Why did Benny Gantz form a coalition government with Benjamin Netanyahu?

And will he regret it?

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue

UNEASY UNITY? Benny Gantz (right) and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu reach to shake hands at a memorial for former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 2019. (Heidi Levine / Pool via AP)

The major question everyone in Israel has been asking is whether or not Benny Gantz, leader of the center-right Blue and White party, did right by joining forces with his sworn political enemy, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in an emergency coalition government.

Those arguing yes, mainly from the right side of the political spectrum, maintain that the coronavirus pandemic is sufficiently scary to bring together all political parties to fight something that is beyond politics. In addition, it puts an end to nearly two years of political uncertainty—of inconclusive elections, interim governments, the impossibility of passing a budget, and a lot else besides.

Those arguing no include members of Blue and White's formal partners, Yesh Atid and others, who point out that in joining this coalition government Gantz has denied the chief platform for his own election bid to become prime minister: an end to Netanyahu's 11-year reign. Gantz's main claim against Netanyahu was that he is facing three counts of mistrust and corruption, which could land him in jail if he's proven guilty, and therefore that he cannot fulfill his role as prime minister and fight these charges at the same time.

Who is Benny Gantz, and how did he become such a force in Israeli politics? He is a native Israeli, born to a mother who was a Holocaust survivor and a father who tried to enter British Mandatory Palestine illegally. After a typical Israeli education, Gantz joined the army as a paratrooper and enjoyed a rich military career, retiring in 2015 as chief of the general staff. (Many Israeli political leaders have come from the military.) After a short career in tech, he entered politics.

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Gantz's original political program was to prevent a prime minister from serving for more than two terms and to bar indicted politicians from serving in the Knesset. His Israel Resilience Party soon joined forces with other parties from the moderate center or right, and these united groups presented themselves as Blue and White. However, they failed after three attempts to form a new government.

Hence Gantz's decision to join with Netanyahu. His original goals have been shelved, along with other proposals, for the sake of national unity in the face of the coronavirus. In moving toward this emergency government, Gantz lost many of his coalition partners, although the left-wing Labor Party under Amir Peretz has also agreed to join this government-to-be.

What adds fuel to this combustible crisis is the character of the prime minister. Once a bright and idealistic politician, Netanyahu has shown increasing signs of fanaticism—or at least populism, which in Israel is more or less the same thing. His courting of the poorer, less-educated Sephardi population, along with his de-pendency on the anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox parties, underline the lengths to which he has gone to shore up his ever smaller support in the country as a whole. He did not win the previous elections—that is, he did not reach the 61 seats needed to create a majority—but the opposition was not sufficiently united to form an alternative government. This was partly because it would have included the United

Arab List party, which was a red light for Gantz. (He later softened his position, though too late to make a difference.)

The coalition government thus formed will have Netanyahu as leader for a year and a half, after which, theoretically at least, Gantz will become head of the government. Netanyahu wants to use his year and a half to push forward his plans to annex territories on the West Bank and absorb them into Israel proper—a move backed by Gantz, whose politics on this issue are not far removed from those of his new partner. However, even Netanyahu has agreed not to put his plans into practice if the United States objects—which officially it still does, although David Friedman, the US ambassador to Israel, has indicated that his government supports these plans.

Gantz has not come out for or against a Palestinian state. His attitude on the subject seems to be pragmatic rather than ideological like Netanyahu's.

Netanyahu has also taken an aggressive stand against the independent judiciary, particularly with Israel's highest court. His attempts to suppress its power, or even to silence it altogether, are seen as a tactic to prevent his own trial from ever taking place. He has maintained his innocence on all counts, but of course the only way to prove this is for him to stand trial. The more he protests his innocence, and the more he tries to wrestle with the court, the guiltier he appears. Yet the Movement for Quality Government failed in its recent attempt to persuade the high court to legislate against Netanyahu's government-in-the-making. The way is now clear, legally as well as politically, to form a new coalition government.

Was Gantz right to prioritize national unity over politics as usual? Only history will tell. What emerges so far is that Netanyahu, a master of political maneuvering, has helped create a situation so complex that it would take a team of Talmudic scholars to unravel it.

Speaking of whom, the ancient sages' take on the powerful is summed up in the Ethics of the Fathers (2:3), where the following saying is attributed to Rabban Gamaliel: "Beware of rulers, for they befriend someone only for their own benefit, they act friendly when it benefits them, but do not stand by someone in his time of need."

If Gantz remains uncertain as to the choice he made, these sages might suggest he proceed with caution.