


A Word from the Guest Editor: Politics and Religion in Israel

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With all its efforts to present itself as a “revolution” against traditional Jewish life in the Diaspora, including its religiosity, Zionism could never really divorce itself from Judaism, for two obvious reasons: the only cultural marker shared by all members of the Jewish nation that Zionism claimed to represent was Jewish religion, and the connection between that nation and its “homeland” was a religious connection. These realities secured Judaism and the religiously Orthodox political parties that represent it a privileged status in the Zionist movement and in the State of Israel, far beyond their weight in the Jewish population.

Theodore Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, wrote in his diary in 1895, “Our nation is not a nation except in its faith” (cited in Inbari 2008, 43). This dictated, firstly, the choice of the movement's target territory (in dispute until Herzl's death in 1904, see Vital 1982) and then the use of a whole array of religious Jewish symbols and other cultural constructs. From the dubbing of immigration to Palestine *aliyah* (pilgrimage) and the use of the sacred Jewish language, Hebrew, as the *lingua franca* of the *yishuv* (pre-statehood Jewish community in Palestine), through the choice of the Star of David and the seven-branch candelabrum (*menorah*) as the official emblems of the state, to the celebration of Jewish religious holidays as national holidays, traditional Jewish themes abound in Zionist lore. In the words of the prominent Zionist historian, Anita Shapira: “The founders of the Palestine labor movement [which led the

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Zionist movement and the State of Israel from 1935 to 1977] attached great importance to instilling in the young generation clear, unquestionable national convictions. The components of this nationalism were rooted in the Jewish religion: the age-old ties of Jews to the Holy Land; the historical right to the land; the attempts of Jews all through the centuries to resettle in Palestine as manifested by the messianic movements” (Shapira 1998, 259).

However, the emergence of Zionism as a nominally secular political movement actively seeking to “return” the Holy Land to Jewish sovereignty, constituted a formidable theological dilemma for Orthodox Jews, a dilemma which has been aggravated by the Holocaust and by every Zionist success. While the return to Zion had been at the core of Jewish hopes for redemption for two millennia, it was never expected to materialize through the this-worldly efforts of heretics who had strayed from the fold. So initially the vast majority of rabbis, in both Western and Eastern Europe, were vehemently opposed to Zionism, on both religious and political grounds. The religious objections of the Orthodox rabbis focused on the traditional notion that redemption of the Jews – their return to the Land of Israel – had to await the coming of the Messiah and that the hand of the Almighty must not be forced in this matter by this-worldly action. Jewish tradition since the Talmud held that God had made the people of Israel swear not to scale the wall (of Exile), not to hasten Redemption, and not to rebel against the (other) nations (Ravitzki 1993, 277-305). In addition, these rabbis realized that the modern nation-state sought by Zionism was not going to be a theocracy governed by *Halacha* (religious Jewish law).

With time, the different ways in which various Orthodox groups and rabbinic authorities have responded to this dilemma can be classified, with some simplification, under four headings:

1. Pragmatic accommodationism: This response characterized the Religious Zionist movement in its early period. The ideological position of this movement viewed the Zionist enterprise as a project of physical survival, a search for a safe haven for persecuted European Jews, essentially indifferent in terms of religious values. Setting up a secular Jewish society in *Eretz Yisrael* (or anywhere else for that matter), where Jews could be safe and prosperous, was a worthwhile undertaking, although it had no bearing on the hoped-for messianic redemption. Orthodox Jews, according to this view, should actively participate in this undertaking both because of its intrinsic value and because their participation could mitigate its secular character. This position has been

associated with “modern orthodoxy,” the tendency which in general has sought limited accommodation to modern secular society (Don-Yehiya 1983, 103-46).

2. *Principled accommodationism*: This position was formulated by the eminent ultra-Orthodox rabbi, Rav Abraham Isaac Ha-Cohen Kook (1865-1935), Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Palestine from 1921 until his death. According to Kook's famous “synthesis,” Zionist settlement in Palestine was the “advent of redemption” (*atchalta degeula*), a preliminary but essential stage in the holy process of redemption. Secular Zionists, while indeed sinners, were unknowingly carrying out God's will in setting up the physical prerequisites for the final spiritual redemption. Although final redemption required that all Jews repent and return to religion, the preparatory work done by secular Zionists was potentially and partially sacred, and so were its perpetrators (Hellinger 2008, 533-50). Moreover, within this school of thought the fact that the Zionist pioneers were Jews who had abandoned their religion was yet another indication of the divine guidance of their project. According to Rav Ben-Zion Uziel (1880-1953), an important Religious Zionist thinker and Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Palestine/Israel from 1939 to his death, “..the solution to this wondrous and unfathomable riddle, whereby the national awakening of... Zionism, began only in the ranks of the people who had forsaken Judaism... is no other than providing divine enlightenment for those who are in need of repentance [*teshuvah*], and they return [*shavim*] to Zion, and through this repentance, they return to their people and escape assimilation and intermingling, in which they had almost drowned” (cited in Schwartz 2002, 179). Since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 a much more radical version of the approach of Rav A.I. Kook, promulgated by his son, Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook, has been adopted by Religious Zionism and has helped it achieve near-hegemonic status in Jewish Israeli society (Peled and Herman Peled 2019; Peled 2022).

3. *Pragmatic rejectionism*: This is the most common *Haredi* (non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox) position, distinguished by its rejection of ideological, though not necessarily practical Zionism. Most groups that adhere to this position seceded from the Religious Zionist movement over the issue of Zionism's educational work in the Diaspora, which they found to be too secular. They came together under the title *Agudat Yisrael* in 1912 and have been grudgingly willing to take part in the Zionist enterprise on a limited basis and without endowing it with any theological legitimacy. Their cooperation with Zionism has been motivated by two sets of considerations. One had to do with defense

of their own material interests in a society where all material resources were controlled by Zionist organs. In that sense cooperating with the Israeli state (or the pre-state Zionist institutions) was similar to cooperating with non-Jewish governments in the *galut* (exile), although the former is viewed by some *Haredim* as a greater abomination than the latter. The other consideration was similar to that of the religious Zionists, namely, an effort to minimize as much as possible the violation of Jewish religious codes in the society as presently constituted. In the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, head of the *Chabad* Chassidic sect: "Our opposition to Zionism and to the state is not based on any objection to Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, which is a *mitzvah* [commandment] ... Quite the contrary. It comes out of a desire to purify and sanctify these values which Zionism reduces and empties of significance, giving them meanings which are foreign" (Aran 1986, 123).

4. *Principled rejectionism*: This position was held by the majority of Orthodox Jews when Zionism was first founded, but time and historical developments dwindled the number of people adhering to it. Today, in Israel, it is held by the extreme, most religiously orthodox fringes of the *Haredi* community, which view Zionism and the State of Israel as demonic enterprises and refuse to have anything to do with them. According to Rav Mordechai Mintzberg, a prominent member of this group, "I object to the very thing called the State of Israel, I object to this concept of the army, I don't agree to their wars and I don't agree to their operations, they are fighting against me ... Zionism is exile among Jews and this is the worst exile" (cited in Hasson 2017). Mintzberg's group counts for less than one percent of *Haredim* in Israel, but in spite of its small numbers it functions as an "ideological compass" for the entire *Haredi* leadership (Leon 2016, 36).

In recent times, under the influence of the younger Rav Kook, the two tendencies described here as "principled accommodationism" and "pragmatic rejectionism" have increasingly been showing signs of convergence, with some Religious Zionists becoming more orthodox in their religious behavior and *Haredim* (with the exception of the "principled rejectionists") becoming more nationalist in their political outlook. The product of this convergence is commonly referred to as "Hardal" (lit. mustard), acronym for *Haredi-Dati-Leumi*, meaning Ultra-Orthodox-Religious-Nationalist.

In 1947, the year before the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish Agency Executive, the governing body of the *yishuv*, sent the *Haredi* political

party, *Agudat Yisrael*, a letter outlining the place of Jewish religion in the public life of the future State of Israel. Commonly referred to as the “status-quo letter,” it stipulated that the future state would continue to observe the religious arrangements that had prevailed in the *yishuv* in four specific areas: Saturday would become the national day of rest, *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws) would be observed in all government kitchens, rabbinical courts would retain exclusive jurisdiction over marriage and divorce of Jews, and the autonomy of the existing religious educational systems would be preserved. The conditions stipulated in the status quo letter have, by and large, been maintained since the time of its writing. Moreover, Orthodox privileges have been augmented in two important areas not mentioned in the letter: all Orthodox women, and ultra-Orthodox *yeshiva* (seminary) students, have been exempted, fully or in part, from mandatory military service, and the Orthodox conception of “who is a Jew” – whoever was born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism and is not a member of another religion – has become increasingly influential in defining the boundaries of the Jewish Israeli collectivity (Liebman 1993, 154-55).

During the Ottoman and Mandatory periods, jurisdiction over family law (primarily marriage and divorce) was the purview of the various officially recognized religious communities of Palestine (*millets*). This situation was written into the Israeli legal system in the Rabbinical Courts Jurisdiction (Marriage and Divorce) Law of 1953. This statute granted rabbinical courts exclusive jurisdiction over marriage and divorce of Jews in Israel, and similar laws were enacted with respect to the religious courts of non-Jewish communities. The most important practical consequence of this law has been that, officially, non-religious civil marriage and the possibility of inter-religious marriage are not available in Israel. Moreover, since both Jewish and Moslem law do not consider women to be equal to men, the status of Israeli women in marriage and divorce procedures is clearly inferior to that of men, a situation that reflects on many other aspects of civil law as well. Thus the 1951 Women's Equal Rights Law specifically excluded from its purview matters of marriage and divorce, and its amendment, enacted in 2000, excluded religious institutions from the requirement to appoint women that is mandatory for all other kinds of public institutions (Shifman 1995; Raday 1996; Halperin-Kaddari 2000; Triger 2005; Barak-Erez 2009).

The articles in this special issue examine many of the key features of the place of religion in Israel's public life. Lior Alperovitch's contribution deals with

the differences between the pragmatic and the principled *Haredi* rejections of Zionism. His argument is that, paradoxically, the position held by the principled rejectionists on the question of the character of the Jewish people has a common ideological basis with Zionism, as both see the Jewish people as a nation. The pragmatic rejectionists, on the other hand, consider the Jewish people to be a religious community, and therefore treat the Jewish state only as a hollow political tool, which enables them to be politically more flexible.

Gal Levy's article focuses on the role of religiosity in Mizrahi (*Mizrahim* = Jews originating in the Moslem world) politics in order to criticize the two prevalent approaches to the question of the intersection of Mizrahi ethnicity and citizenship in Israel. The citizenship discourse approach attributes the Mizrahim's semi-peripheral position in Israeli society, trapped between the hegemonic Ashkenazim (Jews of European descent) above and the Palestinian citizens of Israel below, to their being viewed by the state solely through the ethno-national discourse, i.e. their contribution to the Zionist project is seen as consisting merely of their demographic presence in Israel as Jews. The other, culture-based approach, argues that Mizrahim, whose culture is particularistic and communal, are intrinsically opposed to liberalism, dominant in Israeli culture, because of its individualism and universalism, and have therefore been relegated to a secondary position by the powers that be. Levy's critique of these two approaches uses the concepts of "ethnic thinking" and "performative citizenship" and is based on two case studies of Mizrahi activist movements which, he argues, seek their own avenues to perform their citizenship from within the political entanglements of religion and state.

The analysis of Mizrahi religiosity continues with Nissim Leon's article, which examines the confluence of religion and nationalism in the discourse of the Mizrahi *Haredi* political party, Shas. Leon focuses specifically on the work of Shas-related preachers engaged in promoting *teshuva* (repentance; "return" to religion) among Israel's peripheral Mizrahi population. His argument, based on extended field work, is that these preachers use ultranationalist rhetoric in order to enhance their audience's religious devotion. He also notes the existence of a complex and fluid version of religious ultranationalism that demands communal separation between Jews and Arabs in Israel, but is not necessarily averse to cultural interaction between the two communities.

In their joint article, Hayim Katsman, who was murdered by Hamas in his kibbutz, Holit, on October 7, 2023 and Mordechai Miller analyze the newly

established political alliance between two factions of the Israeli right-wing – Israeli Conservatism and the “Hardali” followers of the ultra-nationalist Rav Zvi Thau. What made this alliance possible, they argue, was the spiritual crisis experienced by Religious Zionism as a result of Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005 and the removal of the Israeli settlements from that region. The current Gaza war is likely to further augment this alliance.

As mentioned above, being Jewish according to *Halacha* is essential for full membership in the Jewish Israeli collectivity. Other than being born to a Jewish mother, conversion (*giyur*) is the only way of becoming a Jew. The normative conversion in Israel – the Orthodox conversion – is difficult and time-consuming and requires, formally at least, maintaining an Orthodox lifestyle following the act of converting. As discussed in the article by Einat Libel-Hass and Elazar Ben-Lulu, some people choose, therefore, to convert through the Jewish Reform movement, a much more pleasant and less demanding process. Although the Reform movement is not recognized as a legitimate Jewish community by the state, in 2021 the High Court of Justice ruled that Reform conversion should be recognized for the purpose of acquiring Israeli citizenship. Libel-Hass and Ben-Lulu’s paper is based on a field study of female immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the Philippines who, for various reasons, chose to convert to Judaism through the Reform movement.

The final article deal with the predicament of Moslem women in Israel and with their struggle against both the state and the Moslem religious authorities for improvement of their status. Areen Hawari argues that citizen-Palestinian feminist activists are caught between the hesitantly liberalizing policies of the state, which they view as a colonial regime, in matters of personal status, and the conservative, patriarchal religious establishment of their own community. Her article highlights the complexity of Palestinian feminist politics in Israel at the juncture of religion, gender and colonialism.

The articles in this special issue were all written before the Gaza war, which began with a deadly surprise attack by the Islamic movement, Hamas, on southern Israel on October 7, 2023, in which one of our contributors, Hayim Katsman, was murdered. Religious themes and motivations abound in this war, on both sides. Hamas sees itself as conducting a holy war to liberate Palestine from the Jewish infidels who occupy it. On the Israeli side too, religious fervor is displayed by some of the troops and in some of the motivational speeches made by their commanders. Public opinion polls show that the most extreme

national-religious Israeli political party, Jewish Power, has doubled its electoral strength since the outset of this war, and among Religious Zionists there are those calling for the re-establishment of the Jewish settlements that were removed from Gaza in 2005. Gaza, in their view, is part of the holy Land of Israel, granted to the Jews by God. As I hope the articles in this issue help to make clear, politics and religion are closely interwoven in Israel and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We dedicate this special issue to the memory of Hayim Katsman.

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