Jon Alterman:
Dahlia Scheindlin is a political pollster and political analyst in Israel. She has worked on eight national campaigns in Israel, and she is also a fellow at The Century Foundation in New York. Dahlia, welcome to Babel.

Dahlia Scheindlin:
Thank you for having me on the show.

Jon Alterman:
Israel has just had a transition from Benjamin Netanyahu after 12 years. Do you think that Israel is at an inflection point, or is it in the middle of a muddle?

Dahlia Scheindlin:
It may be a little bit of both. Although, I wouldn’t overstate the case for an inflection point. There has been a tendency over the course of the last two years—and for much of the time that Netanyahu was in power—to project what is going here as if it’s all about Netanyahu. There’s a tendency to say that he started everything that happened, and that he’s responsible for every process that the country has gone through over the last dozen years. That’s really not true. Benjamin Netanyahu accelerated processes that were already in place, but they had begun years or decades before. He certainly brought a unique governing style that has had a deep impact on the country, but he was basically leveraging elements that already existed in the Israeli political culture—particularly social divisions. I don’t think most of those things are going to change overnight with him gone. The biggest thing that might change is that the volume of the deeply divisive, bitter, friend-and-foe-driven approach to governance might lessen. The rhetoric that goes along with it—which was often severely targeted at different communities in Israeli society—might change. I hope that it will change. The new government has been portraying that it will change, but is that really going to change the deeper direction of Israeli policy or the deeper conflicts within Israeli society that underlie those divisions? I don’t think so. Those things are going to continue. When I say deep divisions, I mean the question of whether Israel is ultimately a secular civic society or a theocratic society. I’m talking about the question of whether Israel is roughly within the region pre-1967, or whether it is an annexationist power that essentially governs the entire area between the river and the sea in perpetuity and controls millions of Palestinians. Those are the dilemmas that preceded Netanyahu by decades. Those questions are going to go on, and I don’t think they’re going to be decisively resolved with the new government. I don’t really see this as a deep turning point, but simply as the end to a particular era in Israeli politics and governance.

Jon Alterman:
As a pollster who looks a lot at Israeli public opinion, one way to look at the electoral results is that Netanyahu’s ideas captured well more than 60 percent of the vote. Does Netanyahu’s leaving the scene perhaps mean that Israeli society will coalesce around the view of life shared by Naftali Bennett, Gideon Sa’ar, the Likud party, and the Yisrael Beiteinu party? This would be far to the right of where a lot of American Jews are—and far to the right of where a lot of supporters of Israel around the world have been for decades.

Dahlia Scheindlin:
I think that’s a very important insight—based on the reality of how the vote broke down—that is often lost in the discourse
about these four elections. 72 seats of 120 parliamentary seats in the Israeli Knesset went to parties that are ideologically committed to the right-wing. That is the highest number of seats for the right-wing in the last 20 years, and depending on how you count, it might well be the highest number of seats ever won for right-wing parties. What’s interesting about it is that it doesn’t reflect the percentage of Israelis who self-identify as ideologically right-wing. That’s just around 50 or 52 percent. Having said that, those are the election results: 72 seats. If Netanyahu had resigned as it was rumored that he might—even 24 hours before the establishment of this government—there would have been a coalition of right-wing parties within minutes. Essentially, it would have been an easy coalition for them to form, and that would have been a massive coalition for Israeli society. We don’t know what will happen if Netanyahu leaves the scene. In fact, some people are saying that his leaving would be the worst thing that could happen to the new government. This is why it was being rumored that his departure was going to be his final trick before the government was established. I don’t think there’s much chance of it. Netanyahu apparently isn’t quite that committed to establishing ideologically right-wing governments, because he insists on remaining within the political system. He simply moved chairs yesterday—from the chair in the Knesset reserved for the prime minister to the chair of the head of the opposition. He has conveyed, in no uncertain terms, that he plans to stay as a very active and fighting head of the opposition, determined to bring the government down.

Jon Alterman:

To me, one of the great surprises of the last election was how good a politician Yair Lapid showed himself to be. He showed himself to be much better than former chief of staff Benny Gantz—who Netanyahu seem to run circles around. How do you think Yair Lapid is going to try to deal with Netanyahu, and do you think he'll be successful?

Dahlia Scheindlin:

It shouldn't surprise anybody that Yair Lapid was a better politician than Benny Gantz because Benny Gantz had zero political experience when he began running against Netanyahu. Yair Lapid has been in politics since 2012, when he announced the formation of his party. He first entered the Knesset in 2013. He has served as a coalition partner and as a minister, so it was natural that he would have political experience. Having said that, I think that he matured tremendously over the course of the last two years. He has—as you pointed out correctly again—demonstrated remarkable political acumen. He also demonstrated rare qualities in Israeli politics—patience, playing the long game, and self-sacrifice. This is something nobody really expected of a man whose image was as a movie star or talk show host—a little arrogant and a little empty. Those are not empty values. What we don't know is what those values will mean in terms of where Yair Lapid is going ideologically and on policy. We don't know that yet. I think that the best thing that he can do is keep this coalition together, and that is his biggest challenge because Netanyahu’s only route is to try to dismantle the coalition. As much as I think the country deserves to see what Yair Lapid’s ideological commitments really are, in the immediate future, he will have to continue applying those impressive skills.
keeping the political glued together. The power to cause other parties to compromise is what he really brought to the table, and he will have to continue doing that because there will be crises immediately. On Tuesday there’s supposed to be the big flag march, ultra-nationalists marching through Jerusalem. Who knows what kind of a crisis that will cause? It could be that they won't have 24 quiet hours in office before Yair Lapid has to work whatever magic he managed to pull to get those parties together into the coalition to begin with. I do think that will fall to Yair Lapid on some level. Naftali Bennett is prime minister, but he only has six seats in the coalition. I don’t see that Yair Lapid is simply going to fade into his role as foreign minister and have no influence for the next two years, given that he heads a party with 17 seats—the biggest party in the coalition.

**Jon Alterman:**
A lot of Israeli politics seems to divide on tribal issues, whether it’s peace with the Palestinians, or whether it’s the role of religion and politics. This coalition is so narrow and so fragile. It seems hard for me to imagine that they can make any movement on any of these big tribal issues. Are there other issues that Israel can make movement on? Are there non-sensitive issues that the coalition can get behind—and perhaps get Israel off of the tribal tone of so much of its politics?

**Dahlia Scheindlin:**
I do think there are some areas where Israeli society agrees that they don’t entirely disagree. Most parties are committed to economic growth, and many think that there needs to be some more action on the government to help reduce severe socio-economic inequality. I think that’s something that they can marginally agree on, especially in the post-Covid era, when there are some clear problems with the Israeli economy. Everybody agrees there’s a problem with the deficit right now. Everybody agrees that there are still too many people on furlough who haven't gone back to work, and that there needs to be a plan for that. They may not agree on how to do it, but those aren’t as sensitive as national existential issues. Some of the ministries that have gone to the left-wing parties are less controversial. Meretz holds the health ministry. Who can disagree on the importance of the health ministry? There are things we need to be prepared for in the coming years following the Covid-19 crisis. I don’t think we’re going to see existential debates over that. Merav Michaeli, the head of the Israeli Labor Party is the transportation minister. That has political sensitivities because it involves the integration of the West Bank into Israel, and it’s not clear exactly where that will go. However, that’s not the most important part of it. Primarily that is about things that Israelis agree on. We have an enormous congestion problem; Israel has one of the most crowded roads in the entire OECD community. You don’t have to be a data nerd to know that when you’re sitting in traffic for two hours to get to Jerusalem, there’s a problem. The government can make progress on these things. The Israeli judiciary is the major issue that I think will lead to very deep divisions. For extremely fundamental reasons, it has become an enormous source of contention, largely because of the Netanyahu era, but not primarily because of him. Benjamin Netanyahu only personally got involved in that debate over the last couple of years—coincidentally or not—as he was facing indictment, but there have been far-right-
wing forces, including very active members of his Likud party, portraying to the Israeli public that the judiciary is a rapacious force that has overstepped its bounds. They say it has encroached on the will of the voters and is trying to impose a liberal, left-wing agenda on Israeli society, so it must be restrained. The current government includes some figures who’ve been very central in that—including the prime minister, Naftali Bennett. Ayelet Shaked, the other partner running Bennett’s party, was the justice minister during the peak of this campaign. She led the campaign. She appointed—by my count—close to half the judges in the country. The new justice minister is Gideon Sa’ar. He’s a Likud breakaway. He supports reform, and when the right-wing in Israel talks about reforms in the judiciary, they usually mean attempts to restrain the power of the Israeli supreme court or other judicial figures. One of the first things Gideon Sa’ar insisted on in coalition negotiations was dividing the role of Israel’s attorney general. That is considered a means of weakening that role and exerting more political control from the sitting government over the attorney general. I don't know whether this government can agree on that fundamental issue. There are some issues where they can agree that are not so controversial, but there are also some dark horse issues—if you will—that haven’t been prominently on the agenda that could also torpedo the successful functioning of this government.

Jon Alterman:
The politicization of the judiciary and attempts to capture the judiciary is something we’ve had come up in U.S. campaigns, and a number of articles have compared Benjamin Netanyahu and his supporters to Donald Trump and his supporters. On what aspects are those comparisons useful, and where do you think those comparisons break down?

Dahlia Scheindlin:
There are many aspects of overlap. Netanyahu has employed classic tactics of populist leaders. There can be populist leaders on the left and the right, and on the right, you can distinguish them by calling them nationalist populists. Netanyahu uses all of those techniques. In fact, he was using them long before Donald Trump was even on people’s minds as a potential politician. In the 1990s, Netanyahu was already vilifying media, calling them left-wing and saying they were out to get him, characterizing them as an enemy of the people—without necessarily using that term. At that time, he also knew the appeal of reaching out to Israel's most aggrieved communities, playing upon their victimization and marginalization, and taking it upon himself, saying, "They are trying to persecute me just the way they've persecuted you; my victory is your victory." That is a theme that Netanyahu has basically burnished, refined, and honed to perfection, starting from when he came back to office in 2009. This has to do with the themes of the real people—the real true voice of the people against the cabal of the elite. He perfected the populist style and leveraged it, pitting different groups against one another and targeting internal enemies—whether it’s the media, the Arab minority, or leftists. He spoke about them in such severe terms that it approaches incitement at points. There is everything in common with Trump. Starting in 2009 there was a wave of legislation that essentially violates liberal principles—but was also in many ways considered anti-democratic. That legislation has gone on throughout the
decades—all under Netanyahu’s watch. Where I think he differs from other nationalist populists is that Israel is involved in a protracted conflict with the Palestinians. Why are these two connected? Many of the laws that they have tried to pass under Netanyahu are particularly focused on constraining criticism of government policy with relation to the occupation, strengthening the Jewish identity of Israel, and stifling expressions of Palestinian identity—whether it's in Israel or anywhere else. The particular format it's taking is largely around the conflict. That lays the groundwork for weakening opposition to the Israeli policy of occupation, or even annexation. It weakens the possibility of Palestinians protesting that policy—whether citizens of Israel or those under occupation—and it anchors and emphasizes the unquestioned dominance of Jewish identity, despite the fact that Israel is making its control over the Palestinian areas permanent. I think there’s a somewhat different motivation for the tactics that we’ve talked about—specifically the illiberal and less democratic direction of the nationalist populism in Israel. The tactics are very similar, but I think the motivations and the underlying reasons are somewhat different.

**Jon Alterman:**
I’ve seen different accounts of how much Israelis care about their relations with the United States, and how much they care about the U.S. Jewish community. How should we see the range of opinion in Israel about both the United States and the importance of strong relations with the U.S. Jewish community?

**Dahlia Scheindlin:**
On the issue of the United States, there's not that much that people disagree on. There may be contradictions in what they think. The thing that most Israelis agree on is that the United States is Israel’s best friend. It has always been Israel’s best friend. It will probably continue to be Israel's best friend, and Israel should take that friendship seriously. That’s where they agree. There hasn't been that much awareness in the past over the deep partisan divide in Israel among U.S. policy circles and even among U.S. Jewry. There is a little more awareness in Israel over the years. The contradiction lies in the fact that despite Israelis seeing this relationship as so key and so important, they don’t invest in learning those nuances. They weren't particularly upset when Netanyahu endangered the historically bipartisan nature of the relationship by taking such a nasty line on the Obama administration. It was not a respectful relationship. It was a relentless message that the prime minister hammered on about how bad the Obama administration was and how anti-Israel it was—not even considering his going behind the president’s back to speak to Congress or his unrestrained against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). There was no acknowledgment that the JCPOA was at least an attempt to restrain Iran's nuclear program—it was all about a concerted U.S. attempt to give Iran nuclear weapons. That was the only line you heard in Israel. President Obama was eventually replaced by somebody that is considered to be a great friend of Israel, Donald Trump. Israel was one of the only countries in the Western world where Trump had majority approval ratings. Now that Trump is out and President Biden is in, you don’t see Israelis particularly nervous about that either. Even if there are right-
wing commentators in the news saying that it’s worrying, none of them are really willing to go up against a new U.S. president and take the initiative to slander a U.S. government—including Netanyahu. The Israeli public is basically assured that even if it's a Democratic administration, President Biden seems like a nice guy to them, and they trust that the United States will always be on their side. I would call it a bit of complacency about the U.S. relationship. There’s a sense that it’s so unshakeable that even Netanyahu’s controversial position doesn’t really change the reality. Even a new U.S. president from the Democratic party doesn’t really change the commitment that the United States has to Israeli. I don’t think too many Israelis are really concerned that the United States would do anything dramatic to pressure or limit Israel’s range of action because the United States has never done anything that really caused Israel to change direction.

Jon Alterman:
Dahlia Scheindlin, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Dahlia Scheindlin:
My pleasure—excellent questions.