Episode Book

EPISODE #6066

Israel Votes, Part 2: What the Parties Stand For

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SYNOPSIS

Israel's parties are asking for your vote, but many haven't written down what they'd do with it — Likud's last platform dates to around 2009. This episode reads the actual documents, the leader quotes, and the voting records to map where each list really stands. The Haredi draft has become a two-sided precondition that could block anyone from forming a government. October 7th divides the field between those demanding a state commission of inquiry and those refusing to say. The judicial overhaul is back in redrafted form, with an override clause as a coalition condition. And on the Palestinians, the sharpest line isn't between blocs — it's between almost everyone and two small parties. Plus: what the Arab lists are actually campaigning on, and why 184 killings in Arab communities in ten months barely makes national news.

TRANSCRIPT



Herman

I'll admit the thing that surprised me most this week is that Likud, the party that has run this country for most of the last two decades, hasn't published a platform since about two thousand and nine.



Corn

That's this whole episode in one fact, and we haven't started yet. Last time we did the map, who's running and how the seats add up. This time Daniel wants the substance. What each of these parties actually says it will do. And the problem, as you've just found, is that a lot of them don't say.



Herman

A lot of them don't write it down. Which isn't the same as having no positions. You can read most of these parties off their record. But it does mean that when we say a party stands for something, we have to be clear whether that's a document, a quote from the leader, or just what they did last time.



Corn

Who actually wrote something down?



Herman

Eisenkot's Yashar has a real one. A ten-point plan plus policy papers on the economy, national service, education, aliyah, pensioners. Liberman published one that the business paper Calcalist called the most detailed of the opposition platforms. Smotrich's party has a judicial plan. Feiglin's Zehut has a full libertarian manifesto, because of course it does. Ben-Gvir has a Gaza plan and not much else. Bennett and Lapid have a set of papers but no single document.



Corn

Leaving Likud, Shas, UTJ, the Joint List and Ra'am with nothing.



Herman

Nothing formal. Shas's list is chosen by its Council of Torah Sages. You don't need a manifesto when you have a council.



Corn

It's a very efficient way to run a party. You just skip the part where the voters read anything.



Herman

Let me try organising this by issue rather than going party by party, because if we go party by party we're here until the election.



Corn

Do the one that decides who can even form a government.



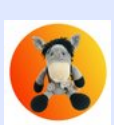
Herman

The Haredi draft. It's the hinge of the whole thing. On one side, Shas and UTJ have both said, in public, in the last few days, that they will not join or support any government until a law protecting the status of yeshiva students has passed. Not as a negotiating point. As a precondition, before ministries, before budgets. Aryeh Deri said it on the fourteenth.



Corn

Before the government even forms.



Herman

Before it forms. And on the other side, almost the entire opposition, plus Ofer Winter on the right, has made the opposite a precondition. Universal service, legislated, or they don't sit.



Corn

So two sets of parties have each made the other side's red line their entry fee.



Herman

Which is why the Haredi parties are hard for anyone to seat. Including Netanyahu. Remember, Shas walked out of this government over the draft in July of last year.



Corn

What do the opposition versions actually look like? Because universal service can mean anything from boot camp to a form you fill in.



Herman

They differ in teeth. Eisenkot's plan is called National Service for All, it covers Haredim and Arab citizens, with the army first. The press reporting adds an exemption for roughly three percent, an elite tier of yeshiva students. And for draft evaders, the loss of a list of benefits. The purchase tax discount on a first home, daycare subsidies, property tax discounts.



Corn

That's a draft policy enforced through the property tax office.



Herman

It's a draft policy enforced through your wallet, which is the only enforcement anyone thinks will work. Bennett and Lapid go further on the numbers. Mandatory Haredi enlistment, aiming at twenty thousand more soldiers, and no state money for any school that doesn't teach the core curriculum. Liberman is the same in spirit, and he's actually done it. As finance minister he cut daycare subsidies for children of full-time yeshiva students.



Corn

The right, though?



Herman

That's the more interesting split. On paper, Smotrich talks about a consent-based framework. On the record, his party shelved the draft bill in March, backed the freeze on arresting draft evaders, and six of his seven MKs voted for a Basic Law on Torah study. Feiglin, sitting on the same list, wants a militia-style universal draft.



Corn

Same list, opposite policies.



Herman

They've said themselves they'll split after the vote. It's a technical alliance. You're voting for a bus with two drivers.



Corn

What about Likud?



Herman

Here I have to be careful, because the reporting conflicts. One outlet says Likud now calls for more enlistment, another says it resists drafting yeshiva students. What I can tell you from the record is that the exemption bill was shelved in March by Netanyahu and Smotrich together, and nothing replaced it.



Corn

Herman, can I ask you something? You and I are both fairly sympathetic to the right on security. Does the draft issue sit on the left-right line at all anymore?



Herman

I don't think it does. That's what struck me. Ben-Gvir, of all people, sent a letter on the eighth blaming UTJ's leadership for the draft crisis. Winter won't sit without a draft law. Sharren Haskel quit as deputy foreign minister over the arrest freeze and started her own list. The draft has become a fight about whether you served, not about where you sit.



Corn

Second hinge. October seventh.



Herman

Clean split. Every opposition list, both Arab lists, and Hendel's Reservists support a full state commission of inquiry, the kind headed by a judge with legal powers. Bennett says he'd establish it on his government's first day. Liberman says first decision, exactly according to the existing law. The coalition parties either resist it or say nothing. The government set up its own ministerial panel instead, which Liberman calls a whitewash.



Corn

Even the Haredi parties won't say?



Herman

Shas and UTJ both declined to answer when Ynet asked. A couple of Shas MKs backed a state commission earlier, individually. Which tells you it's not a theological objection, it's a coalition one.



Corn

My one hesitation about this, and I think it's a fair one, is that a state commission is also going to become a campaign weapon. Half of these lists are run by people whose case for office is that the other man was in charge that morning.



Herman

That's fair. Eisenkot's line is that anyone who held office on October seventh is unfit to lead. Which is also, conveniently, a description of everyone he's running against.



Corn

Though he was in the war cabinet, wasn't he? After.



Herman

After. He joined after. Which is the distinction he leans on.



Corn

It's a very precise distinction.



Herman

Third, the courts. The judicial overhaul hasn't gone away. It's been redrafted. Smotrich and Simcha Rothman put out a plan in September called Law and Justice two point oh. An override clause so the Knesset can re-pass a law the court struck down. Narrower judicial review. Splitting the Attorney General's job in two. And politically appointed legal advisers in each ministry. They've called implementing it a coalition condition. Feiglin wants elected judges and no judicial review at all.



Corn

And the opposition's answer is to reverse it?



Herman

The answers range. The Democrats want to reverse the overhaul entirely, including the changes to how judges are chosen, and amend the Nation-State Law. Bennett wants a written constitution and to define the court's powers more clearly, but no curb on its power to strike down laws. Eisenkot talks about an independent judiciary and a Basic Law on legislation. And three of them, Eisenkot, Bennett and Golan, want term limits on the prime minister.

L

Larry

Close your eyes. Breathe. A whisper of constitution. A hint of override. Something that lasts two terms. Or eight years. Whichever comes first. Basic Law. By no one. Available now as a forty-pack of ordinary kitchen sponges.



Herman

A Basic Law isn't a scent, and Basic Law Legislation would set out how all the others get passed. It's the missing one. Israel's never written down the rules for making its own constitution.



Corn

Let it go.



Herman

It's genuinely a big gap.



Corn

Term limits, though. How long?



Herman

Eisenkot says two terms. Bennett and Golan say eight years. Notice none of that would bind anyone retroactively, as written, except the Democrats, who want a law specifically preventing Netanyahu's return.



Corn

That's not a term limit. That's a restraining order.



Herman

That's how the right reads it, yes.



Corn

Fourth. The Palestinians. I assumed this was where the bloc lines would be sharpest.



Herman

It's where I was most surprised, actually. Because the sharp line isn't between the two blocs. It's between almost everyone and two small groups. Eisenkot, the man leading the opposition, told Israel Hayom in August that the two-state solution is a grave mistake. He prefers what he calls a state-minus. Palestinian autonomy, under Israeli security control. He opposes formal annexation, but he's not offering a state.



Corn

Bennett?



Herman

Bennett has always said no. Lapid, his number two, has said possibly. So that list is unresolved inside itself.



Corn

Very on brand for that partnership.



Herman

The only Jewish party that says two states for two peoples is The Democrats. Gilad Kariv has floated a demilitarised Palestinian state. Plus the Joint List. Ra'am's Mansour Abbas says a Palestinian state is already a reality, but reportedly told opposition leaders it wouldn't be a coalition condition.



Corn

And the far end?



Herman

Ben-Gvir's one written policy document is a Gaza plan called Disengagement seven-ten. It proposes what it calls voluntary emigration of Gazans, through a dedicated ministry, a quarter of a million people in the first year and nearly the whole population over seven years. Zehut's text is blunter still. Smotrich wants to cancel Oslo, dismantle the Palestinian Authority, and apply sovereignty.



Corn

A ministry of voluntary emigration is a phrase where every word is carrying a different load.



Herman

The word voluntary is doing the most work and getting the least scrutiny. Liberman, meanwhile, has a Gaza idea nobody else has. Hand responsibility for Gaza to Egypt, and bring Jordan in on parts of the West Bank.



Corn

Has anyone asked Egypt?



Herman

Not that I've seen. The Democrats want an internationally supervised technocratic administration in Gaza, Gulf-funded reconstruction. Bennett wants security zones in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, and a central role for Egypt. So Egypt is popular. Egypt might be the most popular party in this election, and it isn't running.



Corn

What's your read on Iran, across the board?



Herman

Iran is the one place there's close to consensus. Everyone from Likud to Bennett to Eisenkot talks about continued pressure. The Democrats are the outlier only in emphasis. Golan wants a new nuclear deal while keeping the military option, and he called the killing of Khamenei a strategic mistake because nothing was built on it diplomatically.



Corn

That's a line that'll cost him votes.



Herman

In this climate, almost certainly.



Corn

Before religion, I don't want to skip the Arab lists, because we keep talking about them as seats in somebody else's arithmetic. What do they actually want?



Herman

Something much more domestic than the rest of this conversation. Crime, first and foremost. Ra'am's slogan is that there is no value higher than human life, and the count from the Abraham Initiatives is a hundred and eighty-four people killed in Arab communities so far this year.



Corn

A hundred and eighty-four. In ten months.



Herman

It's a staggering number, and it barely makes national news. The Joint List's leader, Yousef Jabareen, set out conditions on the eleventh for supporting any government from outside. A funded, time-limited plan against crime. A halt to home demolitions through proper zoning. Land for young couples. Recognition of the unrecognised Bedouin villages in the Negev. Plus a political horizon for the Palestinians.



Corn

Land for young couples is a housing policy. That's more of a housing policy than Likud has.



Herman

It's more of a housing policy than most of the Jewish lists have, which is a point we'll come back to next time. And the posture is support from outside, not joining. The Joint List says it will not join a Zionist coalition but would, say, abstain on a confidence vote, with no blank check. Ra'am wants back in government, as it was in twenty twenty-one, and names no exclusions. Its number two is Yoav Segalovitz, a former police commander and former Yesh Atid MK. Ra'am's first Jewish candidate.



Corn

A former Yesh Atid MK and police commander, running on an Islamist list to fight crime. That's not a sentence I expected to say.



Herman

Who will actually take their support is the other question. The Democrats are the only Zionist party that openly says including Ra'am would be natural. Eisenkot has been quoted saying Ra'am won't be part of his government, though he's floated a minority government that would need someone's support from outside. Bennett's position has been reported both ways.



Corn

So the party most likely to decide whether there's an opposition government is the one most of the opposition won't be photographed with.



Herman

That's the shape of it. Fifth, religion and state, and here the opposition is unusually united. Civil marriage, including for same-sex couples, from Bennett and Lapid, from Liberman, from the Democrats, and in press reporting from Yashar. Shabbat public transport decided city by city, which Bennett, Golan and reportedly Eisenkot back. Liberman wants it outright. Competition in kosher certification, so the Rabbinate loses its monopoly.



Corn

Civil marriage has been promised in every Israeli election since I was napping in the eighties. Does anybody think it happens this time?



Herman

What do you think? You're the one who reads the history.



Corn

I think it's the first promise that gets traded away the minute a Haredi party is needed for sixty-one.



Herman

I'd normally agree with you. The difference this time is that the draft fight might make the Haredi parties unseatable anyway. If they're out regardless, the price of civil marriage goes down. That's the real mechanism, if it happens.



Corn

Last one. The economy.



Herman

Here the platforms are thinnest, which matters for next episode. Likud is pro-market and lower taxes in general but has no cost-of-living plan anyone could find. Shas has no economic platform at all. Liberman's is detailed but unfunded. Twenty-five billion shekels a year more for defence, three billion for policing, and abolishing coalition funds, which



Herman (continued)

are about five billion. No total, no funding sources.



Corn

He's costed the spending and left the income as an exercise for the reader.



Herman

Very much. Bennett and Lapid have the most concrete consumer pledges. Break up food monopolies, force Shufersal to sell off some stores, bring food prices down to the OECD average. Eisenkot talks about breaking up monopolies and adopting international standards, and benefits for reservists and working families first. The Democrats want a bigger state. Shorter work week, public childcare, public housing, stronger unions. And then Hendel's partner, Yaron Zelekha, wants to scrap import tariffs and quotas, cut VAT by a point a year to twelve percent, and cap income tax at forty.



Corn

That's the most libertarian economic offer from a list whose name is the Reservists.



Herman

The Reservists and the Economic Party, to be fair. It's in the name.



Corn

Herman, was there ever a point when a secular couple here could just walk into a town hall and get married?



Hilbert

Not in the eighties. You couldn't have done it through the Rabbinate in the eighties either, Corn. You'd have had to go to Cyprus.



Corn

I was asking Herman about now.



Hilbert

I know. I'm answering about then. Larnaca. The registry office by the marina. In the mid eighties the Jerusalem Bridge and Backgammon Society ran a coach and a ferry there every spring for members who wanted to get married without a rabbi. Members only. You had to have played in two tournaments. The society's minutes record a dispute about whether backgammon counted as a tournament game, which split the membership for eleven years. The bridge players said it was dice. The backgammon players said bridge was cards. Both true. Nobody resigned. They just sat at opposite ends of the coach. In the spring of eighty-six the committee voted, nine to seven, to have the treasurer marry the society itself, to settle who owned the coach. It's in the minutes. The registrar in Larnaca was a man called Andreas and he said no, politely, in three languages. The treasurer took it hard. He'd bought a suit.



Herman

The Cyprus marriage loophole is very real. Israel recognises a civil marriage performed abroad, so people have been flying to Cyprus for decades.



Hilbert

I went as a witness. Every year. I have twenty-three Larnaca marriage certificates with my name on them as witness. That's not counting the year the coach broke down in Ashdod and they did four of them in the port, on the ferry ramp, with the captain reading from a card. Those didn't count. The society still argues about whether they count. Here's what I want to know. If one of these parties gets civil marriage through, who's allowed to perform one?



Corn

Why?



Hilbert

I'd like to know.



Herman

That would depend on the law. Most proposals I've seen would make it a state registrar. Somebody employed by the state or a municipality.



Hilbert

Not the secretary of a society.



Herman

Not as written, no. The society's secretary would have to become a municipal employee.



Corn

Which means he'd have to get a job at the Jerusalem municipality, and then the municipality would be marrying people.



Herman

Then you're back to the city deciding, which is exactly how they'd do Shabbat buses. City by city.



Corn

Whatever passes, then, the real question for anyone who wants it is whether their own city council wants it.



Hilbert

Then he'll apply to the municipality. He's seventy-nine. They'll take a while.



Herman

He's put his finger on it, Hilbert, though he won't take credit for it. Almost every religion-and-state promise in the opposition platforms, transport, marriage, kashrut, gets pushed down to the city. Which means the national election decides whether you're allowed, and the local council decides whether you get it.



Corn

For a secular voter in a city like Jerusalem, that's a big asterisk.



Herman

It's the biggest one on the ballot. And it's worth bearing in mind for next time, when we get to housing, because housing is almost entirely a local planning question too.



Corn

The misconception I'd name is that this is a left-right election. That the bloc you're voting for tells you the policies you're getting.



Herman

Not even close. The man leading the anti-Netanyahu bloc opposes a Palestinian state. Ben-Gvir is attacking the Haredi parties over the draft. The real lines are the draft, the inquiry, and the courts, and they cut across the blocs.



Corn

Which means next episode is the hard one. Holding all of this up against what Daniel actually cares about.



Herman

Where the platforms are thinnest. Rent, prices, how you actually live day to day.



Corn

Our thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces this show and keeps it running on time.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find every episode, and the rest of this series, at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

See you tomorrow.