

DIVREI CHAIM

by Rabbi Steinmetz



YES, THERE IS A HOWEVER

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There is no way to sugarcoat it: Zohran Madani's election was a crushing defeat for the Jewish community of New York. We worked so hard to stop the DSA machine but came up short. The city with the single largest population of Jews in the world has just elected an anti-Zionist mayor.

Watching the rejoicing Mamdani campaign tonight is painful. So many of his supporters have taken to social media to gloat about defeating the "Zionists." Their candidate has won, and these snarky anti-Zionists will set the agenda in the years to come.

It is humiliating for a community that has long had a place around the municipal table to be reduced to beggars hoping for some crumbs of attention from the new mayor.

Unquestionably, there will be postmortems about our community's failure. Yes, we faced a nearly impossible task: electing a deeply unpopular candidate who ran against a slick, smiling, Teflon candidate. Even so, this election exposed our community's weakness. We are years behind Mamdani's backers, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in terms of organization and recruitment. The DSA had an army of canvassers willing to take their cause into the streets; and they have a pipeline developing candidates for every possible elective position.

The Jewish community has none of that in place.

Even more painful is that this defeat shone a light on internal weaknesses in our community. A significant cohort of young Jews is less attached to Israel, or even anti-Zionist. Many proudly declared they were "Jews or Mamdani." How many fall in this group is unclear, but it may be as many as 30% of 18-29-year-olds. This probably correlates with assimilation among young Jews; those who are less attached to Israel are often less attached to Judaism. But that offers no comfort at all; it is still a tragedy that so many are alienated from their Jewish identities.

The election campaign has also exposed ugly rifts within our community. Some passionate opponents of Mamdani lashed out at fellow Jews they felt had failed them.

These attacks allowed people to vent their anger. But they did nothing to stop Mamdani. On the contrary, they threaten to tear apart our community.

Division is the Achilles heel of the Jewish people. We often fight each other, only to have our enemies exploit our divisions. The Talmud condemns what it calls "sinaat chinam" pointless hatred, which it blames for the destruction of the Second Temple. Multiple Jewish factions focused first on fighting each other, paving the way for the Romans to conquer the country.

This is not just a history lesson. If our community can't unify, we will certainly fail.

To add even more angst, this election comes at a time when both the left and the right are turning away from the Jewish community. Zohran Mamdani and Tucker Carlson represent a new era in American politics, in which populists demonize Israel to advance their own agenda. Antisemitism is going mainstream, and we are shocked to find former friends peddling bizarre conspiracy theories.

It is a very difficult time for New York Jews. It's beginning to feel like the 1930s.

Our vacation from history is over.

Things used to be easier. Although not every politician felt comfortable with Israel or the Jewish community, it was usually a product of ignorance. The old playbook was to create relationships, advocate, and educate these opponents. This was often very effective; some ended up being passionate supporters of Israel.

That was then. Right now, we need to throw out the old playbook.

Mamdani is a mayor unlike any other. I know some are optimistic that he will turn out to be more moderate than his platform.

Unfortunately, that is wishful thinking.

Mamdani is a talented politician who knows how to project an image of concern and understanding. But you cannot judge a candy by its wrapper. Mamdani has very troubling associations; he campaigned with Imam Wahhaj and palled around with Hasan Piker. Statements he makes in unguarded moments, like "the boot of the NYPD on the necks of black and brown New Yorkers were laced up by the IDF" show what Mamdani really believes.

Considering that Mamdani's parents and wife are far more radical than him, one has to assume that Mayor Madani will not magically moderate.

Yes, there's no sugar-coating our current predicament. However...yes, there is a however,...there is a very good reason to be optimistic.

We can take a different approach. And we can succeed.

After Jeremy Corbyn won the leadership of the UK's Labor Party, the Jewish community organized with a passion. For five years the community took their case to the public, exposed antisemitism in the Labor Party, and worked tirelessly to oppose Corbyn's initiatives.

And it worked.

We must do the same. And I'm confident that we will.

This election campaign has been a test of our community's character. Nachmanides writes about the Biblical concept of a test. He offers the profound insight that a test isn't there to discover who you are; a test forces you to become who you can be. A test is a challenge that brings out previously unseen potential.

Every test transforms you.

And this test has transformed our community.

We've seen the best of our community in the last few months. We were determined. We worked hard. Volunteers young and old, door knockers, all were available to campaign at a moment's notice.

We fought the good fight.

As Jews, we know our history, which has its triumphs and even more challenges. There is one common lesson in all of this history; that we never lost faith in ourselves. We never quit. Nothing stopped us from pursuing our destiny.

Yes, Mamdani's election is a difficult defeat. However, we have overcome far worse in the past.

And we will overcome again.

Am Yisrael Chai!