



## **The Election You Are Not Hearing About** **Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz**

*NB: the opinions expressed herein are solely the view of the author of this piece. They are not the official opinion of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.*

Dear Friends,

The United States, as you know all too well, is gearing up for an important election. By the time you receive this missive, my guess is that there will be a new President-elect. But in about a week's time, the Israeli public will be engaged in its own elections, and although the election is not for Prime Minister or the Knesset, it looms large over many in Israel. I refer to the municipal elections that will take place. Specifically, I want to give you a sense of what is happening here in Jerusalem. While many Jews in the Diaspora are concerned with national elections in Israel and what that outcome may bring vis-à-vis the peace process, far fewer Jews understand the import of the elections that are about to take place in the city that many of us hold so near and dear to our hearts. Even though we are not residents of Jerusalem, we should, as a whole Jewish people, be deeply concerned about the future of this city.

On November 11, thirteen parties and four mayoral candidates will vie for the leadership of Jerusalem. Presently, there are 527,627 eligible voters in the city out of a total of 725,000 residents. Jerusalem stands at a crossroads. Four issues in particular are at the forefront of the minds of Jerusalemites. First, the character of the city has changed dramatically over the past fifteen years, as ultra-Orthodox Jews are increasing their presence in the neighborhoods and schools of the city. It is estimated that *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox) constitute 19.1 percent of the population of the city and their influence is felt disproportionately, to the point where many secular Israelis have fled and continue to flee Jerusalem, seeking cities and towns that are more open to a diversity of peoples and Judaisms. In fact, it was reported that in this municipal election cycle, as a result of *haredi* influence, pictures of women were banned from electoral posters on buses (out of fear of offending *haredi* sensibilities).

Second, the city is facing a housing crisis. Students and young couples cannot afford to live in Jerusalem; real estate prices and rents have skyrocketed and continue to do so. American and French Jews who purchase vacation homes here have contributed to this crisis by creating areas of the city that have become virtual ghost towns for most of the year. While such investments are welcome in Israel, it has deeply affected the local population and economy in deleterious ways.

Third, a vitally important issue that is affecting Jerusalem is that the city is filthy. From the streets to the playgrounds, one cringes to see the extent to which the city has neglected cleanliness since the Golden Age of legendary Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek (z"l). This is something that we see very tangibly as my son, Adir, and I walk to school in the morning. In fact, the two of us have taken up the tradition of carrying empty garbage bags along the way and picking up litter. By the time we reach the school, the garbage bags are full.

The fourth issue is the inequality inherent in the infrastructure and resources between the Arab and Jewish sides of the city.

So who are the candidates running for mayor? Four candidates in total are on the ballot this year: Meir Porush, Nir Barkat, Arkadi Gaydamak, and Dan Birron. Meir Porush, a *haredi* rabbi and politician, has been running a strong campaign. Porush's natural base is the *haredi* community of Jerusalem and no doubt they will support him in extraordinary numbers. He comes to the race with twenty-five years of experience in government, having served on the Jerusalem municipal council and in the Knesset. Porush also served as Housing Minister for three years. Among the campaign promises he has made is securing cheap housing for young couples, maintaining the integrity of an undivided Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and developing the industrial infrastructure of the city toward increasing jobs. Two observations have struck me in Porush's campaigning: one, the campaign decided to use a friendly, happy go-lucky caricature of Porush (rather than his real picture) so as to appeal to secular and modern-Orthodox residents of the city. The caricature makes Porush seem accessible and a man of the people. Second, in an elaborate brochure published by the campaign that boasts of his record of service and experience, there is not a single picture of a woman (I have my wife, Miriam, to thank for pointing this out to me before I read the piece).

Nir Barkat, who is considered the front-runner in the election (if secular, Reform, Conservative, and modern-Orthodox residents turn out in larger numbers than their *haredi* counterparts), is promoting himself as a man of the future. He seems to be the Barack Obama of the Jerusalem municipal elections. A successful businessman with a background in the high-tech industry and a member of the Kadima party, he espouses "entrepreneurial thinking," a "broader vision for Jerusalem as a world capital on the level of Paris, London, or New York," and investing more in public transportation. Still, many religious Jews may be put off by his implying that in order to encourage younger residents to remain/move here, public transportation and entertainment establishments must be accessible on Shabbat. From the other side, liberal Jerusalemites are concerned about his reported meetings with Shas (the Sephardic *haredi* party) representatives and his emphasis on the "Jewish roots" of Jerusalem to the detriment of Arab citizens of the city. For this reason, Dan Birron, a radical secularist and member of the Green-Leaf Party, decided to throw his hat in the ring. Birron is committed to issues such as a clean Jerusalem, civil marriage, separation of politics and religion, and the preservation of natural resources.

Finally, Arkadi Gaydamak, the Russian-Israeli financier and philanthropist, decided to run as well. Though Gaydamak has a compelling, humanistic vision of what he would like to accomplish as mayor (equal living standards for Jews and Arabs and creating a more efficient and professional bureaucracy), there seem to be two serious strikes against him: Gaydamak has difficulty speaking Hebrew, and that is being generous. His campaign posters, which feature the slogan *lo midaber—oseh!* (I do not speak, I do!), have been defaced numerous times by graffiti artists

who have inserted *Ivrit* (Hebrew) after “I do not speak.” Also, Gaydamak is not a regular resident of the city, though he owns a residence in Mamilla.

Regarding the thirteen parties that are competing for a share of the thirty-one available seats on the municipal council, one finds the entire spectrum from United Torah Judaism, Shas, and Likud on the right to Meretz and Green Leaf on the left. Subsequent to the election, the mayor must form a ruling coalition (much like the national Knesset) to pass the budget or the mayor is liable to be ousted by the council. Rather than getting into the details of each of the platforms of these parties, I want to single out one party that appears to be dynamic, committed, and hopeful; they call themselves “Wake Up Jerusalemites,” a fact I happen to know because one of the party’s founders sits next to me in shul. The party represents a joint list of secular and liberally-minded religious people. They were founded by Azaria Fraenkel who headed a nonprofit organization called *Mavoi Satum* (a group that assists ‘*agunot*, women who have been denied a get from their husbands and are thus unable to remarry). The party seeks to increase job opportunities for recent college graduates, struggles against the ghost-town phenomenon in the city, and hopes to create a greater appreciation for the diversity that is Jerusalem. What is most impressive is that they are attempting to mobilize a younger generation of voters for the sake of a brighter future for Jerusalem.

One can only hope that, whoever takes over the reins of leadership, Jerusalem will be blessed with leaders who can respect the mosaic of its inhabitants. Recently, Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum of the Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel shared with Miriam the story of the battle that ensued over a simple sign that the Movement wanted to post on the building where their offices are located in the Talpiot section of Jerusalem. The city and its leadership did everything in its power to prevent the Conservative Movement from placing a modest sign with its logo on their building. Jews who are active in North American Jewish life and the world need to be aware of the reality that faces Jerusalemites and Israelis every day. While Israel must continue to be a source of inspiration to us, we must not be blinded by our loyalties. It is an imperfect homeland with very real challenges. American Jews must care for the politics of Jerusalem as much as they care for Israel and their own governments in the United States and Canada. In the face of apathy and indifference toward the future that Jerusalem faces, it will become a city of a small, religious-élite minority and not a “light unto all the nations.”

Thinking of all of you here in Jerusalem,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt".

