

Social protestors: Do we share a vision for Israel's future?

Saturday 20 August 2011, by [SCHEINDLIN Dahlia](#) (Date first published: 8 August 2011).

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300,000 is a dizzying number. It was thrilling to see so many citizens on the streets suffused with hope. But I still grapple with uncertainty amid all the excitement, unsure of what connects me to them to make an 'us.' Beyond some increasingly specific policy demands, in the big scheme, are we hoping for the same things?

Pressed between a quarter-million bodies in Tel Aviv on Saturday night, awash in euphoria and humidity, I searched hard for points of convergence, and confronted my fears about future divisions. Here are the ones I identified:

Convergence

The protests are pan-Israeli, and this is consensus, period. It is by now totally absurd to paint the organizers as fringe radicals. Still, delusional isolated voices try: Dr. Haim Misgav, a lecturer of law at a college, wrote in *Ynet* that the demonstrators are left-wing anarchists bordering on Stalinists (huh?). "They came straight from demonstrating against the separation fence," he writes. I'm sure dozens of regulars from Anarchists Against the Wall will be thrilled to learn that 300,000 are suddenly part of their ranks. The leadership too, continues desperately trying to delegitimize the protests, for example, by accusing the media of inflating the numbers. With apologies to Bosie, what a funny little leadership this is.

In fact, Saturday night proved that the protests have gone totally mainstream, evidenced by the large band of tan-uniformed Scouts, and blue-shirted "Working and Studying Youth," a longtime youth movement affiliated with Labor Zionism and the Nahal stream of army service. Yes, they are left-leaning, but you can't get any more "mamlahiti" - nostalgic symbols of devotion to the state - than that. As one speaker thundered, this is "salt of the earth."

Consensus issues: The demonstration kicked off by conjuring one of most emotional, unifying symbols among Israelis - the Jews, at least: Gilad Shalit. The very first speaker, Student Union leader Itzik Shmuli, pleaded for his release; the crowd roared, waving huge signs for Gilad. It occurred to me that Gilad Shalit is becoming Netanyahu's Vietnam. It didn't start on his watch, but public pressure to free the hostage soldier will haunt Netanyahu no matter what issues he faces. About two years ago, my surveys have showed people divided over what to do, with a plurality who preferred to free Shalit even at a high cost. If I had to guess now, the vast majority just want him home.

What else unites Israelis? There is a stark and fascinating contrast to America's tremendous economic drama. Last week American society was rent asunder by fundamentally different worldviews that permanently underlie the American political landscape [1]: champions of a minimal government, free, private market and a balanced budget versus passionate supporters of basic social services and safety nets for citizens guaranteed by the state - inevitably bolstered by its richest citizens. No one could claim victory; the discourse was so acrimonious, that commentators compared the ideological divisions to those surrounding the Civil War [2].

Yet in fractious Israel, the signs and chants unrelentingly and uniformly demanded a return of the welfare state (and a New Deal too); the J14 movement accurately reflects a sweeping (perhaps too sweeping) romanticizing and embrace of the state-support-for-all approach.

Tel Aviv University professor Michal Shamir, an expert on public opinion, wrote in *Haaretz* last week:

"In the 2009 Israeli election survey, we repeated a question..."When it comes to economic life in Israel, do you favor the socialist approach or the capitalist approach?"... 32 percent chose capitalism and 68 percent supported the socialist approach..."

"The 2009 survey also found that 74 percent of respondents thought "the government should be responsible for ensuring that everyone has a job and a reasonable standard of living"; only 9 percent thought that "the government shouldn't intervene and everyone should look out for himself."

I'd venture that there are dangers to this full-out embrace of the notion that the state owes us everything. Greater personal responsibility of citizens would also be a vital contribution to Israel's future. I see too many Israelis forsaking personal responsibility already - in daily life, in consumer services ("sorry ma'am, can't help you - it's not my responsibility" is a refrain we hear roughly every few seconds), through to moral and political responsibility. Responsibility doesn't just mean joining the wave of a mass movement, it means being genuinely self-critical and changing ourselves if needed, if we expect the state to change for us.

Divisions

I am still troubled by the uncertainty of whether there is any deeper, new found solidarity beyond the communal demand for government support, and high-flying rhetoric of kumbaya. I was cheered by many speeches of brotherhood at the demonstration, including one by Rabbi Benny Lau. But when Arab writer Uda Basharat spoke on the same themes, the crowd was notably more muted, and I saw at least one demonstrator scuffling with security in anger.

I still fear that the roars and thrills of 300,000 people will become a distraction from tackling tougher issues that truly divide us. Shai Golden expressed this same concern eloquently in *Maariv* on Sunday [3], asking how many of the protesters would sign up for the critical passages in Israel's Declaration of Independence guaranteeing the development of all parts of the country for all citizens on the basis of freedom, justice and peace, complete social and political rights for all citizens, and inviting the Arabs to enjoy full participation and representation in the state. I can answer: in a survey I conducted just over one year ago, only 54% of 16-29 year-old Israeli-born Jews approved of these very passages; and 45% of Russian speaking immigrants; 80% of Arabs of the same ages agree [4]. Golden writes:

"How many [of the protesters] are prepared to stop and define more precisely what kind of justice we need in Israel? Can one demand social just without calling for full equality of rights for one

million Arab-Israelis, for example? Can our throats utter the cry 'the people demand social justice,' when the middle class itself is divided and fragmented on core issues of Israeli society – such as the status of minorities, the status of women and the inter-ethnic tension? When it's clear that this collective is stuck together with pins for the last few weeks and is not unified over any fundamental issue except for the economic burden...?"

"The protest could be an opportunity for many Israelis to look inside themselves and define Israeli identity afresh; to understand what values are important to them as individuals, and from there, to seek the common ground and the binding glue for new Israeli men and women."

Golden writes that until Israelis agree what defines them as a people, they won't be able to articulate real demands from the government. I would qualify this: not all Israelis have to agree – but the protestors need to articulate a worldview that defines them – and everyone who agrees will join.

Here is my concern: as an isolated demand, the cry for "social justice," isn't very meaningful. It is a post-modern vessel, empty and open for any individual to fill it up with different content.

But if "social justice," is a true symbol, one that stands for a whole set of values and even a minimally coherent worldview – let's say, modern social-democracy with a liberal/progressive agenda grounded in human rights and equality – then it stands a chance of overthrowing the current free-market individualism (mixed with passive victimization) – the coherent and powerful worldview the protestors despise.

Now that would be a revolution.

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P.S.

* August 8 2011|:

<http://972mag.com/author/dahlias/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://myaccount.nytimes.com/auth/login?URI=http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/03/us/politics/03fiscal.html&OQ=Q5fQ72Q3dQ31Q26Q73Q63Q70Q3dQ31Q26Q73Q71Q3dQ75Q73Q25Q32Q30Q64Q65Q62Q74Q25Q32Q30Q63Q65Q69Q6cQ69Q6eQ67Q25Q32Q30Q73Q65Q6eQ61Q74Q65Q25Q32Q30Q76Q6fQ74Q65Q26Q73Q74Q3dQ63Q73Q65>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/03/us/politics/03fiscal.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=us%20debt%20ceiling%20senate%20vote&st=cse

[3] <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/267/928.html?hp=1&cat=479>

[4] <http://kulanana.org.il/h/?p=1408&lang=en>