

## Live From Israel With Brit Tzedek Board President Marcia Freedman

Moderated by Brit Tzedek Board member, David Albert.

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**Moderator:** Welcome to Brit Tzedek's very first Town Meeting. Marcia Freedman is live from Israel--from Jerusalem in fact, and she will start out by speaking a little bit about what's going on in Israel in the run up to the election on Tuesday, and then she'll be taking your questions.

Marcia was one of the founders of the feminist movement in the early 70's; she served in the Israeli Knesset from 1973-77. She raised a lot of very important issues that had really not been discussed very much in Israel before that time, including domestic violence, breast cancer, rape, incest, teenage prostitution. She was a real pioneer in the Knesset. Currently she divides her time between Berkeley, California and Jerusalem, and she is the president of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom. She also wrote an acclaimed memoir, Exile in the Promised Land. So, if you have questions, email them, and I will turn you over to Marcia, who is going to tell you a little bit about the mood in Israel and the upcoming elections.

**MF:** Hello, everybody, this is a real experiment for all of us, and it's kind of exciting for me to be sitting here in Jerusalem, knowing that I can talk to this broad audience of Americans via this new technology; it's pretty amazing, actually. I'm going to talk for about twenty minutes or so, and then leave the rest of the time for questions from you, as David has told you. You can send your questions via email and we will get them transferred to me--questions and comments as well; please feel free.

I've been here for about three weeks now, and I would say that this is probably the strangest election season that I have ever experienced in Israel, and other commentators are saying exactly the same thing. There's very little evidence even in the streets that there's an election going on; on the weekends, on Fridays and Saturdays you can see that some people are out at the various intersections in cities and on the highways with signs and such, but really not a lot. People are not talking about the election, and I know that any of you that have any acquaintance with Israel know that once you get into a cab, you're going to be in a political discussion within a minute and a half. That is not happening.

People that I'm talking to are talking about their own sense of despair and hopelessness and that which their own acquaintances and family and friends are experiencing. There's quite a bit of talk, among people who have the potential to get a foreign passport, to do so, or to encourage their children or their

grandchildren to do so, with the sense that at some point it may be a good thing for them to leave the country; you know that we've really gone far in terms of gloom and doom when that's happening.

One of the other things I have noticed is that in the daily broadcast of pre-taped election spots, both on the radio and on television, five and ten minutes long, instead of talking about peace, what's talked about is separation, and instead of talking about negotiations, what's being talked about is dialogue. There is a kind of move away from the terms "peace" and "security," I think from the point of view of the Likud, because that was Sharon's promise, two years ago--that he would bring peace and security. I think from the point of view of the left, there isn't any real hope at this point, that either peace or security are possible in the near term, at least.

We're three days away from the election, and there is still about a 16% undecided vote, which is quite a lot--some twenty-odd seats in the Knesset. So there's a lot of room here for surprises.

The other thing that's happening in the background is that there was, as you may know, a lot of brou-ha-ha about the fact of possible scandals within the Likud. None of that seems to be affecting the vote for the Likud, anymore. What is being expected is that they will get at least 30 mandates, 30 seats in the Knesset, and that number seems to go up on a daily basis. And Labor will get probably 20 seats and maybe fewer than 20. Labor has lost four seats over the past two weeks. There was a Ma'ariv newspaper poll that was taken this evening and published, showing that Labor may even get fewer seats than Shinui, and I will talk to you about Shinui in just a bit--this is one of the really major and surprising phenomena of this election.

The large vote expected for the Shinui party shows the way in which people are not voting or even thinking in a very rational way about how they are going to vote--I would say the center and left people, more than anybody else. Shinui has been a very small, centrist party all along, in the Israeli electorate. Two years ago it came under the leadership of a man named Tommy Lapid. Tommy Lapid is a very pugnacious, very coarse, very publicly angry sort who is, by trade, a journalist. He began a program on television called "Popolitika" and the style of "Popolitika" was that everybody screamed at one another, led by Tommy Lapid, firing all of this up and keeping the screaming going, shouting over one another, and so forth. It sounded worse than the Knesset on one of its worst days. Tommy Lapid came in in 1999 with, I think, something like eight or nine seats. At this point in the polls, they are showing fifteen or sixteen seats at the very least, and this poll today is showing that they might actually get even more votes than Labor, which means they have taken the seats from Labor. The positions of this party

are very unclear; the one position that is clearly stated is that they will not sit in any coalition with Shas, which is the religious Mizrahi party, that has been, up until now, the third largest party, and now Shinui is rivaling it. It is coming out very strongly with a platform of separation of synagogue and state and of reducing the amounts of subsidies that are given to yeshivas and other religious institutions, to revoke the religious students' exemption from service in the Army, and in favor of civil marriage. Some of these things are good, but some of them seem very irrelevant at this point in time, given the situation as we know it in Israel and in the Middle East.

The other appeal of Tommy Lapid is that Shinui describes itself very clearly as a party that will serve the interests of the middle class, and they speak in almost blatantly racist terms about Arabs, both Palestinians within the Occupied Territories as well as Israeli citizens, and with a great deal of hatred. What you read again and again, about Tommy Lapid's campaign appearances around the country, is that the man comes up before larger and larger crowds of people and just spews forth hateful talk, about the Likud, about Labor, about the religious, about the Arabs, about the Ethiopians, about everybody. Whatever target there is out there that one can find, Tommy Lapid is busy being very angry with them, and he has a very pugnacious manner and apparently seems to entertain people, because that was what he was doing before he went into politics--entertaining people with his angry tirades.

This is the party that is now potentially going to be the second largest party in the country, and if it's not going to be the second, it's definitely going to be the third largest party in the country. There are many commentators, including today, Tom Segev in Haaretz, who are saying that if we want to have any clearer sign of the level of irrationality that is dominating this election, we have to understand that when there are people who will not vote for Amram Mitzna (head of the Labor party), who is being very clear, very calm, very level-headed, and very logical, in stating his positions clearly to people, and instead take their votes away from him and give them to Tommy Lapid, that there is a level of escapism in all of this; an escape from the current reality of the situation here that is dominant. I agree with that. I think that there is a psychological need not to pay attention to what is really happening and not to pay attention to how hopeless things are looking, for the immediate future and even perhaps the long-term future.

We're going to see some pretty strange results: Meretz is not doing terribly well. It will have even fewer seats than the last time--perhaps eight or nine--and Arab parties together will probably pull something like eight or nine. So if we look at the center to left, we're looking at 35, maybe 40 seats tops, and it could be less than that. If we look from the center to the right, we're looking at a government of potentially 65-66 seats, which is a majority in a 120-member Knesset.

In terms of coalitions, what's happening is extremely interesting and extremely troubling and odd, which shouldn't be surprising, since everything else is odd here right now. The Likud, and particularly Sharon, are extremely nervous about not being able to bring Shinui into the government. If Shinui refuses to sit in a government with Shas and says it will only go into a secular coalition and otherwise will remain in the opposition, and if the Likud feels that it cannot cut itself off from its traditional ties with the religious parties, which seems to be the case, and anyway without Shas wouldn't have the numbers to be recommended to set up a government, then Sharon has one real option available to him, and that is to set up a coalition that includes all of the religious parties, the National Religious Party, and the very right wing nationalist parties. Sharon is very fearful of being held hostage by Avigdor Lieberman and Yisrael B'Aliya and parties that are calling for transfer of the Palestinian population out of the West Bank and Gaza; these are the parties that are refusing to accept the existence of any kind of a Palestinian state whatsoever. Sharon understands that it will make Israel much more of a pariah state in the world, and is also going to undermine tremendously, probably totally, Israel's relationship with the United States, which is insisting on the establishment of a Palestinian state. Therefore Sharon wants very much to bring Labor into the coalition.

In the meantime, Labor, under Mitzna, has asserted very strongly and very clearly--and they say it every day, even twice every day--"We will not go into a coalition government with Ariel Sharon." It is mostly Mitzna saying it, but the other Labor party members are saying it as well. Now, what's happening in the Labor party, is that, in addition to its falling in popularity, there is an enormous amount of in-fighting going on within the Labor Party, and there are a lot of predictions of what might happen post-election. One prediction is that there will be an attempt to get rid of Mitzna as chairman of the party within six months to a year, and then Labor will go into a coalition with the Likud, or that Labor will go over the determination head of the party chair, which the central committee of the party can do, and vote to go into a coalition with Ariel Sharon. Then there would be a split in the Labor party and a group of about ten members of Knesset would form their own faction and become an independent faction in the Knesset, waiting for the next election to try to take over the Labor party once again. So there's an enormous amount of instability within the Labor party itself and no clear sense of how it will respond to a request to come into a Sharon-led government. There are many in the Labor party who understand today that the reason that they have become so weakened is because they sat in this government for such a long time. There are others who claim that the reason they are not getting the votes that they would normally get is that they have refused in advance to go into a national unity government, and they are being punished by voters for that.

It's very hard to predict right now what kind of coalition we are going to have. One other possibility that is pretty remote but is being talked about is that Shinui will in fact get enough votes so that it can determine what kind of a coalition it is, and will get its way and have a secular coalition, which would mean the Labor party, the Likud, and Shinui. That would be a very interesting phenomenon, to be sure. I think it would probably paralyze this government on some level, certainly from the point of view of where one goes in terms of Israeli-Palestinian relations, the peace process and all the rest of that. I think it would just be a total standoff, and we would be enter into a period in which this country would be dealing with issues of civil marriage, and so forth. To be clear about that, these are very important issues, but at this moment they are a distraction, given the gravity of the security situation and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The possibility that seems to me of where we may end up is that there will be a fairly narrow government of anywhere from 63-66 seats that will consist of the Likud, Shas, the other religious parties, and all of the smaller, really extreme, right-wing parties. It's going to be very hard for Ariel Sharon to control those parties, because they could bring the government down any time they decide to leave it. That can be extremely dangerous and will be even more dangerous because, if there is an invasion of Iraq, there will be a real sense of "Well, regime change in Iraq, regime change among the Palestinians; if they're expelling Saddam from Iraq, we can expel Arafat from the West Bank, and let's consolidate the re-occupation and let's encourage as many Palestinians as possible to leave the area during this period of time." That is one of the great fears that people who are peace loving and are still hoping for a peaceful solution to this conflict are expressing.

**Moderator:** Marcia, do you want to say a few words about how the Israeli Arabs have been affected by this election and by the attempts to ban some of their parties from the Knesset?

**MF:** To fill out the background to that question, there was an attempt to ban Ahmad Tibi, who was an outspoken nationalist Israeli Arab, from running in the election, and there was an attempt to ban the party, Balad, which is a nationalist Arab party. The attempt was from the right-wing Knesset members, and it was in fact, stopped by the Israeli Supreme Court. This action has encouraged Palestinian citizens of Israel to participate in this election. It is expected that their participation will be as high as it has ever been in the past and that they will divide their votes between three or four different parties, but as a block they will end up with eight or nine seats.

**Moderator:** How about the Russian voters? Some people say that they are the

swing voters in this election.

**MF:** Russian voters today constitute 17% of the electorate. A smaller and smaller proportion of those voters go to the parties that particularly appeal to Russians. Most of them tend to vote now for the Likud. In other words, they are voting more in the way that other people are voting, although they do have a very separate culture. It's important to understand that this is not a homogeneous population. There are something like two seats that Roman Bronfman, who is a Russian immigrant and a member now of Meretz, can usually bring in.

**Moderator:** How much public discussion is there about the construction of a "security fence" between the Territories and Israel. Are people addressing the destruction being caused in its wake?

**MF:** There's very little public discussion about the construction of the fence, except that there is so little constructed so far. The debate that is going on here is this: Amram Mitzna of the Labor party has pledged that if, in one year, he cannot reach a final status agreement with the Palestinians, he is going to call for unilateral separation, that is that we leave the Territories and we build this fence. The right, including Ariel Sharon, doesn't want to build the fence, because they don't want to fix a border. They assume that any fence that gets built will determine a border, and they don't want to do that. The pieces of the fence that have been built have been built because the Israelis in that area are feeling so threatened that they are insisting that it be built. The Army and the government tend to build it as far to the east as they can possibly do, so they are annexing a lot of Palestinian land to do that, and of course are destroying orchards and farmland. I think that of the hundreds and hundreds of miles of fence that are being talked about, there are only, I think, 70 kilometers that have been built, in two or three isolated places. The serious fence building (I was out and took a look at it today) is being done in order to cut greater Jerusalem off from the West Bank. And that fence is being constructed so that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for Palestinian Arabs who live in the West Bank to get into Jerusalem. As I say, the real conversation here is not about how terrible the fence is, but why isn't it being built more quickly.

**Moderator:** The idea of the fence is very popular, right?

**MF:** The idea of the fence is a desperate one, it's not a popular idea. The idea of the fence is "Well, the Palestinians are not going to negotiate with us and they don't really want peace." They've been told that and they believe it. So we just have to separate ourselves off from them."

**Moderator:** How has the trauma of the past two years of terror affected the

political atmosphere?

**MF:** I think it has affected the atmosphere in the sense that it has made people very irrational, very frightened. They are not thinking straight. If they were thinking straight, they would hear what Mitzna is saying, which is very clear and very easy in a sense: We can try to reach an agreement, and if we can't reach an agreement, we need a unilateral separation from the Palestinians until we can reach an agreement. We need to dismantle these settlements that are so costly to us, both in terms of the economy and in terms of suicide attacks. We need to establish a defensible border and go about our lives. This is what, in survey after survey, Israelis indicate that they want, and yet they're not voting for it. I think that what has happened is that the fear has taken hold so deeply that it is causing a kind of psychological disconnect that has a political side to it. In terms of the election, people are going to vote for Shinui, on issues of synagogue and state rather than on issues of survival and security.

**Moderator:** During the campaign, has any party addressed compensation for the settlers who want to leave the Territories and return to the pre '67 parts of Israel?

**MF:** Amram Mitzna and the Labor party have addressed that, not at great length. But there was a period in the campaign when he went to several of the settlements that were pretty much known to have many people who wished to leave and offered them compensation, and he said that this is something that would be supplied to anybody who wants to leave. It's not so much compensation as housing grants so that they can afford to relocate within the Green Line, because they are stuck where they are. These are not people with a lot of money; they are house-rich and they can't sell their homes or their apartments.

**Moderator:** Is a two-state solution still as possible? Is Oslo seen as finished?

**MF:** I think we have to make a distinction between a two-state solution and the Oslo process. Yes, I think the Oslo process is finished, that any renewed negotiations are going to begin in a different way. The Oslo process was based on a certain timetable for establishing trust between the two sides and taking various steps, in a gradual sort of way. That's all broken down and is not going to resume. That doesn't mean that there can never be negotiations again, and it doesn't mean that there can't be a two-state solution. In my opinion, and in the opinion of many people here who are not in power at the moment, the two-state solution is still the only viable option. There is no other viable option, because you are either going to have one state, in which all the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are citizens of Israel, and then it's no longer going to be a Jewish state, or you're going to have a State of Israel holding in perpetuity an occupied population that is stateless, and that is simply not going to work. It's not going to

work in the short term and it's not going to work in the long term.

So we have to move in the direction of two states, and at this moment in time, I would say that the best thing that we have going for us is the roadmap that was developed by the Quartet, meaning the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia. This is a plan to restart negotiations, but it's more than that; it's a coming together of international forces, basically to impose a solution on the Middle East. Sharon now has a team, as of today, that is already preparing Israel's response to this roadmap, knowing that the roadmap is going to be made public soon after the election, if not immediately after the election, certainly immediately after the establishment of a new government. What the roadmap means, I think, that's most important, is that the United States, on some level, is committed to working within an international framework on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Moderator:** Sharon says he basically agrees with the Quartet's roadmap, which includes a freeze on settlements. Do you think he would abide by that?

**MF:** No, I do not. And he hasn't said that he agrees with it; he agrees with certain parts of it. The alternative roadmap that Sharon's people are preparing, according to today's Haaretz, and I'm assuming this is based on some probably orchestrated leaks, is that the Palestinians will have to take all of the steps that the international roadmap demands of them, while Israel doesn't have to do anything but simply wait to make sure the Palestinians have done everything they are told they must do, which means that they've reformed their government, they've gotten rid of Arafat as the major power, they've managed to completely stop all terrorist attacks within Israel or against even soldiers and settlers. And when all of that happens, then Israel will consider the establishment of a Palestinian state, and then we can talk about temporary borders for that state.

**Moderator:** Has the Peace Now idea of restricting U.S. funding so that money cannot go to new settlements gotten any attention?

**MF:** It hasn't actually, and it's very interesting, because there are cautious headlines every now and then that the Americans are considering Israel's request, and they keep on considering it and considering it, and not saying anything publicly about it. But nobody here is thinking a demand for a settlement freeze would be effective; nobody on the left, either. It's kind of a foregone conclusion that at some point or another, the Americans will probably say yes to the loan guarantees as well as to new military aid as a quid pro quo for Israel's not entering into the attack on Iraq.

**Moderator:** Do you see any meaningful campaign reform legislation as a

response to the rampant corruption in the Likud primary and the Sharon loan scandals?

**MF:** I suspect that there may be something of that sort, but it wouldn't be campaign reform or Knesset reform; it will be reforms that are instituted within the party itself. There are several things that are going on here. One of the major scandals was about buying votes, with bribes, by candidates for safe seats on the Likud list. There have been indictments, and there will be more indictments. I am sure there are going to be trials, and that probably will lead to some kind of reform within the Likud, to make this less likely in the future. The other big scandal that is going on is the one-and-a-half million-dollar loan to the Sharon family to repay donors who funded him illegally in the past, in the 1999 election. These things will continue to have repercussions. The police are pushing for a quick investigation, and the Justice Ministry and the Attorney General in particular are slowing it down as much as they possibly can and not taking any action on it. What's happening instead is that they are actually investigating the reporter who broke the story.

**Moderator:** Does that scandal have any legs? I mean, is it possible that Sharon could be indicted after the election or have to leave office?

**MF:** It would be his son, Gilad, and not him. His reputation will be very much damaged, but I don't think it's going to bring him down.

**Moderator:** Uri Avnery won't make a recommendation among Labor, Meretz, Hadash and Balad. Will you?

**MF:** No, I won't actually. I'm here, and I'm a citizen, I'm going to vote but I'm still not sure how I'm going to vote. As Americans, I think it's not our place to be recommending to Israelis how they ought to vote. I think that we have a common desire that there will be a vote for peace and that there will be at least a strong opposition in the Knesset that stands for these positions. I think that is really all that we can hope for right now. I don't really think that it matters too much, in fact, which of the parties of the left one votes for, and I think that's why Avnery is doing what he's doing, that one goes with one party or candidate over another.

**Moderator:** What messages, if any, from the peace camp, seem to be resonating with the voters?

**MF:** I think that Mitzna's message is resonating with the voters who are associated with the peace camp. I think that even if they are going to get fewer seats than ever before, those are seats that are committed to a vision of reconciliation and rapprochement between Israel and the Palestinians. His

message is, I think, the strongest one. And of course the messages of Meretz, and other parties on the left, which are still holding the candle of opportunity for a kind of just co-existence in this region between the State of Palestine and the State of Israel, are resonating. But as I say, I think there isn't too much resonating in general going on in this election.

**Moderator:** There are many off-the-wall political parties running as well. Can you share with us any amusing anecdotes from TV commercials or campaign events that you have seen from some of these "out there" parties?

**MF:** Well, I think the most "out there" party is the men's rights movement! They have run in lots of elections, and they campaign on a platform that they are being discriminated against, and that because women are beginning to win a certain number of rights on their own, that means that there is discrimination against men. They very righteously take this position and hold it as if it can be justified in some way, and that, at least for me, as a feminist, tends to be somewhat amusing.

I've been impressed by the Aleh Yarok, the Green Leaf party and the way it is presenting itself. I don't think it's an "out there" group at all. I think this is a group of young people who are looking for a society that's based on individual freedom and equality and respect for the environment, in a very sincere kind of way. I think that people are actually paying attention to them, and not just young people. I was in Haifa two weekends ago, and we just by chance went by a public park in which there was a rally being held by them, and there were large numbers of people coming, and many of them were young couples with children. So I think there's a beginning of some looking beyond that it represents, by a certain segment of what I would say is probably the Ashkenazi population.

One of the things that has happened to Labor (and I'll take a minute to talk about this, because it's an interesting phenomenon) is that it has never been able to actually take into account, recognize, and move with and develop with changes in the demographics of Israeli society. It has never been able to connect with the Mizrahi population, it has never been able to connect with the immigrant Russian population, and now I think it's losing its base among young Ashkenazis, who are feeling kind of cut loose and not quite knowing what to do with themselves and where to go. And a lot of them are going to Shinui; some of them are going to the Green Leaf party. There's an entire world there, of people in the middle-class, educated Ashkenazi population who are very at loose ends politically.

The other thing that I think is very interesting in what's going on here, and one of the things that's being reflected in this Shinui-Labor phenomenon, is that it is in fact the case that the Ashkenazi dominance is being very seriously eroded.

Secular Ashkenazis are not a numerical majority of the population, and its domination of the political scene is really being strongly challenged at this point, and I think that its domination in all other areas is not long to be challenged.

**Moderator:** What are the prospects for the formation of a Social Democratic party led by Yossi Beilin or Yossi Sarid, and a new party on the left, combining Meretz and Labor that you talked about?

**MF:** That is being talked about only within Meretz, at this point in time. What the Labor people are talking about is the possibility that the party might split, that there would be a new faction that would be set up that would be called "New Labor," which would take maybe ten of these twenty Members of Knesset--the Mitzna people, Avraham Burg, Chaim Ramon, Yuli Tamir and others of that sort--and wait out whatever is going to happen between now and the next election, to see whether or not they can make a comeback within the Labor party. I don't think there's a lot of interest thus far, that I can tell, or really none that's public at all, in that faction of the Labor party forming a new party together with the Meretz people.

**Moderator:** Who are the other candidates on the Shinui list--?

**MF:** Nobody knows.

**Moderator:** -- and what is their policy around the conflict?

**MF:** I'm very serious. They are right-wing, for the most part, in terms of their politics; they are very anti-Arab in general. There has been no clear position taken on the conflict by Shinui, and nobody knows who these people are. I really mean nobody knows. There's been no publicity given to them; there's been no attempt to give anybody a sense of who they are or what they stand for, individually or as a party. They have really run on the narrowest platform you can possibly imagine. What is clear, at least from Tommy Lapid, who is the voice of that party, that they are much more to the right than to the left.

**Moderator:** Can you talk a little about the economy for both Israelis and Palestinians? Is that an issue in the campaign?

**MF:** You would think it would be an issue, but it's not. When I say that this is a terribly irrational electorate at this point in time, that's just another indication of how irrational the electorate is. Except for the Histadrut (One Nation) party, which can get one or two seats, and the Labor party somewhat, but not a huge amount, nobody's talking about the economy, and yet the Israeli economy is in very deep trouble. There is real poverty in this country. There are beginning to be soup lines

that you can see on the streets of Tel Aviv; there is a growing homeless population. Sixteen percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and even social supports don't move them above the poverty line. If those social supports were taken away, 30% of the population would be living below the poverty line. Unemployment is now up to 10 1/2 percent. There is an ongoing devaluation of the shekel, so that it has lost 20% of its value over the past year alone, and it keeps losing more against the dollar, and against the euro, and against all other foreign currencies. The gross national product is in negative numbers for the first time since the establishment of the State, and this is for the second year in a row. There's no tourism; I'm in Jerusalem, and there's just nothing. Every once in awhile you see a bus with some Christian pilgrims in it, but there really is nothing at all. So the tourist industry, which is a major industry, is just non-existent. As I say, the number of unemployed is increasing all the time. The other thing I discovered, that I didn't know when I first came, is that people's salaries are being lowered, in the private sector and in the public sector. People are being asked to take less money just to be able to keep their jobs, and they are being forced to do that. As contracts are being negotiated, salaries are being lowered. This is true in education, in medical services, in mental health services, in the social work field, also in the professions. The middle class is suffering mightily from what's going on, and yet they're not voting in accordance with that.

**Moderator:** Thank you very much for your cogent observations and analysis. Given that the Israeli electorate will not empower the Israeli government to implement a two-state solution, isn't it the case that such a solution, if it is to be had, has to be promoted vigorously by the international community, including the United States?

**MF:** There's no question about that. In terms of how this election is going to affect our work, it is going to highlight the understanding that we've had all along: that the solution has got to come from outside, that American foreign policy in the Middle East is absolutely crucial, that the voice of American Jews needs to be changed to another kind of voice affecting American foreign policy. It's just going to make our work not necessarily harder, but more critical. I think that if the Labor party sticks to its guns and stays in the opposition, with a clearly critical voice about current government policy, it's going to help us a great deal.

**Moderator:** Given how dim the political situation seems to be currently, what, if anything, can the Israeli and non-Israeli Jewish activist public do, even if indirectly, to try to bring about long-term change to the Israeli political situation?

**MF:** Again, I think that is our critical task to organize those in our community who agree with us (and I believe that there are tens of thousands of American Jews who agree with our own positions) so that we can become a forceful element

within American Jewish dialogue, to influence U.S. foreign policy. And I think we have to do that as quickly and as strongly as we possibly can. That's what's going to make a difference. In my view, and at this point in time, certainly in the short term, it's the only thing that's going to make a difference.

**Moderator:** Can you say a little about the situation in the Occupied Territories. You've talked about the Israeli economy; how about the economic conditions that Palestinians are facing?

**MF:** The economic conditions of the Palestinians are pretty dire. There is something like a 60% or 70% unemployment rate, there is an enormous percentage (I can't remember offhand exactly) of people living under the poverty line, there is beginning to be serious malnutrition among children, among the Palestinians there are very few who have any work whatsoever. If the situation on this side of the Green Line is bad, the situation on the other side is dire.

**Moderator:** Sharon blames Arafat for all of the problems, Netanyahu says Arafat needs to be removed from office; will any of that do any good for the Palestinians or anyone?

**MF:** Without Sharon and without Barak and without Clinton saying this, there has been ongoing Palestinian criticism of Arafat's rule for a very long time, particularly among middle-class, educated Palestinians, and others as well, and very strong criticism of the amount of despotism and the amount of corruption under Arafat. There have been serious attempts at reforms, but Israel has, again and again, interfered with these attempts, the last time very recently, when the British were hosting a conference of Palestinians to talk outside the country about reforms and the Israelis refused to let them leave the country to attend. For all of our talk about wanting reforms within the Palestinian polity, it doesn't really seem that there is a great interest in creating the conditions for those reforms to take place. There is a general understanding among the Palestinians that Arafat's policies have been a disaster. On the other hand, when he is made into a martyr by Israel, they will rally to support him.

**Moderator:** There's all this talk about a war in Iraq. Are people on the street and people you are talking to afraid that Israel is going to be attacked with SCUDS again, as in '91, and how is that affecting the mood?

**MF:** Again, as I say, there is very little talk about it. People are afraid. They are all being given their gas masks (hoping that this time the masks aren't defective, as they were during the Gulf War. I think that there's a sense here of holding one's breath and not knowing exactly what's going to happen. There's no sense of imminent doom from Iraq at this point in time, but there definitely is a sense of

danger.

**Moderator:** Thank you very much, Marcia; it's been a very informative hour and I think we've all learned a lot. Do you have any closing thoughts?

**MF:** I want to close on what I have already said. I think in terms of Brit Tzedek that this election is making it clearer than ever before, how important our work in the United States is. I hear that from everybody in the peace camp here they understand exactly why we're doing the work as we are doing it; that we have to appeal to mainstream progressive Jews, and that therefore we have to speak in a voice that is very supportive of Israel. I've been told again and again, "It's a good thing you're not here this year. Stay there and do the work." I say that to us as well; we need to work even harder than we have up until now.