

Dear friends,

As you might have heard, yesterday I announced that I shall not seek a second term as chairman of the Meretz-Yachad Party.

The decision was not an easy one for me, but, I believe, the right one. For the recent decision by my Meretz Party colleague Haim Oron (aka Jumes) to join the race meant that I would have to compete with a man who walks the same political path as I, and who is, moreover, a close personal friend. And this I would not do. I have held this principle my entire my political life - that I will not run against a comrade who walks the same political path. And although Oron's decision to run surprised me, catching me well into my own re-election campaign, my ideological closeness with Oron dictated my move.

Let me underscore that I joined the Meretz-Yachad party in 2003 not in order to become its chairman so much as to be a part of it. For Meretz is a unique party in the Israeli political landscape: a party that privileges values and ideas above being in power; a party that fights every day for a better and more just Israel; a party that ceaselessly promotes its positions, even when they are not popular, until they become adopted by the majority. Next March, I will have served as party chairman for four years. And although I will no longer serve as party chairman once a new one is elected, I intend to continue being a full and active member of this party and, of course, to continue representing it in the Knesset.

Indeed, there are certain advantages to not serving as party chairman, and the most salient one for me is the greater time that I will be able to dedicate to the peace process, especially in the coming year. Last month's Annapolis conference set an ambitious agenda for Israel and the Palestinians of concluding negotiations on a permanent-status agreement by January 2009. Although not an official deadline, January 2009 is as real a deadline as deadlines go, since what will not be achieved during 2008 will not be achieved in 2009. This is both because Abu Mazen will end his term that month, and because any new American administration that will be inaugurated that month will take its time before investing itself in the Middle East peace process.

Given the urgency of completing an agreement in 2008, and the general sense of skepticism about the feasibility of doing so within one year - the dominant feeling is that, even if the substantive features of the final deal are already known, the actual process of reaching an agreement is technically too difficult and procedurally too intricate for the parties to reach an agreement in 12 months - I am already working diligently on convening a major conference of experts next month in Tel Aviv. The experts, who will include key figures from past negotiations between Israel, the Palestinians and the Syrians, will be asked to respond to the question, "How to Reach an Agreement in 2008." Needless to say, the overarching thesis of this conference is that it is possible, and the public, as well as our decision-makers, need to be convinced that it is.

For now, I thank you all for your steadfast support, and I will continue updating you on my work as always.

Yours always,

Yossi