower and more urgent. Will this people, in this month, treat the ballot as a covenantal act of free will, or as a ritual some other camp should perform?

Heaven and earth remain the witnesses Moses summoned in Ha'azinu. The sukkah is the dwelling in which that testimony is practiced for seven days. The polling station is the dwelling in which it is practiced on the twenty-seventh of October. Neither is optional for a people that still claims to be free.

All glory to the Ribono shel Olam · Errors are mine

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI