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Gantz's Herzlian challenge: Appoint a Green Zionist to run KKL-JNF



CENTER FIELD
• By GIL TROY

us today, in Israel and worldwide.

This gap between what KKL-JNF is and what it can be is why Benny Gantz must be Herzlian when selecting KKL-JNF's leader. We cannot wait for the Messiah to fix things. The 38th Zionist Congress will elect the next chairman when it convenes in October. But the maneuvering has started – and is in Gantz's hands. He must decide: will this appointment become yet another political soccer ball, kicked around by scheming politicians to score points, or will the best candidate be appointed to do the job as it needs to be done?

Alas, we know how most Israeli politicians approach these precious Zionist institutions that built Israel. They either appoint some bored retired general looking for relevance and paycheck – and on day one, he starts on-the-job training – or, worse, they choose some political hack who views this Zionist treasure as his buddies' employment bureau and his personal piggy bank.

ON THE ground, a consensus is forming that Prof. Alon Tal is the right person for this difficult KKL-JNF job at this critical moment. It's growing into a groundswell, spearheaded by Israeli environmentalists and mainstream American Zionists, compounded by Tal's international reputation and his deep ties to the Reform and Conservative movements, along with Hadassah.

I confess, I'm biased. Alon and I are old friends. But note that within two hours of posting, more than 50 leading environmentalists signed a letter to Gantz – and Yair Lapid – saying one person has the “political acumen, environmental

passion and intellectual depth to guide one of Israel's most important and powerful institutions, and he would do so with the best interests of all of KKL-JNF's multiple stakeholders” – meaning, the Jewish people. These experts – now nearly 100-strong – recognize that under Tal's “leadership, KKL-JNF would be able to take a place of honor among the leading forces to preserve and sustain the environment of the Land of Israel.”

The experts identify Tal's four unique strengths. A “visionary Leader and entrepreneur,” he “founded two of Israel's most innovative and successful environmental organizations” – Adam Teva V'Din, the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, the country's leading environmental advocacy lobby, and the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. As an environmental scholar, with degrees in law from the Hebrew University and in public health from Harvard, Tal now heads Tel Aviv University's public policy program. He has written six books and dozens of articles defining the field of Israeli environmental history and policy, deftly applying scholarly rigor in service of a wider policy aim – to preserve the Land of Israel – and the health of everyone in the region. Third, a “patriot, activist and optimist,” he has improved Israel's quality of life in myriad ways since making aliyah. Finally, he's not just theorizing about KKL-JNF's potential. In serving on the KKL-JNF board for over a decade, his many achievements included upgrading the forestry program's ecological integrity.

As other candidates work their political connections, Tal's towering qualifications and deep connectedness to the

land should speak for themselves. To have a founder of Israeli environmentalism, someone who embodies the power of Green Zionism, leading KKL-JNF would be an important statement. It would show concern for our planet, love of our land, respect for the Jewish people worldwide, and Gantz's personal commitment to follow through on one of the first things he said when he entered politics: “We all need a government that solves our real problems and is not preoccupied with itself.”

When Gantz launched Blue and White, refusing to allow an “entire generation to live here without hope,” he proclaimed: “We all deserve a leadership that gets up in the morning and thinks about us.” Tal is a hope-generator, an us-thinker, who is also remarkably rooted in pragmatic political realities.

I echo Theodor Herzl's words, challenging Gantz – “yours is the power to decide” – adding, yours is the responsibility and opportunity to spark a movement for visionary, professional, qualified, humane and Zionist leadership in the KKL-JNF. Be bold. Do it by forcing the issue and making Tal, not some political hack, the next chairman of this critical Green Zionist organization, this legendary Zionist institution.

The writer is the author of The Zionist Ideas, an update and expansion of Arthur Hertzberg's classic anthology, The Zionist Idea. A distinguished scholar of North American history at McGill University and the author of 10 books on American history, his next book, Never Alone: Prison, Politics and My People, coauthored with Natan Sharansky, will be published in September.