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... and a city council to keep him honest

Voting for a list that reflects one's values and concerns should help guarantee that someone will be keeping an eye on the mayor's actions.

By Rachel Azaria

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Voters will be asked to cast two ballots in Jerusalem's upcoming municipal elections, one for mayor and one for city council. Although the importance of choosing a mayor appears self-evident to most voters, the importance of selecting council members also deserves proper attention.

The elections are expected to be decisive for the city's future. The last five years have been difficult ones for the capital's non-ultra-Orthodox residents. Although Haredim constitute some 25 percent of the city's voters, for the past half-decade they have dictated the municipal agenda, directing resources principally to their sectorial needs. For non-Haredim, voting is an opportunity to redress the imbalance that has been the stuff of Jerusalem city politics since 1993.

Three principal issues are at the root of voters' dissatisfaction with the current administration, and have spurred a disproportionate number of non-ultra-Orthodox residents to leave the city in droves. These issues - housing, employment and education - are at the heart of the current campaign for Jerusalem's future.

? Housing prices have doubled in the past five years, making it nearly impossible for young couples and the middle class, who used to constitute the backbone of the city's population, to purchase or rent apartments locally. The disproportionate number of premium housing projects catering to Diaspora Jews wishing to own residences in the capital is largely to blame for this phenomenon. The municipal planning committee contends that the influx of foreign capital into Jerusalem is a blessing. No one wants to discourage foreign Jews from spending time in the Holy City, but City Hall has a responsibility to find solutions for Jerusalem's lack of affordable housing.

? The municipality has invested no thought, nor has it offered much assistance, to those wishing to set up shop in the city. In fact, receipt of a business license has become a veritable "Via Dolorosa," rather than a basic administrative process. Similarly, the effort to make Jerusalem a national asset and priority - in part through significant tax incentives from the state, meant to encourage high-tech industries to locate in the city - is effectively canceled out by the prohibitive municipal taxes demanded of local businesses. This situation deters high-tech and other entrepreneurs from making Jerusalem their home.

? In recent years, the city's educational framework and infrastructure have been the victims of neglect. In areas that have enjoyed a substantial growth among their secular and modern-Orthodox school-age population, the municipality has prevented the building of new school buildings and classrooms. Attention has been paid exclusively to the educational needs of the ultra-Orthodox sector.

Needless to say, additional problems in the realms of transportation, culture and the city's physical condition have influenced Jerusalem's residents' perception of their hometown and contributed to a sense of despair.

In this light, the upcoming municipal elections can be seen as a real opportunity for Jerusalem's residents to make a change for the better. The candidates for mayor present two clear alternatives that have overshadowed the more nuanced approaches of various lists running for city council.

Nir Barkat, the candidate of the city's secular and pluralistic population, has increasingly taken on a right-wing political orientation, calling for building more Jewish neighborhoods in eastern Jerusalem. Despite certain reservations they may have about him, the

majority of the city's non-Orthodox population is expected to support him since he appears to be the only non-Orthodox candidate for the post with a serious chance of winning. (The other non-Haredi candidates are the Russian-Israeli businessman Arcadi Gaydamak, and Dan Biron of the Green Leaf party, which calls for legalization of marijuana; neither is given much chance of winning.)

Meir Porush, of the Haredi Agudat Israel party, is running a strong campaign, despite internal rifts in the local ultra-Orthodox communities. He is expected to rally the overwhelming majority of their votes, with an agenda emphasizing the city's unity and with general declarations about representing the entire population.

With these two candidates presenting agendas that can be characterized as right-wing, the core issue of the campaign - even when not explicitly mentioned - is whether City Hall will continue to be under Haredi control. For many, the outcome will determine to what extent Jerusalem will remain a city they will wish to live in.

In this context, the second ballot - for city council - in the municipal election becomes all the more crucial, offering residents the opportunity to vote not solely on the basis of religious leanings, but according to the agenda presented by the various lists and the quality of the people running on those lists. Whoever becomes mayor will need to assemble a coalition, and voting for a list that reflects one's values and concerns should help to guarantee that someone is keeping an eye on his actions and influencing policy. A variety of lists - Mafdal, Hitorerut-Yerushalmim, Meretz, Yerushalayim Tatsliach, Shas, Agudat Israel and others - are presenting diverse agendas that represent the local population in all its nuances. Beyond those lists, the candidates themselves - Jerusalemites who declare their commitment to work voluntarily to better the lives of the city's residents - merit voters' attention. Even if some crucial issues concerning the future of Jerusalem can and will only be determined on the national level, those who sit on the city council will play a central role in determining what the daily lives of Jerusalemites will look like in the next five years.

Rachel Azaria is co-chair of the Hitorerut-Yerushalmim list for city council, which is made up of young professionals who aim to improve conditions for Jerusalem's secular, traditional and modern-Orthodox residents.

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