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'We have to preserve Israel as a Jewish state'

By Nurit Wurgaft

"Shas looks after the interests of all of the sectors, in a balanced manner in line with the interests of the state," is the mantra repeated by Shas leader Eli Yishai, in reference to the Arab citizens of Israel. And why? "Because there is a religious ruling of Maimonides that he who seeks peace should see to the livelihood of their poor, comfort their mourners, visit their sick. There cannot be discrimination if you are interested in having peace and calm in Israel."

"And do you think there really isn't any discrimination?" he was asked by the journalist Danny Rubinstein.

"I think the government truly wants to reduce the gaps," Yishai replied. "When we were in the government, we did a lot. The gaps still exist, but in the framework of the different cabinet ministries that we ran, we helped them as much as possible."

How do you explain the Arab votes that went to Shas?

"The Shas movement acted in an egalitarian manner in all of the sectors, and Israeli Arabs felt the need to express their appreciation and recognition for what Shas did. It came very naturally to them."

What is your stand on the issue of family unification?

"We aren't the only ones who have a problem with family unification. Israeli Arabs are also complaining about it. Aside from that, the democratic state should also do everything it can to preserve Jewish identity and its Jewish majority."

How does that fit in with equal treatment?

"There's no connection. There should be equal treatment of all the citizens of the State of Israel. Not allowing relocation of Arabs from the Palestinian Authority into Israel is completely different. Equality is one thing, this is quite another. They passed a law in the Knesset, which is under the vigilant eye of the High Court of Justice, and we supported this law. We don't hide the fact that we want to preserve the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. If, for example, the entry of foreign workers was permitted, within a few years we would turn the country into a state of all its citizens, something to which we are opposed."

What is your opinion of collective rights for Arabs?

"We are a Jewish state and we have to preserve Israel as a Jewish state. Believe me, even the Arab sector doesn't want to move over to the Palestinian Authority. They want to be included here, just like all other citizens of the State of Israel. Anything that preserves the state as a Jewish state, with a Jewish character, is a good thing. Anything that can endanger the Jewish state and the Jewish majority is not good."

What are you offering Arabs in your platform?

"When we were in the government, we proved that we adopt a completely equal and balanced approach."

What about political equality? Did you appoint an Arab ministry director-general? Did you go to the Arab parties and conduct coalition negotiations with them?

"No, not at all. We helped by allocating resources to the Arab sector in equal fashion, and we did not discriminate against them in any way. There was an Arab minister, Salah Tarif - a Druse. But I think that given current circumstances it is problematic, due to sensitivity on security matters."

There is a demand that they be recognized as a national minority. What is your position on that?

"Either you want to maintain equality, or you want something else. I am against it."

Is it true that there is an alliance of the downtrodden, between the ultra-Orthodox and the Arabs?

"That's idiotic. There are ways in which these two population sectors have been hurt in the same way, but that is hardly an alliance. We always keep our gaze fixed on interests of society, so there are cases in which there are similar votes by us and by the Arab parties, but there are also cases when that is not so."

It has been claimed that the conflict will not be resolved until religious leaders from the two sides intervene, and make peace among themselves. Is this still true in the wake of the Hamas victory in the Palestinian Authority election?

"Are you kidding? They call themselves a religious party, but to my mind this is not religion. I don't want to recognize a religion that talks about murder. Hamas wants to destroy the State of Israel. You call that religion? As far as I'm concerned, Hamas is like Iran. Both of them want to destroy the Jewish state. What does that have to do with religion? Religion is tolerance; it is peace, it brings people closer. There is nothing for us to talk about with Hamas. We would be hiding our heads in the sand if we even thought we could talk with them. When it comes to relationships with Israeli Arabs - here I think that religious leaders can accomplish something, and take action to reduce the gaps."

Do you have a problem with the fact that Arabs in the State of Israel are defining themselves as Palestinians?

"It all begins and ends with my concern for preserving the Jewish state as a Jewish state. Our situation with the Palestinians is not good right now. There is no doubt that today's Palestinian leadership wants to destroy the Jewish state. As I see it, Israeli Arabs should recognize the State of Israel - and the vast majority do - and want to keep things the way they are. The connection with the Palestinians, which could lead tomorrow to a connection with Hamas, harms Israeli Arabs, and I have the feeling that most of them are not interested in this connection."

What do you think about Lieberman's idea of a population exchange?

"It's unrealistic. Maybe it's good for an election campaign, but I don't see how it could be carried out in any country of the world. I don't see anyone capable of getting up and saying, 'Gentlemen, hundreds of thousands of citizens are no longer citizens of the State of Israel.'"