Episode Book

EPISODE #6064

Israel Votes, Part 1: Who Is Actually Running

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SYNOPSIS

Israel votes on October 27, 2026 — the first scheduled election since 1988 — and the ballot looks nothing like the last one. Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar has swallowed much of Blue and White, Bennett and Lapid have merged into Beyachad, Labor and Meretz are now one list called The Democrats, and a small party called The Reservists is refusing to pick a bloc. This episode maps the players, the mergers, the disqualification fights, the surplus agreements, and the 3.25% threshold that decides which votes simply evaporate. Policies come next episode; this one is just the seating chart.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Thirty-eight lists on the ballot, ten days to go, and Daniel would like someone to tell him who is actually running.



Herman

Which is fair, because half the names on that ballot did not exist eighteen months ago.



Corn

He's calling it confusing, and he's asked for this as the first of three. Today is just the map. Who the players are, who merged with whom, who vanished, and how the arithmetic works on the night. Policies come next time, and then a third episode where we hold the whole thing up against what Daniel actually cares about and, at his request, tell him how we'd vote if we were him.



Herman

Which I am already nervous about.



Corn

That's next week's nerves. Today you just have to know who Yoaz Hendel is.



Herman

I know exactly who Yoaz Hendel is.



Corn

You're going to tell me anyway.



Herman

Later. The date first, because it explains a lot. This is the twenty-seventh of October, a Tuesday, and it is the scheduled date. The Knesset served its full four years. The Israel Democracy Institute points out that the last time Israel held an election on schedule was nineteen eighty-eight.



Corn

First on-time election in a generation, and it still managed to feel like a snap election.



Herman

There were dissolution bills in the spring, but they'd only have pulled the date forward by a few weeks, so the Knesset formally dissolved in July and everyone just ran down the clock. And the term itself was dominated by two things. The judicial overhaul fight, and then October seventh and the wars that followed. Everything on this ballot is a reaction to one or both.



Corn

Okay. Give me the shape before the names. Because I think most people, me included, picture this as a contest between parties, and it's really a contest between two piles of parties.



Herman

Blocs, yes. There's the Netanyahu bloc, which is basically the outgoing coalition. There's what you'd call the Jewish-led opposition bloc, the people who have all sworn they won't sit with Netanyahu. Then the Arab lists, which neither bloc counts as theirs. And then one small list in the middle that refuses to pick a pile.



Corn

Hendel.



Herman

Hendel. We'll get there.



Corn

Start with the opposition, because that's where the furniture got rearranged.



Herman

The headline is a man who was not leading a party a year ago now leads the polls. Gadi Eisenkot, former chief of staff, left Benny Gantz's camp and built his own list. It's called Yashar, with an exclamation mark, which means straight, or honest.



Corn

The exclamation mark is doing a lot of campaigning.



Herman

It's punctuation with a security clearance. And the list behind him is very establishment security. Number two is Yoram Cohen, a former head of the Shin Bet. Then Orit Farkash-Hacohen, Matan Kahana, Chili Tropper. Four of his top six came out of Gantz's Blue and White.



Corn

He didn't just leave Gantz, then. He took the furniture with him.



Herman

Took the furniture, the lamps, possibly the curtains. And his pitch is very simple. Anyone who held office on October seventh is unfit to lead. That's close to a direct quote.



Corn

Which is a line aimed at one man and phrased as a principle.



Herman

That's the art of it. Now, Gantz himself is still running, under the old Blue and White name, and he's polling around one percent. Below the threshold in every recent poll.



Corn

Hm. Two years ago he was the man everyone said would be the next prime minister.



Herman

He was polling in the thirties at one point after the war started. It's one of the steepest collapses I can remember in Israeli politics, and it happened partly because Eisenkot turned up offering the same product with fewer compromises attached. Gantz has actually said that if he's not over the threshold in the final week, he'll halt the campaign.



Corn

The final week is next week.



Herman

It is. So watch for that one.



Corn

Then Bennett.



Herman

Bennett, and this is the merger that confuses people most. Naftali Bennett came back with his own vehicle, and then Yair Lapid folded Yesh Atid into it. The joint list is called Beyachad, which means together. Bennett is number one, Lapid is number two, and Yesh Atid does not appear on the ballot under its own name at all.



Corn

Wait. Lapid was leader of the opposition this whole term.



Herman

He was. And he's now running as Bennett's deputy. Which, if you remember how their last government ended, is either very mature or very funny.



Corn

Why not both.



Herman

Both is my position. Yesh Atid got four of the top ten slots, so it's a real partnership, not a quiet burial. But it tells you something about where Lapid thought his own brand stood.



Corn

Bennett and Eisenkot didn't merge, though.



Herman

Bennett ruled it out. Two ex-military, centre-right-ish figures fishing in the same pond, and they decided they'd catch more as two boats. And then Bennett had a wobble earlier this month where he suggested Netanyahu might be a minister in a future government, and walked it back within hours. The line now is, we will not sit with him under any circumstances.



Corn

Any circumstances is a phrase with a short shelf life in this country.



Herman

The shelf life of a pledge is usually one coalition negotiation, yes. Then on the left you have The Democrats, Yair Golan's party, which is Labor and Meretz finally merged into one list. That's the end of two historic party names on a ballot, actually. Labor built the state, and it's now a component.



Corn

Golan's line on Netanyahu?



Herman

Shortest of anyone. We will not sit with Netanyahu and his allies. Period. He actually says the word period.



Corn

Punctuation again. Everyone in this election is very confident about punctuation.



Herman

The fourth opposition party is Avigdor Liberman, Yisrael Beytenu, who is his own category. He won't sit with Netanyahu, but he also won't sit with the Haredi parties or rely on the Arab parties, and he's ruled out any minority government. So he's in the opposition bloc but with a list of conditions that makes the bloc's arithmetic harder.



Corn

He's the guest who's coming to the party but has sent ahead a list of who else can't be there.



Herman

He's also publicly accused Eisenkot of secretly planning to govern with Netanyahu, so the bloc isn't exactly holding hands. Although, to be fair, in late September the five opposition leaders signed a document promising not to attack each other during the campaign.



Corn

How's that going?



Herman

Liberman signed it.



Corn

So, poorly.



Herman

Now the Netanyahu side, which has changed less. Likud is still Likud, Netanyahu at the top, then Eli Cohen, Amir Ohana, Yariv Levin, Miri Regev. Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope has been absorbed into Likud, so Sa'ar is on the Likud slate now.



Corn

The man who left Likud to replace Netanyahu is back inside Likud.



Herman

The prodigal son came home and was given a reserved slot.



Corn

Then the religious right.



Herman

Two lists that ran together last time and are separate now. Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionist Party, which has joined up with Moshe Feiglin's Zehut, so that's the libertarian-ish, legalise-cannabis Feiglin running alongside the settlement movement.



Corn

That is a coalition of people who would argue about everything except where the border is.



Herman

Itamar Ben-Gvir's Otzma Yehudit is running separately. There were bids to disqualify Otzma, and both the elections committee and the High Court rejected them. Then the two Haredi parties, Shas under Aryeh Deri, and United Torah Judaism. UTJ had some internal turmoil over who heads the list, and I'd hold that loosely, the reporting isn't consistent. Shas, interestingly, has been running a campaign aimed at soldiers and the Zionist right, which is not the traditional Shas pitch.



Corn

Shas courting reservists in the middle of a fight over the Haredi draft is a bold piece of marketing.



Herman

It's audacious. Whether it works is another matter. And then one new list on that side, Amcha Yisrael, led by Ofer Winter, a former general, with Yoseph Haddad and Fleur Hassan-Nahoum on it. Winter says he'll recommend Netanyahu, but he's running separately, and he's sitting right on the threshold.



Corn

Speaking of which. Explain the threshold to me like I'm going to lose sleep over it.

L

Larry

Citizens. In these uncertain times, your vote is precious. Do not let it fall below the threshold. Introducing the Threshold Lifter, a pair of orthopaedic insoles that raise any voter by three point two five percent. Was ninety-nine shekels. Now forty. Now twelve. Now free, with a complimentary surplus agreement, a second surplus agreement, a bloc, a commemorative envelope, and a minority government you can assemble at home. Offer ends at the close of polls. Offer has ended. Offer ended before I started describing it.



Herman

The threshold is not a height. It's three point two five percent of valid votes cast, and insoles have nothing to do with it.



Corn

Let it go, Herman.



Herman

Three point two five percent of valid votes. That's the threshold. In practice it means any list that gets in, gets at least about four seats. Which is why you never see a three-seat party. A list polling at three seats on paper is a list polling at zero.



Corn

So when a poll says three, it's a polite way of saying gone.



Herman

It's gone, and the votes are gone with it. They don't transfer to anyone. That's the brutal bit. If Amcha Yisrael comes in at three point one percent, that's maybe a hundred and fifty thousand votes for the right that simply evaporate, and that can decide which bloc gets to sixty-one.



Corn

That's where the surplus agreements come in?



Herman

Different mechanism. Surplus agreements are pairings, two lists agree to pool their leftover votes when the last few seats are handed out. It can be worth a seat, sometimes. But it only kicks in if both lists clear the threshold. It doesn't rescue anyone who falls under.



Corn

Who's paired with whom?



Herman

Likud with Smotrich's list. Shas with UTJ. Bennett's Beyachad with Liberman. Eisenkot with Golan's Democrats. And on the Arab side, the Joint List with Ra'am. The interesting gaps were Ben-Gvir, Winter and Hendel, who as of the last reporting I trust didn't have one. Ben-Gvir refused to sign with Winter, and Likud reportedly refused to sign with Ben-Gvir.



Corn

Even the surplus deals tell you who isn't speaking to whom.



Herman

The surplus deals are the seating chart.



Corn

The Arab lists. Because I gather there was real drama there.



Herman

Real drama. There are two. Ra'am, Mansour Abbas, the party that made history by joining the Bennett-Lapid government. And the Joint List, which is Hadash, Ta'al and Balad back together, now led by Yousef Jabareen, with Ahmad Tibi second. In September the Central Elections Committee barred both of them from running.



Corn

Both?



Herman

Both. And on the second of October a nine-justice panel of the High Court reinstated both, unanimously. The one casualty was Balad's chair, Sami Abu Shehadeh, who withdrew after the justices signalled he personally would be disqualified. Balad itself is still inside the Joint List.



Corn

Let me get this straight. The elections committee is a body made up of politicians, and it voted to disqualify their competitors, and the court said no.



Herman

That's a fair description of how it works. The committee is made up of party representatives, and the court has overturned these disqualifications of Arab lists almost every time. It's a recurring ritual now.



Corn

Neither bloc wants to count them, I assume.



Herman

Neither bloc counts them, and yet most scenarios for an opposition government need Ra'am at least to abstain or support from outside. Which runs straight into Liberman's conditions.



Corn

Okay. Now Hendel.



Herman

Now Hendel. Yoaz Hendel, former communications minister, a reservist himself, built a list called The Reservists, and merged it with Yaron Zelekha's New Economic Party. Zelekha is a former accountant general, a very loud anti-monopoly economist. And Einat Wilf left her own little party to join them.



Corn

Einat Wilf, Yoaz Hendel and Yaron Zelekha on one list. That's three people who would each like to be the smartest person in the room, in one room.



Herman

It's a crowded room. And their position is the one that makes them interesting. Hendel says he could back either Netanyahu or Eisenkot. Zelekha is demanding the Finance Ministry and universal military service as conditions.



Corn

So the kingmaker list is the one that hasn't decided whose king it's making.



Herman

That's the leverage. They're polling around four seats, right on the edge. If they get in and neither bloc has sixty-one, they become the most courted four people in the country.



Corn

Herman, where do the numbers actually sit? Not every poll. The shape.



Herman

The shape is this. Across the polls from the last week, Yashar is first, averaging about twenty-two seats. Likud is second, around twenty. Bennett's list around twelve.



Corn

Likud not being first is still strange to hear.



Herman

It's genuinely new. There's one exception, Channel Fourteen, which is the right-leaning channel, and it has Likud at twenty-nine and the Netanyahu bloc at sixty-one. Every other pollster has Yashar ahead. So either Channel Fourteen knows something nobody else does, or...



Corn

Or it's Channel Fourteen.



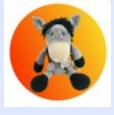
Herman

Or it's Channel Fourteen. Below that you get a crowd of lists in the high single digits. The Democrats, Liberman, Ben-Gvir, the Joint List, UTJ, Shas, all clustered around eight or nine. Smotrich around six. Ra'am around five.



Corn

And the blocs?



Herman

On the average, the Netanyahu bloc is around fifty, maybe fifty-two if Winter gets in. The opposition bloc is about fifty-one. The Arab lists around thirteen. Hendel's four in the middle. Nobody at sixty-one.



Corn

Most likely result, then, is that nobody wins and the real election starts on the twenty-eighth.



Herman

That's my read. The vote decides the opening hand. Then you get the President consulting each party on who they recommend, a mandate of twenty-eight days plus fourteen, and the government is whatever can survive a confidence vote. A minority government is legal. Eisenkot has floated one.



Corn

And Liberman has ruled one out.



Herman

Liberman has ruled out everything except Liberman.



Corn

Here's my question, though. What do you think matters more on the night? The Yashar versus Likud race for first place, or the threshold races at the bottom?



Herman

What's your guess?



Corn

My guess is the bottom. First place gets the headline, but the president doesn't have to hand the mandate to the biggest party. He hands it to whoever has the most recommendations.



Herman

I agree with you, and I'd go further. The three lists to watch at eleven at night are Winter, Hendel, and, for completeness, Gantz, because if Gantz somehow scrapes in that's four seats nobody planned for. Winter in or out could be a four-seat swing for Netanyahu. Hendel in or out decides whether there's a kingmaker at all.



Corn

So the whole thing could come down to whether a few tens of thousands of people in the middle of the country feel like voting for a general who used to run a brigade.



Herman

You could run that sentence as the caption on most Israeli elections.



Hilbert

If a list gets three point two four percent, does anyone actually count those slips, or do they go straight in a bin?



Herman

They're counted, Hilbert. Every slip is counted at the polling station. The votes just don't turn into seats.



Hilbert

Good. Because I'm doing my own count. At the school on Rehov Hapalmach, where I vote. I've arranged it with Avraham Pinto, who runs the ironmonger on Agrippas. I've been buying screws from Avraham for longer than either of us will admit. He's selling me hand tally counters. The metal ones. Chrome. I asked for thirty-eight, one per list.



Corn

You can only press one at a time.



Hilbert

I've thought about that. I've ordered a board. Avraham's nephew is drilling thirty-eight holes in a piece of plywood so they sit in rows. Alphabetical by Hebrew name, because the ballot letters were reported in a way I didn't trust. The board is going on a folding chair, outside the school, past the line where you're not allowed to campaign. I measured it. Avraham lent me the tape.



Herman

You're going to ask people as they come out?



Hilbert

No. I don't ask anybody anything. I watch their faces and I decide. Avraham says that's not a method. Avraham also told me in two thousand and nine that the light rail would never open, and he's been wrong on that every day since. Avraham's view is that the threshold should be ten percent and every party under it should have to run a shop for a year. He thinks it would teach them about margins. I've known him a long time and I wouldn't trust him with an opinion on anything that isn't a hinge.



Corn

Thirty-eight counters on a plank, outside a school, reading people's faces.



Hilbert

Thirty-nine. He threw in one for blank votes. I didn't ask for it. The board weighs four kilos. His nephew varnished it, which I also didn't ask for, and it's drying in my bathtub, so I'm washing at my sister's until Monday. She's charging me for that as well. Not money. She wants me to vote for whoever she tells me on the morning, and she won't say who until the morning. And one more thing. Herman, earlier you said the results would be out by Wednesday morning.



Herman

They will be, more or less.



Hilbert

The count will be. The official results are confirmed on the fourth of November. A week later. Nothing's final on Wednesday. I'm keeping the board up until the fourth.



Herman

He's right. The exit polls at ten, the count overnight, but certification is the fourth.



Hilbert

Avraham's charging me eleven shekels a counter. Twelve for the blank one.



Corn

The blank vote being the most expensive is the most Israeli detail in this whole episode.



Herman

It's also the one that tells you something real. In a system with thirty-eight lists, a lot of people are going to stand in that booth and not see their own politics on any slip.



Corn

If you take one thing from this, it's that the election on the twenty-seventh is really two elections. One for first place, and one at the bottom of the table for who even makes it into the room.



Herman

And the second one decides the first. Sixty-one is a sum, not a ranking.



Corn

Next time we get into what all of these people actually want to do once they're in the room, which is a much bigger conversation than who's sitting where.



Herman

And I'll bring a smaller pile of reading than I brought today.



Corn

You won't.



Herman

I won't. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping the whole thing upright.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you're finding these useful, leave us a review on Spotify, it genuinely helps people find the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.