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MARKETPLACE SHLOMO MAITAL

Yaron Zelekha addresses a protest rally against the controversial proposed natural gas deal, Tel Aviv, November 14

# Social change – on a silver platter

If people of goodwill work together and engage in hard protests of all kinds, social change can and will happen

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## MARKETPLACE

**W**hen poverty, injustice, greed, inequality, tycoons and monopolies afflict Israel, and its democratic institutions fail to act – what can be done?

Can social protest bring about meaningful change? What role can print and visual media and social networks play as instigators and catalysts for social change? Can one committed passionate person spark real social change?

A new three-hour documentary film by Dror Tsabari, called “The Silver Platter,” three years in the making and broadcast on Channel 8, raises these questions. The film features three social critics who each star in a one-hour segment. The protagonists are Guy Rolnik, founder of the business daily TheMarker, Yaron Zelekha, accountant-general in the Finance Ministry from 2003 to 2007, and Prof. Daniel Guttwein, Haifa University historian. Each segment features mainly the talking heads of the protagonists making their impassioned pleas for social change.

The documentary’s title plays ironically on the words of Israel’s first president Chaim Weizmann, who said in December 1947, just after the adoption of the UN partition plan for Palestine, that “no state is ever handed on a silver platter.”

Poet Nathan Alterman used these words as the foundation of an iconic poem, written during the early stages of the 1948 War of Independence. In it, the people of Israel wait at the foot of Mt. Sinai for Moses to bring the Torah. But instead of Moses, two young wounded, exhausted soldiers appear – a boy and a girl. The people ask, “Who are you?” and the two respond, “We are the silver platter on which the state of the Jews was handed to you.”

Tsabari’s film purports to show how the “silver” (the Hebrew word means both silver and money) was handed to the tycoons by the state on a platter and in huge amounts. His goal, he said, was to engage the masses and move them to protest.

Tsabari, 51, is one of Israel’s most creative filmmakers. He co-invented “Connections,” a kind of docu-reality show that uses film footage generated by five men, and later five women, now in its fifth season. An American version was produced by AOL.

“The Silver Platter” follows “The Shakhuka System,” a 2008 film by investigative journalist Miki Rosenthal, now a Knesset Member for the Zionist Union, which highlighted the close ties between private capi-

tal and government, showing how the state handed its resources (such as the Dead Sea Works and the oil refineries) to a small cabal of wealthy families, in particular the Ofer Brothers.

## THE ECONOMIC POLICY OF THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT IS THE CENTRAL CAUSE OF POVERTY

The Ofer Brothers Group sued Rosenthal and initially no Israeli TV channel would broadcast his film. Eventually, Channel 1 broadcast it and the lawsuit was dismissed.

I found the first segment of “The Silver Platter” featuring Rolnik to be most interesting. Rolnik, 47, was rejected at age 18 by the IDF on health grounds. He volunteered for IDF Radio at age 18 and quickly became an economics reporter and editor. In 1999, he founded a business website TheMarker, and sold it six years later to the Haaretz daily. He is now deputy publisher.

In “The Silver Platter,” Rolnik speaks passionately about Israel’s bloated defense budget, tycoon control of the media, monopoly banks (Leumi and Hapoalim), moribund civil service, and how the tycoons got control of public assets by lending to and borrowing from one another.

**IN 2005**, Rolnik began a campaign to raise awareness of the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few families or tycoons. He recounts that Haaretz lost some NIS 10 million a year in advertising as a result. Despite this, and despite the desperate financial plight of print newspapers, Haaretz publisher Amos Shoken stood fast and supported Rolnik. In October 2010, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed a Committee for Increasing Competition, which eventually led to legislation and several key policies.

Rolnik’s 2009 campaign advocating more competition in the cellular phone market is widely believed to have inspired then-communications minister (now Finance Minister) Moshe Kahlon to open the market and bring in more competitors in 2012, sharply reducing cell phone bills. In 2014 alone, the three major cell phone operators (Pelephone,

Cellcom, Orange) saw their revenues fall by NIS 870 million (\$225 million), as new entrants spurred competition.

Rolnik has been teaching a course at the Tel Aviv University Faculty of Management on “Structural Issues in the Israeli Economy.” A large part of Tsabari’s segment on Rolnik features his lectures to students enrolled in this course. Rolnik and TheMarker also played a role in the July 2011 social protests, which saw a series of large demonstrations against the high cost of living.

The news website Mako once said that “Rolnik has the most keenly relevant pair of fangs in Israeli journalism... Rolnik and his team are a courageous beacon of light in a media world bent by vested interests and their controlling shareholders.”

In the second segment of “The Silver Platter,” Zelekha focuses on the high incidence of poverty in Israel, which he attributes to government policy.

I asked Zelekha what his current focus is. “The leading central problem, in my view, is the continuing economic policy of the Israeli government, which is the central cause of poverty,” he tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

The third segment features Guttwein. A card-carrying socialist, Guttwein offers his version of Israel’s economic history in which he attributes Israel’s monopoly economy to the rise of the Likud and to Haim Ramon, who he says destroyed the Histadrut, the national labor union. This segment is rather extreme and, thus, less effective than the previous two.

Social change is often driven top-down by transformative leaders. US president Abraham Lincoln led the drive for the constitutional amendment that abolished slavery, by cajoling, convincing, haranguing and otherwise manipulating the Congress to get his way. The episode is dramatized in Steven Spielberg’s 2012 film “Lincoln.”

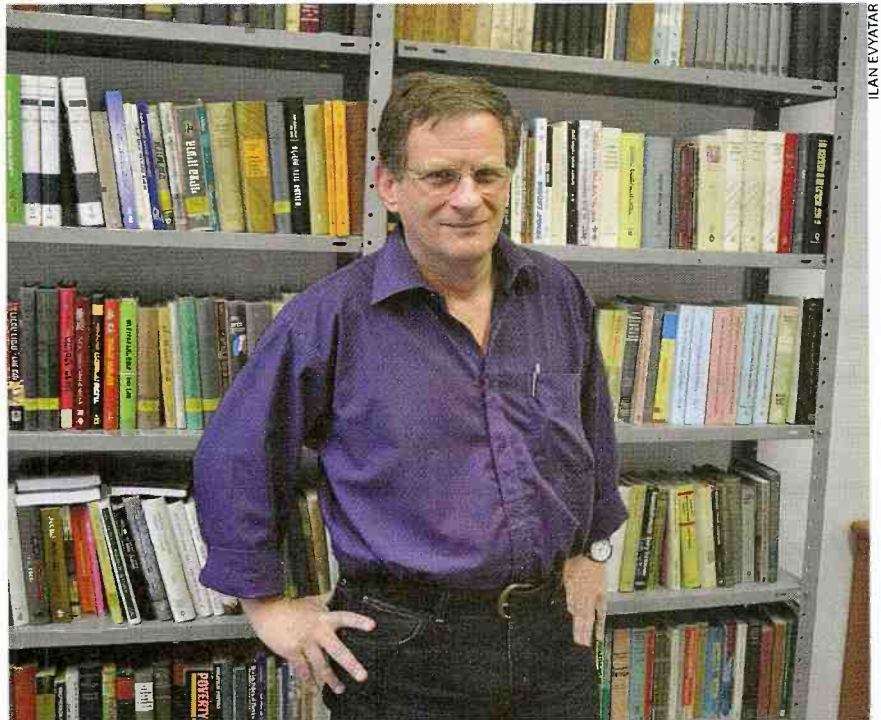
In contrast, while America’s civil rights legislation in 1968 was an enormous social change driven by a charismatic leader Martin Luther King Jr., he was backed by a massive popular uprising of protesters, notably the March on Washington on August 28, 1963 with 250,000 protesters, which featured King’s iconic “I have a dream” speech.

Social media can play a role in drawing attention to injustice, and can even bring down despotic corrupt and incompetent rulers. In June 2011, Bnei Brak resident Itzik Alrov launched a Facebook campaign against the high price of cottage cheese (then, eight

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ELYAL TOUEG / HAARETZ



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(Above) TheMarker editor Guy Rolnik was instrumental in raising awareness of the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few; (right) Haifa University historian Danny Guttwein attributes Israel's monopoly economy to the rise of the Likud

shekels per container) and the resulting boycott brought a sharp drop in price.

Social media can create "flash mobs" (instant large demonstrations) and can focus social protest against injustice. But social media cannot write legislation, and you cannot tweet social policy in 140 characters. Social media played a role in the Arab spring, in bringing down Arab dictators, but could not replace them with truly democratic systems. This asymmetry – network technology that fosters protest but not constructive new policies – has proved destabilizing, especially in the Mideast.

**THE LATEST** instance of social protest in Israel involves the terms under which Noble Energy and its partners can develop and sell offshore natural gas. Netanyahu is determined to drive the deal to final approval by the Knesset and enactment into law, despite opposition.

In mid-November, protests broke out, again, across Israel against the proposed gas contract deal giving Noble Energy and its partners a 15-year monopoly. Zelekha was the keynote speaker at a Tel Aviv rally. According to Haaretz, he called the proposed deal not just robbery, but "organized crime."

"Whoever gives from the public coffers to his friends will in the end refill it with injus-

tice. The government created with its own hands the biggest and most powerful monopoly in the history of the Israeli economy with excessive prices for gas for the past five years," he said. Zelekha said he was trying to open the public's eyes to the way the government is "looting [Israel's] greatest natural resource ever discovered here, after it gave it out without a tender to a group of the rich without almost any payment in return."

Meanwhile, Zelekha has become an adviser to Histadrut head Avi Nissenkorn and may have political ambitions in the Zionist Union party, even though he insists his social criticism is apolitical.

As of mid-November, 265,000 people had viewed "The Silver Platter" on YouTube, as well as those who saw it on Channel 8. The cable company HOT has now removed "The Silver Platter" from Channel 8's website (one can guess why), but the social activism group ANU has restored it, on its website, [anu.org.il/magash](http://anu.org.il/magash).

One of the greatest obstacles to social change is a psychological state of mind known as learned helplessness. According to this concept, developed by American psychologist Martin Seligman, repeated failure to invoke change leads people to believe they are helpless and so they give up trying. The resulting state of apathy is per-

haps democracy's greatest enemy, evoking Edmund Burke's adage that for evil (and perhaps monopolies) to triumph, all that is needed is for good people to do nothing.

I know a great many people, especially senior citizens like me, who recall a different Israel, an Israel that looked after its poor, its elderly, its sick; where the rich-poor gap was tolerable; where tycoons did not buy political influence – because there were no billionaires. Many of these seniors have simply given up. They despair of seeing an Israel as it once was, as they think it ought to be. They agree with Haaretz columnist Ari Shavit, author of "My Promised Land," who believes that the predominant "everything will be OK" mindset is Israel's greatest existential threat.

But I am more optimistic. Social protest is alive and well. "The Silver Platter"? Well, perhaps it appears to have sunk without a trace. But it left more than a trace. The people are helpless, only if they believe they are.

History proves that if people of goodwill work together and are willing to abandon their soft chairs for hard protests of all kinds, social change can and will happen. ■

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