

# THE ISRAELI KNESSET SIMULATION PROGRAM

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## **A STATEMENT OF VISION**

The idea for the simulation program emerged from a sense of absence. Students don't learn enough about Israel, and when they do, the content often centers around military conflict; Israel and its Arab neighbors forms the narrative of the state's first decades, narrowed to Israel and the Palestinians as the lens of the more contemporary discussion.

In the focus on conflict and existential crisis, students are deprived of rich opportunities to explore the many other facets of the Jewish State. While there are many compelling aspects of Israel to explore, the sense of absence was over the bigger picture concerning the Zionist endeavor as it manifests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: how does a government and a people balance the tension in being Jewish and democratic? How does a nation respond to the challenge of having its values put into practice after 2000 years of exile? Israel is a laboratory for the Jewish people taking its place as a modern nation: how does it balance competing needs? What are the values that come into conflict, and what is at stake? With all of these concerns, Israel presents an unsurpassed educational opportunity for investigating what it means to be Jewish, to be a nation, to be independent, to have power, in the modern world.

But the geopolitical, military history is important, existential crises a daily routine. That cannot be denied, nor replaced in the curriculum. But what if an alternative model existed, if instead of supplanting classic course material, the either/or problem could become a 'both' solution? By finding one period a week in the schedule, and creating a virtual world that existed beyond the boundaries of the schedule's bonds, students could suddenly access the world of internal Israel, the tensions it faces, the complexities of its society, and the modes through which it responds. It was through this vision that the Knesset Simulation was born.

There was, however, a second sense of absence. For the school does have second-level Israel courses that transcend the existential, military timeline and delve into some of the topics mentioned above. Those issues, though, require more than learning, more than class; they require living, they demand a personal investment unattached to grades, and more palpable than the words of an essay.

What if students took on the character of a member of Knesset for an extended period of time, delved into that person's perspective, engaged with a party platform, worried about the desires of constituents, and struggled with the realities of a parliamentary system? What if students learned about Israel from the inside out, forming opinions through exposure and experience, in a world in which to succeed they had to compromise, court allies, and sometimes fail?

That is the vision for simulation: creating a world in which right and left come to life, and they are not mere synonyms for 'dovish' and 'hawkish'; where secular and charedi, Israeli Arab and Israeli Jew meet at the conference table; where the fabric of the Jewish State is being shaped.

That is the hope and potential for the Knesset Simulation program.

# THE ISRAELI KNESSET SIMULATION PROGRAM

The Israeli Knesset Simulation is a mandatory, first-semester program for the entire senior class, with one formal in-person meeting time per week, and ongoing work via the website. The program is overseen by the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Dean with assistance from the Social Studies Department Head, and run in conjunction with the Social Studies faculty, the school's Israel Affairs Coordinator, and in some years, members of the Hebrew Department.

The simulation can be run in a variety of ways. The version described below is a hybrid model: it is neither a full class, nor is it a club. A class model would provide far greater time and continuity for the simulation, but would come at the cost of other content. A club model would ensure the investment of all participants, but would be voluntary and only involve a select few. The hybrid model guarantees participation of every senior – since it is mandatory – and does not come at the cost of other classes. It is also, therefore, less formal, and more independent. However, student participation in the simulation accounts for 5% of the fall semester Social Studies grade, on an ‘all or nothing’ basis, providing incentive for the few who are not motivated by the simulation itself.

## GOALS

The Israeli Knesset Simulation offers students the opportunity to role-play Israeli parliamentarians. In that context, the program:

1. Introduces students to the ***range & complexity of issues that the Israeli government faces***. This occurs on two fronts:
  - First, by delving into the issues, making decisions and seeing their outcomes, students learn more about the various issues. Researching topics, crafting bills, and maneuvering for votes provides participants with information and experience that combine to provide depth to their understanding.
  - Second, by role-playing a member of Knesset, students engage with other members of Knesset. That interpersonal aspect brings issues to life, and the variety of topics manifesting through proposed bills creates a web of political interconnectedness: each topic impacts others as MKs struggle to create majorities, trading votes on issues they care less about for votes on issues they care more about.
2. Increases student understanding of the ***larger picture of Israeli politics***. While much attention in the Jewish world and global community is generally dedicated to the Arab-Israeli conflict, this simulation focuses largely on internal Israeli affairs, with no more than one of the six committees devoting its time to issues concerning Palestinians.
3. Deepens student understanding of the ***workings of government and diplomacy***. Israel functions under a different system of government than America, and the differences between the two-party system and multi-party system, and between the direct voting for president and voting for parties offer participants foils through which to better understand and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each system. Moreover, the competing interests of disputing parties – or of factions within parties – and the inherent difficulty in reaching consensus or compromise enriches their understanding of the need for diplomacy, prioritization, and values-based decision-making. The unfamiliar wrinkle of the possibility of a vote of non-confidence and the ‘bringing down’ of the government heightens the sense of urgency in coalition-building.
4. Engages students in the ***issues***. Role-playing someone who cares passionately about the issue – often with thoughts that are vastly different than the students’ personal ones – increases the sense of ownership over the challenges facing Israel. Attempting to find legislative solutions serves a similar function.

## STRUCTURE

The entire senior class is divided into the same number of parties that are represented in the Knesset at that time, with identical ratios of MKs per party to the total number of MKs. For example, the current [19<sup>th</sup>] Knesset consists of 10 parliamentary groups/political parties, totaling the standard 120 MKs. The senior class consists of 70 students, who are divided into those same 10 political parties in direct proportion to the percentage of seats in the Knesset. The ruling Likud party, for example, won 23% of the vote in the 2015 election, giving them 30 seats in the Knesset. In the simulation, the Likud party will therefore have 16 seats.

After several initial sessions in which students are taught the basics of the Israeli parliamentary system, all participants are given their role-playing identity, after which the simulation proceeds in four steps:

1. MKs learn about **themselves**, filling out personal bios.
2. MKs meet in their political **parties** for several sessions, learning the basics and then intricacies of their party's political platform. As a group they prioritize their goals for the upcoming sessions of Knesset. They debate and reach consensus over what approach to take as a collective, when to compromise, when to toe the party line, what issues to push, and what bills to propose.
3. MKs then meet in one of six **committees** to focus on a specific issue facing Israel. In preparation they must learn the relevant information pertaining to the topic, brief their parties, and agree with their party on what their stance will be for that issue. Over multiple committee sessions they will do their best to represent their parties, crafting bills that push the party agenda. In order for a bill to pass from committee to the full Knesset, it must get a two-thirds majority vote.
4. Finally, MKs gather together as a **full Knesset** in order to vote on any bills that passed through committee proceedings. Each MK has their own vote, but party heads retain the right of invoking party discipline to control the voting of MKs in their respective parties. To pass the full Knesset, a bill must receive a simple majority of votes.
5. Depending on time, some years there is a **crisis** in which all the MKs are called out of class for an extended session of Knesset to deal with an emergency. Two crisis examples can be found in separate documents.

It is in the committee subgroups that students do a fair amount of their work, representing their party's position on specific issues, writing bills with MKs of other parties, and generally interacting with members of other factions. This work will take place on both the website and in person, so that each student will belong to two groups: their political party and their Knesset committee, working in one while keeping the other updated. Aside from accurately representing the real Knesset, the advantage of these divisions is that each student in the grade will have an individual task. The work in the committees will demand their involvement, their votes, and their representation of the larger group.

The simulation is run by the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Dean, who plays the role of Speaker of the Knesset. Along with the other faculty members, the Speaker sets the agenda for each committee, decides when the students will meet in parties or in committees, and calls for debates and votes as a full Knesset when appropriate.

Students role-play the heads of each party and the chairs of each committee. There is one faculty member overseeing every party and committee, but only in a supervisory role, mainly to provide assistance or to clarify complex topics; all meetings are run by students who are tasked with the smooth functioning of their party or committee.

## FORMAT

The live person interactions take place once a week, in the manner described above.

The virtual interactions can take place at any time, though are often guided by homework assignments on a weekly basis. The format of the website is detailed through a separate screencast video.

## CONTENT

There are three types of content in the simulation:

1. **Biographical information:** This is the only research that the students must do on their own, and is limited to learning about the Member of Knesset that they each role-play. Examples are on the website and are displayed in the screencast.
2. **Party Information:** This material is provided to the students in a specific section of the website. It is a combination of the official party platform – when possible – and news articles about the party. Examples are on the website and are displayed in the screencast, and can also be found as an attachment.
3. **Committee Information:** This material is also provided to the students in a specific section of the website. It consists of collections of news articles about the topics. Each topic is chosen in the summer, taken right from the headlines so as to be current. Examples are on the website and are displayed in the screencast, and can also be found as an attachment.

## SAMPLE TOPICS

The number of topics covered per simulation varies depending on the speed with which the MKs negotiate, but each simulation begins with six core topics, corresponding to six committees. *[To keep the numbers manageable, committees range from 10-12 MKs, totaling six committees. In a different sized school there would be a different number of committees].* Each committee is modeled off of a real committee in the Knesset. The current committee work focuses on the following topics:

- **FOREIGN AFFAIRS:** Should Israel extend Israeli law to the settlements, which are currently under military law? This is a measure being pushed by HaBayit HaYehudi, which critics say is an attempt to annex the West Bank.
- **CONSTITUTION, LAW & JUSTICE:** What are ways of curtailing the power of the Supreme Court, or of aligning it more closely with the Knesset? This is a topic that is also being pushed by HaBayit HaYehudi, in an attempt to weaken the left-leaning Supreme Court, strengthening its own right wing position.
- **SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE TEMPLE MOUNT:** What should the law be regarding Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, and MK access to the Temple Mount? In general, what laws should be instituted that would alleviate the tensions that have previously led to rioting in the streets and demonstrations from both sides?
- **DIASPORA AFFAIRS:** How to counteract or respond to the BDS movement? This debate coheres around the topic of censorship and the tension between freedom of speech and national security, pitting nationalist sentiments against civil liberties.
- **INTERNAL AFFAIRS:** How to respond to seeming institutional racism in the Israeli police force, directed against the Ethiopian community?
- **TRANSPORTATION:** What should the law be regarding public transportation on Shabbat? This topic pits the religious factions against the secular ones.

Other **committees** from past years have included:

- Education
- Finance
- Economic
- Environment

Topics from past years include, but are not limited to:

### **FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

- Iran and its pursuit of nuclear weapons
- The vote on Palestinian independence at the UN
- Unstable relationships with Egypt and Syria
- Negotiating with the Palestinians about settlement-building
- Courting alliances with Russia, China, and India.

### **INTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

- Infrastructure spending in Arab villages
- Women of the Wall, and the place and role of women at the Kotel.
- Illegal African Immigration
- The Draft Law
- Issues pertaining to Naqba commemorations
- Segregated Bussing
- Hannibal Directive

### **EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

- Zionist and Jewish values curriculum to be taught in schools
- Banning of the textbook with the Palestinian narrative
- What curricula are required to be taught in charedi schools in order for them to receive government funding?

### **ECONOMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

- **Poverty:** How should Israel respond to the poverty that plagues certain sectors of its society?
- **Water:** How should the government deal with the water shortage?

### **FINANCE COMMITTEE**

- **Taxes:** Protests over cost of living have led many to question the tax system, its impact on the middle class in specific, and its built-in exemptions for some, especially the chareidi community.
- **Cost of Living:** How to make rent more affordable for young couples.

### **CONSTITUTION, LAW & JUSTICE COMMITTEE**

- Should Israel have a constitution?
- There have been proposed changes to the Law of Return? How should it read?
- Should Israel's status as a Jewish state be constitutionally protected, and if so, how?
- Should there be a loyalty oath?

## STUDENT TESTIMONIALS & ANECDOTES

### 1. Email from a student on his gap year:

*I didn't feel like I was doing anything important with my year, so I went out and asked for an internship at the Knesset with someone at Yesb Atid that I knew before he got into politics. I felt comfortable going to him because I knew him beforehand, but I realized very soon after I went there that as long as I came in willing to help, I think he would have let anyone interview for it. Long story short, he told me I'm more than welcome to, and I'm very excited to get started.*

*I had no idea how accurate the framework for your Knesset simulation actually was to how the Knesset is built. I got a tour where I saw all of the committee rooms, the party rooms, meeting rooms, and the huge voting room, and I actually knew more or less how things worked. ... You do an excellent job of teaching us more or less how things work, and it was really cool and validating to see it in action.*

### 2. Email from a student currently in college:

*My experience as Naftali Bennett really helped shape my opinions about Israel. Fun stuff: over the summer I became really good friends with Matan Revivi, Oded Revivi's son... I was proud to have legitimate conversations with Matan about Israeli politics, and our conversations were strengthened by my understanding of the far right bloc.*

*The simulation ... gave me an opportunity to learn a ton about other parties -- not only their platform, but also their willingness to talk and align themselves with other parties. I experienced the field, running around trying to broker a deal that would not only legalize Israeli access to the Temple Mount, but also would depose Bibi (in favor of me) as Prime Minister. I experienced the real motivations of Israeli politicians. The issue of access to the Temple Mount was an effective topic for the simulation because it allowed my peers to represent parties in the most extreme ways... I had the opportunity to bridge my life to the parties. I understood the legitimate and real challenges of negotiations in the Knesset. I understood the tenuous relationships between Knesset members, demonstrated by tensions between peers. I vividly remember the fierce rivalry between Bibi's actor and Yair Lapid's character -- both were at the top of the class, and had applied to the same school early decision. It added a twist that added real world application. By focusing the simulation around the Temple Mount, I recognized concrete examples that highlight the left and right bloc divide. It's easy to think that the parties disagree on how they deal with the Palestine conflict. But that's too big picture: no major inroads have been made on the issue since the Oslo Accords. That's over 20 years ago. The Temple Mount depicted an everyday example of this divide: and there are more ways in which the conflict is manifested in Knesset. The simulation encouraged and motivated me to research the relationships between the major party leaders and to discover smaller issues that could actually come up in Knesset, not just the buzz word issues.*

### 3. Story told by a senior when he was still in the Simulation

*I play Naftali Bennet in the simulation, and I heard he was coming to New York to speak at a local synagogue. My friend and I went to the speech, and afterwards we went up to him and introduced ourselves. My friend introduced me to him by saying: 'this is my friend. He's playing you in our school simulation'...the best part of that whole experience was that I actually understood what Bennet was saying in the speech. At times, I even anticipated what he was going to say!*

*(this was a different student than the previous one. They played Naftali Bennet during different years)*

### 4. Story told by a senior while still participating in the Simulation

*My family is friendly with Yitzchak Herzog, and had tried putting him in touch with me because of the Simulation. So I'm sitting at my Thanksgiving dinner and I'm told that Herzog is on the phone, waiting to speak to me. I tell him about the simulation and explained to him some of the bills that had been passed by our full Knesset. He said: 'you have a very right wing Knesset' which was completely true because some of our bills were extreme. So somewhat apologetically I said: 'I know, the bills aren't completely realistic.' He laughed and said: 'They're very realistic! My Knesset would also pass those bills...but the Supreme Court would strike them down!'*

## **5. Story that happened during the Simulation Crisis: Gazan War 2012**

*The crisis revolved around renewed shelling from Gaza into Israel, necessitating a response from the Israeli government. Of the three options on the table, two involved Israeli military might, either through the air or through a ground invasion. Members of the Arab Party Ra'am Ta'al worked extremely diligently to cobble together a coalition of parties that would block any use of force. When the full Knesset reconvened and it became clear that the tide had turned and significant military force was going to be used against Gaza, one of the Arab MKs took the floor, launched into an impassioned speech about her family living in Gaza, burst into tears, and left the room. She returned a few minutes later to cast her vote against a war.*

## **6. This final story happened to me, as Speaker of the Knesset**

*Several years ago we were already well into the simulation and internal party politics were heating up. I was walking from room to room as they were meeting in parties, and entered the Labor Party room. They quickly pulled me aside:*

*'We are trying to gather enough votes to unseat Bibi and take over the government with a new coalition. Can we merge with Hatnua, which will give us enough votes?'*

*I replied: 'While the simulation is a virtual world, it still has to have some semblance of reality, and in real life, that just wouldn't happen. The heads of those two parties – Tzipi Livni and Shelly Yacovitch – do not get along with each other. In fact, Tzipi Livni left Labor to lead HaTnua because she was ousted by Yacovitch, so I don't think they'll agree to unite.'*

*'No problem,' they said. 'We'll replace Yacovitch with Yitzhak Herzog as head of the party and merge with HaTnua.'*

*'I really don't think I can allow that,' I said. 'It's just not so realistic – you're doing anything you can to make your plan work but that's not how it works in real life.'*

*The very next week, I'm walking from room to room again, and entered the Labor Party room. They couldn't contain their excitement:*

*'We just came in to do some research and opened a news site! Take a look at the headline!' It read something to the effect of: 'Yacovitch ousted by Herzog; Labor unites with HaTnua.'*

*Seeing as how the students had correctly predicted reality, I promptly gave them permission to follow their plan, and they ultimately succeeded in bringing down the government, on the last day of the simulation.*