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Burning ambition: The solar entrepreneur who wants to shine as president

U.S.-born Yosef Abramowitz believes that if he can secure the backing of Yair Lapid, he can replace Shimon Peres in the President's Residence. He may be greener than he realizes.

By Roy (Chicky) Arad | May 13, 2014 | 1:05 AM

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A new candidate has recently joined the crowded presidential race: Yosef Abramowitz, 50, a solar-energy entrepreneur who lives in Jerusalem. Abramowitz, who moved to Israel from the United States about seven years ago, was named by CNN as one of the top six green pioneers worldwide for his work in solar energy in Israel and Rwanda. He was also a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on behalf of prisoners of Zion. During that struggle, he was arrested for demonstrating in front of the Russian embassy. He also fought against apartheid and supported the mass immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Abramowitz, a father of five (including two adopted children of Ethiopian origin), has been working in the solar energy field since he came to Israel. Surrounding himself with a professional consulting team that includes Tal Marom, a former Jerusalem municipality spokeswoman, and media adviser Shmulik Elgrabli, he is vigorously fighting for the position. He says he has been meeting quietly with dozens of members of the Knesset since March, concentrating most of his efforts on gaining the support of Yesh Atid. He believes that if the party's leader, Yair Lapid, instructs the members of his faction to choose one of the nonpolitical candidates – Dalia Dorner, Dan Shechtman or himself – he could have a realistic shot at being elected.

The possibility that his wife, Reform rabbi Susan Silverman – sister of comedian Sarah Silverman, and one of the leaders of the Women of the Wall protest group – could alienate the religious parties doesn't bother him too much. "Don't forget that I'm the only religious candidate, with skullcap and prayer shawl," he notes. "I put on tefillin every morning. If I get to the President's Residence, there will be a lot more Judaism and a lot less religious coercion there. If I am appointed, I will strive for equality among the Jewish movements and freedom of religion for the non-Orthodox. The police arrested my wife and daughter during Women of the Wall's struggle."

Abramowitz believes the presidency needs reform. "It needs to be renewed and rethought in a creative way," he says. "We need a president who will represent pioneers of the environment. If the people are demanding social justice, we need a president who knows how to encourage investment through a creative economy, so that everyone will have a salary."

When asked why he needs this headache – after all, he is effective even without being president – he says his wife asks the same question. "When I wanted to bring solar energy to Israel, people said, 'Why do you need that headache? You're American and you're naïve.' As I see it, the campaign is reserve duty for the sake of the Jewish people."

Abramowitz says his energy projects can increase support for Israel throughout the world. He points out one of his advantages over the other candidates is that he has a solar energy solution for islands, and thanks to him Israel will win support from the island countries within the United Nations. "A quarter of the UN's member states are islands," he says. "They burn diesel fuel, which is very expensive and dirty. We have a solution that costs half the price and is completely environmentally friendly."

In the meantime, he refrains from giving the names of MKs who have promised to back his campaign, but says Knesset members told him they would consider supporting him only if he announced his candidacy.

Abramowitz, who has no car, takes pride in getting around by electric bicycle and public transportation. Were he to be elected, the presidential vehicle that's been ordered at a cost of 1.5 million shekels will be in danger. "The first citizen should ride in an electric car, and the electricity should come from solar energy. A president should set an ecological example," he believes. "As president, I'll want to surprise the people at Egged from time to time and get on a bus, though the security people probably won't like that."

He answers enthusiastically when quizzed about the first thing he'd do upon arrival at the President's Residence. "According to the sources, the leader of the people, the king, must write a Torah scroll," he says. "I will invite scribes from all the movements and think about how to adapt the idea for our time. Then I will meet with all the MKs and heads of nonprofit organizations, ask what they would like to see, how to narrow the gaps between groups. I will put a lot of effort into the issue of employment among the Bedouin. Twenty percent of the supporters on my Facebook page are Israeli Arabs." Abramowitz reveals that he contacted the Praver Committee and offered the Bedouin of the Negev a franchise to produce a thousand megawatts using solar energy, which would help local residents find jobs. "They refused. It did not go into the report," he says sadly.

Abramowitz says that, recently, he took his children to the President's Residence so they could see the building that might become their home for the next seven years. "My Ethiopian sons were worried," he admits. "They asked why there wasn't a soccer pitch. I told them a pitch could be built and that if Obama had one, we would have one too. That's what mattered to them. Now they're in favor of the project."