

## Letter from Jerusalem – No. 33

*Dr. Debbie Weissman, Jerusalem (July/August 2026)*

The most appropriate word we can use for this period in Israel and the Middle East is “confusing.” Is there a ceasefire with Lebanon, or not? Will the Straits of Hormuz be open for shipping, or not? Is the American agreement with Iran good for Israel, or not? Do Israel and the US still have a special relationship, or not?

What is clear is that both Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and most of the Israeli public feel let down and even betrayed by US President Donald Trump. Trump seems to have begun to feel that Netanyahu is a “loser,” which is just about the worst thing a person can be, according to Trump’s lexicon.

The one thing that seems to be definite is that new Israeli elections will be held on Tuesday, October 20th. Public opinion polls show a significant decrease for the Likud Party, led by Bibi or anyone else. The party that is emerging as an important contender for leadership is a new party called “Yashar”—Straight—led by former Chief of the Israeli Defense Forces, Gen. Gadi Eisenkott. Eisenkott lost a son and two nephews in the recent war. He is perceived as a man of great integrity though low on charisma and appealing to Center-Left as well as “soft” Right voters. The Moroccan background of his family may attract some of the traditionally right-wing voters, disappointed with Netanyahu’s economic policies.

Many Israelis are genuinely afraid of seeing the IDF once again mired in the mud of a war in Lebanon. Our enemy in the North is not really Lebanon, but the Hezbollah Party, which the Lebanese government regards with almost as much suspicion as does Israel. Quite a few soldiers and also civilians have been killed by drones sent over by Hezbollah. In the South, Hamas seems to be re-arming for another possible attack. This time around, the far more isolated kibbutzim and moshavim in the Arava may be the target. Even the Houthis in Yemen have started firing on Israel again.

But the chief and perhaps most frightening military enemy is not one of Iran’s proxies, but Iran itself. On June 7th, Israel intercepted missiles from Iran, for the first time since April. School all over the country was cancelled. Israelis anticipated the prospect of another round of war, with hours, even days of sitting in shelters. Israeli planes targeted Iranian munitions plants, especially those for building ballistic missiles.

Yet, after 17 hours, the war was halted, through US intervention. Then, an American helicopter was apparently shot down near the Straits. The US retaliated by attacking Iran, and Iran retaliated by attacking Jordan, Bahrain and Kuwait. Trump celebrated his 80th birthday on June 14th, making him the oldest person in US history to serve as President. The next day, he announced that the US and Iran had reached an agreement to open the Straits of Hormuz within a few days. But the Straits are still fully controlled by Iran, and shipping

has been limited. It is not clear what all of this means for Israel. Another country concerned about the deal is the United Arab Emirates, a country that has borne the brunt of many Iranian attacks.

Moving out of the ambiguous geopolitical sphere, Israeli society is definitely moving towards elections. These will be the first elections in Israel's history in which there will be significant use, by various parties, of artificial intelligence.

The coalition parties have been trying to use their last few weeks in office to push through major pieces of legislation, but thus far, they have not been successful. One of the reasons is that a lot of the people they brought into the Knesset were newcomers to politics (outside of their own narrow frameworks) and not particularly seasoned or successful as parliamentarians. Additionally, many of the organizations that constitute Israeli civil society have lobbied and worked in the Knesset to block undemocratic laws.

Netanyahu was first elected to the Knesset 30 years ago, in 1996. He has served as Prime Minister for over 18 of those years. He is the longest-serving prime minister in Israeli history. For the other years, he has been leader of the opposition. Almost age 77, he is not in very good health and is still plagued by his personal legal issues. Except for his most loyal base, narrowing all the time, most Israelis would be happy to see him step down. Various plea bargains have been offered to him, but he has not accepted them. The attempts on his part—as well as on Trump's—to have Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog pardon him imply that he is guilty of at least some of the charges brought against him. You can't really "pardon" an innocent person.

Recently, there were five military funerals held on the same day, for five officers and soldiers who fell in Lebanon. But that day, the Home Front Command lifted all restrictions on civilian life, including in the North (remember the confusion we mentioned above?). Fortunately, many Israelis, together with many people in other countries, are busy watching the World Cup in football, and that may be a welcome distraction from the national situation. July 2nd is being called here in Hebrew "the day of 1,000" since it will mark 1,000 days since October 7, 2023. There will be mass demonstrations and other protests on that day. One of the protests involves the failure of the government to appoint an independent commission of inquiry as to how and why the tragedy occurred.

One of the other controversial issues today is to what extent new leaders in Israel will be prepared to include representatives of Israeli Arab parties in their coalition. The only party that has said at this point that it would is the Democrats, led by retired general Yair Golan. Perhaps as we move closer to the actual voting, more will indicate that they are open to this. In the meantime, unseating Netanyahu really depends in part on encouraging Arab Israelis to exercise their right to vote.