



# Culture Connection May 2020

## Satirizing the new Government

**Warning: Adult Humor ahead!**

It was Dryden who wrote of great satire:

“There is still a fine difference betwixt the slovenly butchering of a man and the fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body and leaves it standing in its place.”

I think it would be fair to say that Israeli satire is more in the habit of slovenly blood-baths than Dryden’s subtle artistry. No more so than in the political situation we find ourselves today.

### A New Government, Finally

After a bitter and divisive 18 months, three pretty inconclusive elections, and an unprecedented amount of broken election promises, Israel now has a ruling coalition government.

The government was effectively made possible by the Covid 19 Pandemic. This terrible emergency led the leader of the Blue-White party, Benny Gantz, to betray/rise above\* (\*delete according to taste) his central election pledge, and he agreed to sit in a government with Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister. Gantz argued, and continues to argue, that the country could not cope with a fourth election in the middle of a pandemic. Given this potential for [“a kind of civil war”](#), he chose to compromise.

This so-called Emergency Government was sworn in yesterday May 17<sup>th</sup> to the scorn of many. Forget the bitterness of Gantz’ jilted partners from Yesh Atid, who had supported Gantz all the way. Ignore the fury of Yamina, Netanyahu’s natural partners from the Right whom he ignored when it was convenient. Forget the fact that no one, but **no one**, believes that Netanyahu will step down in 18 months as the coalition agreement stipulates. The universally-shared scorn emerged when it became known that this government would have 36 ministers and 16 deputy ministers.





Now Israel isn't such a huge country. We haven't hit 9 million citizens yet. Just by way of comparison, the US has 16 people in the cabinet (population 37 times larger than Israel's). In Germany the same. The UK has 22 ministers. India has 25 ministers and 33 "deputy" ministers – for a population over 170 times larger than that of Israel.

As [Opposition Leader Lapid pointed out](#), there will be more people in this supposed Covid Emergency Government than are currently on ventilators in Israel. "We could put a minister next to the bed of every Corona patient," he remarked.

## Minister of What?

The public's frustration is that the number of ministers has nothing to do with the Covid Emergency, nor does it relate to the number of parties in the coalition: The amount of ministries is equivalent to the amount of noise non-ministers might make if they don't receive a ministry. The irony has been noted, that when one in four Israeli adult is out of work, members of Knesset ([who recently received a raise](#)) are [now shouting](#) about being left out of a better-paid job of Minister.

In order to make room for so many Ministers, Israel now has a Ministry for Community Advancement. One Minister is now in charge of two brand-new Ministries: Higher Education, and Water Resources. (Cue cheap jokes about being in charge of the toilets at University). Across social media people are announcing themselves Minister of Shabbat Afternoon Snoozes, and Minister of Netflix Affairs. Having said that, the Ministry for Space has been eliminated this time...

More informed and intelligent political commentators than me (I recommend Haviv Rettig Gur and Shmuel Rosner – both write with great professionalism in excellent English from a central if not right-leaning perspective) will warn of how [essential work has been undermined by breaking up ministries to create mini-ministries](#), and of how a bloated cabinet lends far too much power to the Prime Minister.

## Anti-Dryden!

I'm just here to share with you the rude, adult-humored anti-Drydenesque response of satirists to such a situation. The classic revue show of the 80's and 90s, [Zehu Zeh](#), made a comeback at the start of the Corona crisis. The now-elderly actors joked they were being conscripted to boost national morale. Personally, I think their sketches have been, well, sketchy. But this one really hit the nail on the head.

In response to the shameless response of all those who supported the number of ministers, [Zehu Zeh](#) chose to embody in comedy the classic definition of philosopher [Avishai Margalit](#): "A decent society is one that does not humiliate its citizens."





<https://youtu.be/saNRwL-siOY>

## The Challenge of the Acronym

A second clip, that has started doing the rounds, actually comes from the near past. Back in 2014 the comedy series *Polishuk* aired its third season. Polishuk is a clueless politician – his name a fortuitous combination of *Politika* (politics) and *Shuk* (market). This politician somehow bumbles successfully through the ranks of the Knesset to be offered several ministries at one time.

In this clip he needs to deal with the challenge of the acronym. As we know, Israel is awash with acronyms – the result of Army efficiency and the vowel-less opportunities offered by the Hebrew language. In Israel, for example, the Chief of Staff is known as the RaMaTKaL – a title constructed from the initials of Chief of the General Headquarters – *Rosh MaTeh haKLaLi*. SHaBaK comes from General Security Services – *SHerut haBitachon haKlali* – the internal secret services.

The key to acronyms is that in addition to referring to the initials of a post, they can also create a word in themselves. Hence the concerns of Polishuk and his advisor in this scene.



<https://youtu.be/o567xKmbFz8>

It is almost frightening how in this scene the Prime Minister comments on the triviality of the Health Ministry, given our Coronadays...

There was a time when many viewed Polishuk's goings-on as being a little bit too extreme, too far-fetched. The situations were too implausible to be funny.

No longer, it seems!

Robbie Gringras, May 2020