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80790 - בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו -					

The democracy marathon

Compromising with 'Altalena' moments



CENTER FIELD
• By GIL TROY

Last Friday, 30,000 of us marched toward the Knesset ready to run for fun and not for office. This year's Jerusalem Marathon was particularly delightful, a sun-drenched, city-wide party. Most of us particularly enjoyed putting politics aside, as Left and Right, religious and non-religious, sweated about our running times, not our country's future.

This unifying, reassuring marathon, which emphasizes the many lovely moments making Israel the world's fourth happiest country, occurred two days after President Isaac Herzog once again led magnificently. Shaming the demagogues, Herzog spoke with great concern about civil war while respecting all Israelis. The government's instant rejection of "The People's Framework" – within 17 minutes – showed how little most coalition members care about representing all Israelis, although that's their job.

Characteristically, some tone-deaf opponents continued encouraging the right-wing barnburners by making the Left seem out-of-touch. One thousand artists, writers and intellectuals urged the British and German governments to cancel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's upcoming visits. Cold War Americans used to say, ever-so-wisely: politics stops at the water's edge; patriots leave internal fights at home. And although Germany is no longer Nazi and England is not very imperial, proud Zionists don't petition Germans and Brits to save us.

Still, the coalition should stop defining Israel's Silenced Majority as begging for a compromise by the opposition's most ridiculous rantings. Stop demonizing sincere critics as

anarchists. It's time to lead the entire nation, cultivate consensus and tackle our real problems, not these self-inflicted ones. Israel lacks the margin of error other democracies enjoy.

"I came back into government precisely to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state," Netanyahu recently told Iran International, promising to do everything possible to prevent it.

This is everything possible?

If he were just another politician, Netanyahu's lack of self-awareness would be merely outrageous. But because he's in power, it's dangerous.

Look what Netanyahu wrought – even he can't control his government. His minor adjustment to the judicial selection process failed to satisfy the opposition and triggered an extreme backbenchers' backlash. We need the old Netanyahu back, who understood that most politicians fear facing angry voters more than his demands for compromise.

Call the extremists' bluff, especially because polls show right-wing support plummeting. And think broadly for all Israelis' benefit. Netanyahu should listen to Yoav Gallant, who fears the growing unrest. He should learn from Yuli Edelstein, who patriotically met with judicial reform critics because we are all one people. And he should follow Menachem Begin's example.

In *The Revolt*, Begin explains how, despite being victimized by David Ben-Gurion's one-sided civil war, he and his Irgun comrades avoided civil war at all costs. In 1948, when Ben-Gurion sank the Irgun's arms-laden ship, *The Altalena* – Begin nobly wouldn't counterattack.

"We saw our people in Europe



THE WRITER and son, Yoni, get set to run through the Old City in the Jerusalem Marathon, last Friday. (Nitay Nefesh)

in the endless procession of death," Begin wrote. "And from down the corridors of history, we heard the echoes of those other wars, the cursed internecine wars in dying Jerusalem nineteen centuries before."

Begin understood life as "one long chain of revolts and surrenders... Man surrenders to his convictions, the son to the will of his father and the individual to the laws of society and the State. These surrenders frequently cause revolts and it is this action and reaction which gives an edge to the savor of life..."

Those in power must have an *Altalena* Moment – choosing to compromise and not attack their opponents. All coalition MKs, even if they feel they are right, must relent to keep Israel united.

They won. There will be judicial reforms. We just need fewer changes, paced slower, spread out longer, empowering the courts more than expected. Our leaders must grant more concessions, Begin-style, to most Israelis, who want compromise.

Begin knew how hard it is to restrain yourself, especially when you believe you're right. "What is military discipline, discipline in action, compared

with this discipline of inaction, when your whole soul cries out for retaliation and retribution," he wrote. This other-worldly call for restraint came from "the depths of Jewish history" and worked: We were spared the catastrophe of catastrophes, civil war.

When my son, Yoni, served as an officer outside Hebron with left-wing and right-wing reservists, he explained their mission bluntly. "Our army has one purpose," he said. "To avoid another Holocaust."

We need leaders with similar clarity, diluting their domestic agenda to keep Israel united and battle-ready. That's what nationalists do.

Yoni and I ran the 10 Km. marathon on a lark – we registered three days before. Although we weren't trying that hard and despite constant crowding slowing us down, I ran one minute and thirty seconds per kilometer faster than my usual pace.

These happy results make the Jerusalem Marathon a metaphor for the constructive liberal-democratic nationalism we need, which will encourage patriotic compromise from a position of strength and nationalism – words I prefer to Begin's "surrender."

Rather than knocking others down, healthy nationalism builds us up, fueled by amulual love for all our fellow citizens. True, you're sometimes slowed, even a bit squeezed or suffocated by others. But, overall, belonging to the collective liberal democratic nation, makes you better – and makes you do better. The "us" gives the "I" strength, focus and meaning. And yes, identity and history count – running through the Old City and passing our Knesset added meaning – and inspiration.

That's why it's so painful to see these irrational nationalists giving nationalism and Zionism a bad name. And that's why we need leadership to take back the night and forge a Beginesque, constructive, unifying, consensus-building path, President Isaac Herzog-style, for us to follow.

The writer is a distinguished scholar of North American history at McGill University and the author of nine books on American history and four books on Zionism. He is the editor of the new three-volume set, Theodor Herzl: Zionist Writings, the inaugural publication of The Library of the Jewish People (www.theljp.org).