

# ISRAEL

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**YOUR NEXT-LEVEL GUIDE TO  
THE MAGIC, MYSTERY, AND CHAOS!  
OF LIFE IN THE HOLY LAND**

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## CHAPTER 4

# Government, Social Policy, and Education

THE MOST STABLE POSITION IN ISRAEL'S NATIONAL LEADERSHIP is its president, the country's head of state, who serves in a mostly apolitical and ceremonial manner – similar to the king or queen of England, if teatime were replaced by convoluted coalition math. While tea is a pleasant leisure activity, coalition math is a thankless and challenging task by which the president chooses the eventual prime minister.

How thankless and challenging, you ask?

In 1952, Israeli ambassador to the United States Abba Eban asked Albert Einstein if he was interested in the position. Einstein declined, claiming he was not qualified. When the guy who created the Theory of Relativity doesn't think he can handle the job, that tells you something.

Israeli politics, and specifically the Knesset (Parliament), is not for the faint of heart. It's filled with politicians who communicate through screaming, insults, and the frequent banging of fists on furniture. Why so angry? Could it be the lingering stress from one of the many wars the country has suffered? The difficult economy? Or maybe it's the entire political system that's to blame. You'd feel pressure too if your government were shakier than a game of Jenga. Indeed, when we first

wrote this section, we planned to explain why a country would need to hold four elections in two years . . . until it turned into five in three and a half.

Buckle up for chapter 4, in which we attempt to explain the bumpy roads of Israeli government. We'll also look at some of the pressing (and non-pressing) issues of Israeli social policy, as well as at the education system (don't worry, we've included time for recess).

Speaking of politics: In November 1947, Winston Churchill said that "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried." Little did he know what was just around the corner . . .

## Politics: $120 \div 2 + 1 = \text{Chaos}$

In 2019, Israel held what some called "the most important election in the country's history." How important? So important that the country held four more over the next three and a half years.

Indeed, between April 2019 and November 2022, Israelis went to the polls five times. This sounds absurd, until you understand how the Israeli government works – or, as many Israelis would say, that it doesn't.

"The trouble begins with the fact that when we Israelis step into the voting booth, we don't vote for a person, but for a party," says Dr. Gideon Rahat, chair of the political science department at Hebrew University and senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute.

Yes, come election time you'll see posters and TV commercials for Bibi or Bougie or any other nicknamed candidate for prime minister. But when you cast your ballot, you don't actually vote for him or her; instead, you vote for your favorite candidate's party, with the tacit understanding that if that party is able to form a government and assume power, they'll choose whoever was on the poster to be prime minister.

Fair enough. But consider that in any given election, there are upwards of thirty political parties to choose from. "To qualify for

a seat in the Knesset (Israel's parliament), a political party needs to receive at least 3.25 percent of the overall national vote," Rahat explains – what's known in Hebrew as the *achuz hachasimah* (electoral threshold). Parties that cross the threshold are allotted seats in the Knesset in proportion to the percentage of votes they received in the election – but only after all the other votes (for parties that didn't reach 3.25 percent) are thrown out.

As a result, many votes end up “not counting,” because any party whose vote total doesn't cross the 3.25 percent threshold is simply tossed, similar to how voting for a third-party candidate in the US is considered throwing away one's vote. Picture a US presidential election with one Republican, one Democrat, and twenty Ralph Naders.

Still with us?

Good! So now we'll talk about the consequence of this system: for Israelis, voting is sometimes less about core beliefs and more about game theory.

For example: In your heart, you might agree with the progressive policies of left-wing Meretz. But if you don't think they'll get enough votes to cross the magic threshold, it'd be a waste to vote for them. Better to vote for your second choice, Labor.

But wait! Labor is pretty much *guaranteed* to cross the 3.25 percent threshold, so maybe it makes still *more* sense to vote for Blue and White, since they have the best chance to unseat Likud, which they can only do with the help of a coalition that includes Labor, which means that Labor's voice *will* be heard...

How do you say “undecided” in Hebrew? (There's actually no single word for it.)

But the biggest consequence of this system is that with so many small, single-issue parties in the running, no major party is able to attain a clean sixty-one-seat majority on its own in the 120-seat Knesset. “The closest we came was in 1969, with Golda Meir's ‘Alignment’ joint list,” Rahat says. That only happened because Meir brought several parties together *before* the election (an alliance that would later be renamed Labor), winning fifty-six of the required sixty-one. To show

you how mangled Israeli politics is, note that Meir's coalition happened right after the Six-Day War, which just goes to show that even when you save the country from annihilation at the hands of eight hostile countries, and you do it in under a week, it's still virtually impossible to form a coalition.

Anyway...

You can guess what happens next: with no single party ever able to win a majority of Knesset seats, the fate of the country suddenly falls into the hands of a few small parties who demand concessions for their loyalty from the would-be prime minister.

Let the political blackmail – er, games – begin! “Yes, we’ll join your coalition,” leaders of these fringe parties say. “But only if you undo the Western Wall reform that would allow egalitarian prayer, give us no fewer than three prestigious ministries, and make the Tefilat Haderech (the Traveler’s Prayer) an official part of the public elementary school street-safety unit.”

Done!

Usually, it's small religious parties like Shas or United Torah Judaism (UTJ) who are the kingpins. That's why the Orthodox-controlled Rabbinate has such powerful influence over marriage and life-cycle events, prevents El Al from flying on Shabbat, and allows army exemptions for eighteen-year-old ultra-Orthodox Jews who serve the country by studying in yeshivas.

It's also why Cabinet positions are often filled by people who have no relevant expertise. One egregious example was in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the minister of health was Rabbi Yaakov Litzman of the religious UTJ – a man who not only knew nothing about medicine, but was against vaccines, masks, and social distancing. His belief was that God would save people from the virus. (Interestingly, Litzman eventually got COVID and soon after resigned, thereby suggesting that God apparently preferred to sit in the opposition.)

Israel's system also encourages Cabinet members to jump from one post to another, simply as a way for the prime minister (who assigns Cabinet portfolios) to keep certain influential politicians in

the government. After the 2015 election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu named fellow Likud member Miri Regev minister of culture and sport, and in 2020 made her the minister of transportation as well as agreeing to promote her to foreign minister later. With just seven more holes in her punch card, Regev would be the lucky recipient of a free ministry.

This all points to a certain level of dysfunction. So how might Israel break out of this cycle?

Rahat offers a suggestion: the prime minister should be chosen from the party that gets the most votes, instead of from whichever parties can form a coalition. “The benefit of this system is that it would make it harder for small parties to extort,” he explains. “The PM could rule with a minority government and would still have to build and rebuild majorities for its policies.”

And if people aren’t happy with the outcome?

“Not a problem,” Rahat says. “We’ll just vote again.”

# Additional Resources

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