

Election day for a First-time voter in Israel \ By Steven Goldberg

I became an Israeli citizen on April 30, 2014. I did so not because I am ready to live in Israel full time, although that is something I want and believe will happen some day. I became an Israeli citizen because I wanted to have a stake in the Jewish state, and because I believe all Jews belong in Israel if they can possibly manage it.

One of the immediate benefits of being a citizen was the right to vote, so as soon as I learned that the election was scheduled for March 17, 2015, I booked my flight. I arranged my work schedule so that I had no court appearances, depositions or major meetings during my trip. This was no easy task, as judges, opposing lawyers and clients were not particularly concerned with my desire to vote in my first election as an Israeli citizen. Nevertheless, I managed to leave Los Angeles and arrived in Israel several days before the election.

I woke up early on Tuesday, March 17. As a 61 year-old, I've voted many times in my life, but never with the sense of excitement I felt that morning. I badgered the friends who were kind enough to host me in their home in Kibbutz Maale HaHamisha, where I am registered to vote, to go to the voting place right away. We took a quick ride in the car and walked in the building where the voting was taking place.

I walked up to the volunteers who manned the voting station and noted that, just as in the United States, they were all senior citizens. I showed them my Israeli identity card, they checked my name on a list, and sent me to the voting booth. I faced an array of little boxes containing slips of paper, each representing a political party that was offering candidates for the Knesset. For those who don't already know, one doesn't vote for an individual for Prime Minister or any other particular position, but instead votes for a party. The parties are allocated seats in the Knesset based on the percentage of votes they receive.

I scanned the array of boxes, located the one that contained slips of paper indicating the Likud, and picked up one slip. I put the single Likud slip in the envelope I was given, sealed the envelope and placed in the ballot box on a table in the middle of the room. I felt a rush of emotion as I did so. I had exercised my right as an Israeli citizen.

During the rest of the day, I was able to concentrate on little but the election. Every election seems important at the time, whether in Israel or the United States, but this one was especially fateful. The stakes were enormous. The alternative to Likud was the misleadingly named Zionist Camp, led by Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni, both of whom appeared to me, and to many others, as woefully unsuited to lead Israel at this perilous time. Herzog and Livni expressed eagerness to acquiesce in the demands of President Obama, the most hostile President of the United States in the history of the existence of Israel. Such capitulation spelled compromising Israel's security to a potential nuclear break-out by Iran and to the creation of a terrorist Palestinian state. This election was not merely about competing values, or what policies Israel should adopt. Israel's very survival was at stake.

The pre-election polls were ominous. They showed Likud trailing the Zionist Camp, with a trend indicating a Likud in rapid decline. The media was relentless in attacking Prime Minister Netanyahu viciously, including personal attacks on his wife.

Because of my participation with American Friends of Likud, its Executive Director, Adam Fishman, arranged for the two of us to be admitted to the election night festivities at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds. I arrived about 8:00 P.M. and waited for the polls to close. The mood among the crowd of Likud faithful was tense and pessimistic.

Shortly before the polls closed, Adam and I were allowed into the front section of the room, right in front of the stage, again a benefit of being in American Friends of Likud. At 10:00 P.M sharp, suddenly the enormous television screens in the front of the room showed the results of the exit polls. They showed Likud and the Zionist Camp each with 27 mandates. This was a big surprise, and a positive one. Likud had more natural allies among the smaller parties and would have an easier time forming a coalition government if given the first chance to do so. The fear was that, if it fell too far behind the Zionist Camp, it would be Herzog and Livni who would have first crack at forming the government, and there was more than a small chance they would succeed. At 27 to 27, however, the Likud looked more likely to win.

Even better, however, was when the actual results started coming in. It became clear that the Likud was actually in the lead, although the size of the victory was not to be known for hours. Upon receipt of the reports that the Likud was in first place, the mood of the room transformed, as if a power switch had been pulled. Gloom turned to celebration. The crowd was singing, dancing and chanting. Strangers were hugging me.

After a few hours of celebrating, the Prime Minister entered the room. The ovation he received was overwhelming. I was close enough to see the satisfaction in the Prime Minister's face. After waiting several minutes for the crowd to calm down, Prime Minister Netanyahu gave a rousing speech, which was frequently interrupted by chants of "Bibi, Bibi, Bibi," and "Bibi is a magician," and "Bibi, King of Israel." The speech was in Hebrew, but even I was able to get the gist of it, especially with the help of Adam Fishman.

The Prime Minister left the room, escorted by substantial security. The room emptied out, and I left the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds about 2:00 A.M. I was back in my friend's home in Maale HaHamisha at about 3:30, exhausted but exhilarated.

This trip was not inexpensive, as flights from and to Los Angeles are costly. It was a nuisance to leave work and manage my cases from Israel. Most of my friends thought I was nuts to go through the trouble just to cast one vote. To me, however, it was worth everything. I now had a sense of what it was like to win a Super Bowl with a last minute touchdown, or a World Series with a walk-off home run. I know what it must have felt like when, despite being written off as a sure loser, Truman defeated Dewey in 1948. The Prime Minister had run a brilliant campaign and won reelection against all odds, with millions of dollars in foreign funds and the vast majority of the media working against him. To have had the opportunity to vote for him was a privilege, and to be at campaign headquarters to celebrate made the day extraordinary.

Thank you to the American Friends of Likud and Adam Fishman for making this happen.
Am Israel Chai!

Steven Goldberg is a member of the President's Club member of AFL, the Executive Board of World Likud, the Extended Executive of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), the International Board of Governors of Ariel University, and former National Vice Chair of the ZOA. I am a partner in the litigation department of the national law firm of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, and a graduate of Harvard University with a B.S. in Mathematics in 1975, and of New York University Law School in 1978.