

## Mizrahi Politics, Religion, and Ethnic Thinking

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, two major approaches have emerged to explain the intersection of Mizrahi ethnicity and citizenship in Israel. Since the early 1990s, Yoav Peled's *Multiple Citizenship* paradigm has dominated in elucidating the differential, hierarchical, and fragmented incorporation regime. According to this paradigm, affiliation with the Jewish religion was part of an ethno-national discourse of citizenship that constrained Mizrahim (Jews originating from Muslim countries) between the hegemonic Ashkenazim (Jews of European descent) and Palestinian citizens. However, a recent counter explanation has been proposed, focusing on the interpretive repertoires shaping the political behavior of Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. In contrast to the liberal assumptions of the Multiple Citizenship paradigm, this explanation places greater emphasis on cultural rather than material factors shaping political behaviors and broader worldviews, identifying each ethnic group with opposing cultural repertoires. By introducing the concept of „ethnic thinking,“ this article delves into the entanglements of religiosity in Mizrahi politics through two case studies—the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow (the Keshet) and New Mizrahim. Rejecting the inclination to label Mizrahim as predisposed to traditionalism, this article challenges both approaches, which arguably overlook the performative aspects of Mizrahi citizenship.

**Keywords:** Mizrahi studies, Mizrahi religiosity, post-liberalism, performative citizenship, ethnic thinking

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## Introduction

It is now commonly understood that despite expectations to the contrary, modernity had not rendered religion a relic of the past, nor a mere matter of the private realm. Indeed, if religion was at one point privatized, a contestable claim by itself, this process has reversed and religion, as Casanova and many others now argue, (re-)gained a significant role in the public domain (Casanova 1994). The return, or better the non-disappearance of religion from public life, is a hardly disputable argument given the rise of political religion and populism, on the one hand, and the critique of liberalism and secularism as the perceived pillars of the modern nation state, on the other hand (e.g., Bhargava 2006, 637). In Israel, the very notion of modern statehood relies on the foundations of Zionism, which, from its early days, were premised on Jewish religion and on a Eurocentric conception of “the people”. These notions shaped the Zionist idea of nationhood and modernity as well as the contours of citizenship in Israel, leaving the latter lacking and incompatible with the idea of citizenship as an institution of secular membership in a nation state (Kaplan and Levy 2017; Tatour 2019). As was aptly demonstrated in Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled’s seminal book *Being Israeli* (2002), the Israeli incorporation regime is based on competing discourses of citizenship, each exhibiting different intersections of religiosity, ethnicity, and class. While it is widely agreed that this incorporation regime is hierarchical and discriminatory, it remains a matter of theoretical controversy how these intersections shape the public realm, and, more pertinently, how they should be interpreted and explained. Here I ask to untie some of these knots in relation to the debate over the place of Jewish religiosity in the context of the intra-Jewish ethnic conflict. More specifically, I argue against theoretical articulations of Mizrahi religious traditionalism that fail to historicize and politicize the contemporary overlap of Mizrahi identity and religiosity (see also, Levy 2011).

Jewish religion has been a constitutive pillar of modern Zionism (Kimmerling 2001), and it has become a major political resource especially following the post-1967 messianic Jewish expansion into the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2021). Still, religiosity had not always been a dominant resource for political mobilization. Thus, until the 1970s both Ultraorthodox and nationalist-orthodox religious political parties were mainly attending to their respective electorates’ needs, hoping to maintain their relative autonomy within the socio-political structure of a practically secular state (Peled and Peled 2019; Fischer 2012). Interestingly, and more importantly for my argument, during the first decades of statehood, religion

was not considered a significant resource for political mobilization among the newly arrived immigrants who hailed from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Indeed, the connection between religiosity, traditionalism<sup>2</sup>, and Mizrahi ethnicity had not become politically “naturalized” until the early 1980s. To be clear, while Mizrahi struggles from the 1950s through the 1970s were primarily associated with their class position, the inclination to link Mizrahi politics with religiosity must be historically traced and theoretically conceptualized. Although religionization transcends ethnic boundaries in Israeli society (Peled and Peled 2019), my interest lies in understanding how the association between religiosity and Mizrahi identity has become normalized in public discourse. From a citizenship studies perspective, this question is crucial not only theoretically, as the intersection of ethnicity and religiosity influences how citizenship is practiced and what political claims are made in its name. This question is also a reminder that “secular” and “religious” serve as markers, deployed from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives, to label and identify groups and individuals in public discourse. Therefore, I will use these terms as socially constructed identifiers without pre-assuming any specific content. I will thus explore two significant moments highlighting the entanglement of religiosity, Mizrahi identity, and citizenship.

### **Ethnicity and the Mizrahi Question**

Using the term ethnicity in the context of Israeli society calls for clarification. Primarily, this term marks the boundary, within the Green Line (the pre-1967 borders, excluding the Occupied Palestinian Territories), between Jews and Palestinians. While the presence of the ethno-national boundary is fundamental to any comprehension of Israeli society and nationhood, numerous ethnic boundaries intersect within Jewish society. The most salient boundary distinguishes Jews who hailed from Middle Eastern and North African countries – known as Mizrahim (lit. *Orientalis*) – from Jews whose origins are in Europe and the Americas – Ashkenazim. The origins of this boundary rest in the history of European colonialism (Shohat 1988; Shafir and Peled 2002) and its very existence is a matter of an ongoing public debate. Most participants in this

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term traditionalism as the literal translation of the Hebrew word *Masorti*. The latter refers in the Israeli context mainly to describe the religious practices of Mizrahim. In the public debate, these practices are considered as less strict than those of Ashkenazim. This difference however, should not be taken on face value. Upon their arrival, Mizrahim did not see themselves as less religious or less observant. It was the view of the dominant Ashkenazi religious parties and communities that portrayed them in this way. Currently, as we shall see, some Mizrahim are reclaiming and politicizing this term.

debate – both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim – deny the existence of the “ethnic problem” which they relegate to the past while, paradoxically, simultaneously arguing about its manifestations. Among other issues, this debate has rendered the question of religion, or religiosity, immanent to this intra-Jewish ethnic conflict, or to what we may refer hereafter as *The Mizrahi Question*.

*The Mizrahi Question* is not unrelated to the theoretical debate about it. Early on the immigration policy towards new immigrants from MENA countries had shaped both society and sociology. Issues surrounding the absorption of Mizrahim – but not the absorption of European Jews – had been formulated as “the ethnic problem”. In recent years, the “ethnic problem” became intrinsically related to another social “problem” – religion (Levy 2011). What makes this entanglement interesting is that while the role of Judaism in the politics of the religious parties is considered to be ideological, the religiosity of Mizrahim is perceived as “a problem”. Particularly because it presumably drives them towards the political right (Levy, Rosenthal and Saporta 2022). My aim here is not to re-estimate this tendency or to measure the actual levels of religiosity among Mizrahim. Rather, what interests me is how the debate about religiosity shapes the *Mizrahi Question* and the politics of ethnicity in Israel at large.

I argue that the debate over Mizrahi religiosity is neither about the depth of religious observance nor about religious practices. Rather it serves as a discursive mechanism that masquerades what I term *Ethnic Thinking*. This term suggests that ascribing cultural tenets and characteristics to designated Othered groups provides power elites with a mechanism of rendering relations of power and coercion invisible. Subsequently, as specific attributes become instrumental in delineating group boundaries (Barth 1969; Brubaker 2006), also those who are affected and stigmatized by *ethnic thinking* may be driven to adopt and adapt to this ascribed identity and reclaim it. Similarly, in her study on how Jews became part of the white American middle class the anthropologist Karen Brodtkin identifies “ethnoracial assignment” as being “about popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically and socially to the individuals classified.” However, “ethnoracial identity” evolves by the latter as these classifications, let alone stereotypes, are molded into the formation of a sense of identity (Brodtkin 1998, 2-3). In the current context, degrees and patterns of religiosity serve as mechanisms of Othering of Mizrahim, and subsequently in shaping processes of identity formation with real political consequences. Yet, how did this association between Mizrahiyut, religiosity and certain political proclivities come about and how does it shape Mizrahi politics? Answering this is one main goal of this article.

## On Citizenship, Ethnicity and Religiosity

My own approach to *The Mizrahi Question*, and to ethnic relations in general, is informed by the concept of citizenship. In 1990s Israel, in tandem with the advancement of Citizenship Studies (Turner and Isin 2007), the theory of citizenship had been articulated to overcome the limits and limitations of methodological nationalism. Equipped with modernization theory and a structural-functionalist toolkit, sociologists saw ethnicity primarily as a dysfunction of the Zionist nation building and state formation (Ram 1995). This “anomaly” called for an explanation. The ethno-national “schism” – which ensued from the existence of a considerable minority of indigenous Arab-Palestinians whom, following the 1948 War (Al-Nakba), the state unwillingly accepted as nominal citizens – was explained away by seeing the Arabs as “external” to the Zionist nation-building process.<sup>3</sup> However, the intra-Jewish “schism”, or Mizrahi ethnicity, posed a more challenging question, which was answered by a dual discourse of modernization and orientalism (e.g., Shohat 1988; Levy 2002). Accordingly, Mizrahi immigrants were designated as non-modern and in need of de-socialization (of their apparent primitivism) and re-socialization (to become modern men and women). In the 1980s, critical sociology and cultural studies sought to reverse this theoretical and empirical gaze on the absorbed immigrants and turn it towards the absorbers. Contrary to the tendency of blaming the new immigrants for their failure to integrate and adjust to the new society, these two scholarly branches now asked how the state had failed them. In this critical perspective, ethnicity was no longer seen as an anomaly but as an effect of historical and persisting power relations.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, the explanation of how ethnicity, particularly Mizrahiyut, is linked to citizenship and political participation has been approached by two main analytical frameworks. The one, pioneered by the work of Yoav Peled, places the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi ethnic conflict in the context of other social conflicts. The Multiple Citizenship paradigm identifies three discourses of citizenship which determine a group’s relative place in the Israeli incorporation regime. Accordingly, the political status of Mizrahim derives, on the one hand, from them being Jews, hence included as part of the ethno-national dominant group. Yet, while this gives them the upper hand over the Palestinian citizens, they

<sup>3</sup> It should be recalled that the state had placed its new Palestinian citizens under a military rule (1949-1966), regardless of their citizenship status (see, Shafir and Peled 2002, 24-5; Jabarin 2014; Tatour 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the field of ethnic studies in the Israeli-Jewish context is much broader and it is beyond my scope here to account for it. My main interest though is in the politics of ethnicity and, particularly, in Mizrahi politics and so I shall limit myself to two paradigmatic explanations to this.

suffer, on the other hand, from lacking access to the prestigious and beneficial echelons of society. Their proclivity to Jewish religion and to traditionalism thus renders them less worthy Israelis (see Levy and Emmerich 2001). Still, while the theory of citizenship disposes towards accepting the liberal notion of citizenship as the yardstick for “good” citizenship, recent critiques raise doubts about how this liberal discourse relates to the Mizrahi Question. Nissim Mizrachi (2016), for one, challenged the critical sociological approach for its “liberal grammar” which preferences liberal interpretations of social reality over illiberal interpretations of non-hegemonic groups. Mizrachi thus proposes instead to understand ethnic relations as a reflection of different repertoires of meanings that each group holds and brings to the discussion and to real life conflicts. While I do share with the latter the critique of liberalism, and specifically of Peled’s innate acceptance of the liberal credo, I propose that both approaches, Peled’s and Mizrachi’s, presuppose the ontological relationship between Mizrahi ethnicity and religiosity rather than interrogating this relationship to begin with. Thus, both approaches fall short of explaining the political role of religiosity in ethnic relations in Israel, not as an ideological tool but rather as a sociological marker of ethnic group belonging (Levy 2011).

The view of Mizrahim as religious and Ashkenazim as secular is perhaps the most common cliché in Israeli politics and public discourse. This view has been farther advanced since the rise of the ultraorthodox Mizrahi party *Shas* in the 1980s (Peled 1998; Levy and Emmerich 2001; Leon 2023). Both Peled’s and Mizrachi’s approaches are aware of this, and notwithstanding their different normative perspectives – the former based on liberal values and the latter on communitarian ones – both remain committed to a non-essentialist understanding of this relationship. Yet, the question of how religiosity has become a determinant of ethnic identification is unproblematic. Thus, although it is now widely accepted that the Mizrahi Question is Israeli made, that is, its contents and boundaries were eventuated by the process of nation building, the particular role religiosity plays in the performance of citizenship calls for further elaboration in line with the evolution of citizenship studies.

Since the 1990s, the study of citizenship expanded and shifted in many directions (Isin and Nyers 2014). Thus, after migrating from the field of legal studies to sociology and beyond, it was no longer confined to questions of status and belonging to a given polity, nor merely to an understanding of “who is a citizen?” and which rights and duties does this status entail. Hence, as Isin (2009) plainly put it, the question of citizenship shifted from the *doer*, the citizen, to the *deed*, the act of citizenship. This has opened the field to new understandings of *performative citizenship* (Isin 2017), and its materialization regardless of the

formal status of those who make claims to citizenship. A similar shift has been offered by James Tully (2014) who asked what citizenship aims to achieve. The mainstream mode of citizenship, he argued, is concerned with maintaining the social order. This “civil/modern” approach, he proposes, is premised on liberal principles and its focus is on restoring a liberal order when it is undermined or endangered. This approach sees the Anglo-American liberal ideals of citizenship as the normative yardstick to which all should aspire. In contrast, Tully turns to “civic” manifestations of citizenship that demonstrate diverse activities aiming at disrupting the extant social order. This mode of citizenship, he contends, typically emerges at the social margins where people resist their subordination within authoritarian, but also liberal contexts. Citizenship, according to this performative approach (Isin 2017), is not a status conferred by the institutions of the modern constitutional state and international law. Nor is it predetermined by the cultural traits of the claimants of rights. It is rather the sum of negotiated practices in which one becomes a citizen through participation (Tully 2014, 247-8).

How, then, religiosity plays out in performative citizenship? It is common to understand modern citizenship as an institutional manifestation of state universalism and secularism, whereas religion, ideally, is either relegated to the private realm or adapted to form a civic religion. The actual manifestations of religion in public life, according to civil/modern conceptions of citizenship, vary. Yet, in most interpretations levels of religiosity designate an assumed distance/closeness to the state, which serves as a yardstick for the proper secular, civil order. From the opposite perspective of civic, or performative citizenship, I propose, religion and religiosity are social facts, essentially political facts. Social actors and agents thus relate to the different roles they play in political life across time and space. This renders the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and citizenship an empirical question, before being a theoretical one. To account for these manifestations, I employ a theory of performative citizenship that allows us to look at this intersection as neither a mere conjuncture that predetermines the limits of political incorporation (as Peled does), nor a cultural constraint upon one’s political imagination (as Mizrahi does).

In the following I turn to discuss two, less obvious manifestations of the intersection of Mizrahiyut and religion. While at least since the 1980s such a discussion cannot overlook the place and significance of Shas, the political party that re-defined Mizrahi politics back then (Peled 1998; Levy 2015), I propose to look into the ways religiosity is being debated and articulated in what has been termed the New Mizrahi Discourse (Chetrit 2009). In this way I ask, first, to demonstrate different approaches to the place of religiosity in the Mizrahi

political context, and second, to re-conceptualize Mizrahi politics through the perspective of citizenship theory.

### **Religion and Religiosity in the New Mizrahi Discourse**

The new Mizrahi discourse is a loose term that refers to the emergence of critical Mizrahi voices in the public realm since the 1990s. It thus serves as a crude descriptor of a variety of individuals and organizations who share at least two characteristics. One is a critical reading of the history of Mizrahim in Israel, by which I mean a rejection of the idea that intra-Jewish ethnic relations are a mere historical coincidence and that the Mizrahim had not suffered institutional discrimination. The second characteristic that these voices share is the refusal to brush away this history by denying the need to re-construct the place of Mizrahiyut within the context of a culturally open Israeli society. While the two cases to which I refer are relatively recent, it is important to bear in mind that this critical voice is anchored in the history of Zionist colonization, and its roots go back to the beginnings of modern nationalism in Palestine (e.g., Behar and Ben-Dor Benite 2013). This historic discourse rejected major colonialist and orientalist elements that characterized the core of the Zionist movement's ideology (e.g., Eliachar 1975, 16-27; Jacobson and Naor 2016). Politically, several Mizrahi thinkers warned European Zionist leaders of ignoring the cultural, national, and political existence of Arab-Palestinians, and called upon them to adopt a more tolerant approach to local cultures.

By the same token, these early critical Mizrahi voices refused to view modernity and local traditions as necessarily incompatible, nor did they see their position as opposing the new zeitgeist of modernity. Indeed, these public figures – whether they were clergymen, mere observants, or feminists – did not consider their Judaism a reason to reject modernity. In general, there are several testimonies to the tolerance of the veteran Sephardic community of late Ottoman empire Palestine towards its advancement to modernity without being intolerant towards religion and traditional cultures (Levy 2002; Naor and Jacobson 2016; Hashash 2022). Well into statehood, Mizrahi intellectuals shared a non-dichotomous approach to religion or modernity.<sup>5</sup> This approach resurfaced in the critical Mizrahi discourse of late 20<sup>th</sup> century, alongside political criticism of liberalism, on the one hand, and the expanding critical discussion about religionization, on the other.

<sup>5</sup> This conversation appeared in literary and intellectual periodicals such as Naharayim, Apirion or Afikim. One interesting example to this approach is the Passover Hagada that was written by the Israeli Black Panthers, which demonstrated a combination of radical politics and a positive approach to Jewish tradition.



## **The Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow Coalition (The Keshet)**

The Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow (hereafter Keshet) was founded in 1996 as an initiative of Mizrahi activists who were disappointed by the non-responsiveness of Mizrahi politicians to promote justice for the Mizrahim (Karif 2005). They felt that the time was right to (re-)politicize the Mizrahi Question and thus they gathered veteran and novice activists who sought to foreground their political principles of social justice and multiculturalism. Most of the activists were secular in their practice and political orientation, and the movement's principles indeed reflected what may be termed a progressive agenda, in line with the general political spirit of the 1990s. Yet, unlike other leftist and progressive movements, the question of religion and its place on the agenda kept haunting the movement from the very start (Yonah, Naaman and Mahlev 2007, 27-8; Kizel 2014; Karif 2005). Thus, a footnote in one draft of the movement's principles, which included a clause calling for the separation of church and state, proposed a statement regarding the Keshet's interpretation of Judaism and not to be content with a liberal-style call for freedom of consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, if the Keshet is seen as a chain in a history of Mizrahi protest, it is noteworthy that the question of religion and religiosity had not been conceived in the same manner in previous events, such as the Wadi Salib riots (1959) or the Black Panthers protest (1971-72). One possible explanation is that at the time the public perception of these events was of a class war rather than a cultural one, and that, given its origins in the margins it was lacking ideological or intellectual infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> The Keshet, in contrast, was led by both women and men, many of whom were highly educated, and the movement prided itself for its progressive ideological underpinnings (Yonah, Naaman and Mahlev 2007, 29; Karif 2005). However, another way of understanding the urgency to relate to the issue of religion is to recognize the new circumstances of its appearance. Not only that religion had come to play a crucial role globally. In Israel, the political debate had already been saturated with religious tropes and symbolism, and the religious parties were prominent political actors. For the Keshet, religion hit near to home as Shas, the ultraorthodox Sephardic party which appeared just a

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<sup>6</sup> This is taken from a draft of Keshet principles – author's archive.

<sup>7</sup> The "Black Panthers" is often seen as a class movement rather than an identity movement. Even though this may seem anecdotal, I have in my possession a copy of the Passover Haggadah published by the movement in 1971, which demonstrates not only its ability to provide a contemporary social-political interpretation of the Haggadah itself, but also states explicitly that what was done to the Mizrahim is a "crime of cultural destruction." Thanks to Reuven Abergil who gave me this document (<http://tinyurl.com/FBYC2013>).

decade before, was rising to prominence as the sole representative of Mizrahim. The Keshet, as any other political organization or party, was expected to have its own say on the political place of Jewish religion.

One major factor in Shas's political success was its appeal to Mizrahi voters in the lower echelons of society by showing tolerance to their traditionalist way of being Jewish (Leon 2023; Shalev and Levy 2005). This tolerance proved fruitful politically as it allowed Shas, an ultraorthodox party committed to religious orthodox dogma, to reach out to a much less strict constituency of Mizrahi voters. For the Keshet this posed ideological and political dilemmas. As an ideological question, the relationship between religion and Judaism and the state came up in several discussions regarding its multicultural stance (Kizel 2014). The dominant ideological position in these debates had been articulated as a negation of the anti-religious and anti-clerical stances that characterized liberal and left-leaning parties such as Shinui or Meretz. While most of its members inclined to lead a secular lifestyle, the movement rejected the liberal strict separation between the public and the private spheres in terms of consciousness and beliefs. The religion-state model was therefore based not on the modernist dichotomy between religiosity and secularism, but on postmodernist and multicultural concepts of mutual respect between different communities and ways of life.

In concrete political matters, two issues were on the Keshet's agenda. One was bridging a perceived gap between the prevailing position amongst the members and the apparent traditional-religious identity of the Mizrahim for whom the Keshet spoke. Moreover, the views among the members on Jewish religiosity and traditionalism were split, which eventually led to the departure of a group of members in protest of the Keshet's relatively neutral position on traditionalism (Kizel 2014, 179; Buzaglo 2007). Indeed, the Keshet had not resolved its ideological issue with traditionalism, and some members did not think that it should have been resolved (Dahan 2007, 41). Nevertheless, the controversy persisted as a significant topic of discussion within and surrounding the Keshet. Its intensity escalated notably amidst the political discourse of a fresh cohort of Mizrahim, a matter that will be elaborated upon shortly. However, a more pressing political concern for the Keshet lay in its affiliation with and stance toward Shas.

Connecting the inception of the Keshet to the political triumph of Shas is inevitable. Shas's sudden rise to prominence in 1984 took the political establishment by surprise, especially during a period when the avenues for new political parties were rather restricted (Peled 1998; Levy and Emmerich 2001).

Indeed, many saw the Keshet as a “secular Shas” or as a Mizrahi alternative to the left-wing Meretz, Shas’s main antagonist party. While there were no formal ties between the Keshet and Shas, there was an expectation that the two would collaborate on issues pertaining to their mutual base, lower class Mizrahim (Karif 2005, 200-09). However, Shas opposed almost every political initiative that the Keshet promoted, from public housing to land reform. It was not until Aryeh Deri’s, Shas’s charismatic leader, prosecution for corruption that a mediator on his behalf reached out to seek a mutual meeting which was conditioned upon the Keshet’s publicly condemnation of his persecution as political. This request was eventually rejected, but the controversy around it raised once more the question of the Keshet’s approach to Judaism and religion. In the Israeli political environment, where religion is a legitimate tool for political mobilization and religious parties are part of the ruling coalition, it becomes almost inevitable that one’s attitude towards any of these parties overlaps with one’s view of religion at large. Hence, the political schism between left-leaning parties and the religious parties is often seen as a rejection of Judaism and religion (to an extent, these parties are not innocent in making this happen, see Levy 2007). For the Keshet this posed a dilemma. If it does not publicly support Deri, does it place the movement alongside the anti-religion, anti-clerical political parties on the left? Therefore, it was important to publicly emphasize that the Keshet’s position does not stem from hatred of religion, and equally important, that its criticism of Shas does not imply as a criticism of its constituency. In fact, many of the Keshet members saw Shas as a positive force for the Mizrahi lower class, for whom they offered concrete material and spiritual solutions after they had been abandoned for decades by the state (Shalev and Levy 2005, but see Levy and Emmerich 2001).

There is no one way to describe the Keshet, and different people, first and foremost its members, saw it differently and developed diverse expectations from the movement. In regards to the place of religion and Judaism however, it is safe to say that while the dominant attitude was favourable to state-church separation, the Keshet distanced itself from mainstream left-to-center parties by not demonstrating an explicit resentment of Judaism. Nor did it adhere to the tendency to categorize people by their level of religiosity. Therefore, and despite internal controversies, as a movement the Keshet showed tolerance to the existence of Jewishness in public life while adhering to an ideal of a secular, multicultural state. However, a fresh cohort of Mizrahi activists came to the fore, offering a different approach to the question of the place of Judaism and religiosity in the public sphere.

## The New Mizrahi Activism

In his book on the history of the Mizrahi struggle, Sami Shalom Chetrit designated the rise of the Keshet as the New Mizrahi discourse (Chetrit 2009, 152 cf.). Yet, when one looks at the chronology of Mizrahi politics it appears that this discourse renews in a cyclical manner. One major issue that underlies the decades-long Mizrahi struggle relates to the unequal allocation of public resources, particularly lands and housing (Abu 2013). If the Keshet's legacy is marked by one act it is the ruling of the Supreme Court in favor of its petition regarding the Israeli government's unjust land allocation policy (HCJ 244/00), and the inscription of the notion of distributive justice (Karif 2005). The new millennium however is marked by a struggle for a home. The 2011 social protest, that followed the Arab Spring and the global politicization of mainly the young generation against the neoliberal global order, was instigated by a housing crisis that drove mostly the young to the streets. Still, I propose, it was a struggle not just for housing, but for a sense of a home (e.g., Levy 2014a). The sense of homelessness stemmed from the economic insecurity as well as from a feeling of loss of society as a safe place. The call for social justice and the alienation from the neoliberal order spread across the country (e.g., Marom 2013), and was heard in makeshift encampments from which also new Mizrahi voices arose (Misgav 2013; Levy 2017). This new "New Mizrahi" activism brought new approaches to the question of religion and religiosity. Notably, these were not aimed at challenging the state-religion structure, but to integrate in it.

Mizrahi activism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characteristically different from the past. While in the past the organization of protest or of activists sought to create one, all-encompassing movement (regardless of their actual success), current activism is typically more diverse and decentralized. Evidently, activists do not necessarily speak in one voice. As elsewhere, social media is playing a major part in these developments. Thus, a new Mizrahi discourse has developed in several channels, from Facebook and websites to grassroots groups. Some are more focused on cultural issues, "*Tor HaZahav*" ("The Golden Age") is one example, others focus on poverty and homelessness, such as "*Lo-nehmadim lo-nehmadot*" ("the not-nice") (Levy 2017), and still others seek to correct past wrongs, like "*Amram*" which documents the disappearance of mostly Yemenite immigrants' children in the early 1950s and seeks public recognition for their families.<sup>8</sup> During the social protest in 2011, Mizrahi activists were part of the

<sup>8</sup> The Yemenite, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair refers to the kidnapping and disappearance of thousands of toddlers from families of new immigrants mostly in the 1950s. This still remains as an open wound between the state and the families. To read more, see <https://www.edut-amram.org/en/>.

encampments in poorer neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, which brought together citizens and non-citizens from the margins of society who sought real solutions to their predicament (Marom 2013; Misgav 2013). These encampments in collaboration with veteran and novice activists, also from the Keshet and *Ahoti*, a Mizrahi feminist organization, formed and led the "Periphery Bloc Forum" (Facebook group), which primarily protested the failing public housing policy, contrary to the mainstream's demand for affordable housing. The demise of the protests in 2011 did not mark the end of this new activism. Interestingly, while they remain primarily committed to the struggle for social justice, these various groups and activists have shown a different approach to the questions of Judaism, religion and religiosity. Let me begin with an anecdote that illustrate this difference.

I first came across an innovative "use" of religion at a demonstration in front of the home of Yair Lapid, then Finance Minister, organized by the "*Lo-nehmadim lo-nehmadot*" activists group during the state budget approval debates (Levy 2017). In July 2013, attorney Barak Cohen, a novice social activist, attended Lapid's home daily and for thirty days he was reading out loud chapters from the Book of Psalms. It was a unique form of protest that called for an explanation. When asked what made this type of demonstration unique, Cohen told me that the prayers were addressed to God not to Lapid, whose public image was of an adamant secular (personal interview, December 29, 2014). This act, that resonated a mode of protest typical to ultraorthodox Jews in Israel, who would gather for mass prayers in the public space, was more than a religious act. This performance was an act of defiance towards the Ashkenazi middle class, with whom Lapid is identified and whom he seeks to represent. While it was, if we follow Mizrahi's approach (2016), a demonstration of the opposing worldviews and repertoires that Cohen and Lapid hold, one comment on Facebook offers a more sophisticated reference to this act. The choice of a daily reading of Psalms, it read, "reminds me, in a positive way – in one of the Lebanon wars, or maybe both, people stood in front of the Prime Minister's house counting the days [of the invasion] with a sign with a number on it – the number of casualties. What you're doing is very important. Well done."

The interweaving of the secular, the political and the religious characterizes much of Barak Cohen's activism, and indeed his political practice and doctrine challenge both the right and the left. What makes his activism remarkable is his fundamental belief in the absolute and equal sovereignty of those whom he calls "the people of the land" (see Levy 2014a). This belief, which is grounded

<sup>9</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/FBYC2013>

in both secular and religious texts, poses a challenge to Zionists at both ends of the spectrum, whether they see Israel's independence in terms of a godly event or as a modern, nationalist redemption. Cohen's attitude and practice thus allow for a political position that rejects liberal binaries of religion versus the state (Mahmood and Danchin 2014), without prioritizing one or the other. While this event may be seen anecdotal, it attests, I propose, to a change in the way a new cohort of Mizrahi activists seeks new paths for political mobilization of Mizrahim. One manifestation of this was the attempt to tie the success of Shas to that political mobilization.

In late 2014, shortly before Benjamin Netanyahu called for early elections, Ophir Toubul, who was still known as the founder of the website Cafe Gibraltar, a website dedicated to promoting Mediterranean culture, published an op-ed titled "Deri must bring back the voters who moved over to Bennett" (Toubul 2014). Toubul referred to the attempt of Naftali Bennett, then chair of the Zionist-religious Jewish Home party, to draw back traditionalist Mizrahi voters in the 2013 elections. He explained:

„Now, when it is clear that the elections are imminent, the traditional-Mizrahi voice can and should go somewhere else, to the leadership that grew out of it and works for it. Aryeh Deri's Shas is supposed to be a social party, politically moderate, that speaks in a traditional and Mizrahi language, and addresses this public directly. A party that offers the traditionalists "a return to the original splendor" – a slogan that is fundamentally opposite to the religious Zionist slogans of the sanctity of the army and the land. Shas is a party which today has a lot of potential.“

Moreover, Toubul called on Deri to not only open the party to new voters, but to create a new social front with Mizrahi politicians and activists based on a new political platform.

„Did Deri know how to recognize the potential in the Mizrahi leaders around him such as Orly Levy, Moshe Kahlon, Adina Bar Shalom and Amir Peretz, and team up with them to create a real alternative? Will there be, for the first time in the country's history, a front that brings about a new political and social discourse that eliminates concepts such as right and left, religious and secular, and strives for true equality among all the inhabitants of the country?“

The alternative, Toubul concluded, is for Shas to reinvent itself as a new religiously-based Mizrahi party. Eventually, Toubul was invited by Deri to speak at the inauguration of Shas's election campaign in Ashdod.

One cannot overstate the significance of this event, at which Toubul not only praised Shas but also demanded its transformation, including its opening up to women (Toubul 2015; Nahmias 2015). Later, Toubul partnered with other activists, both veterans and novices, in the establishment of the "Civil Council," which sought to advance this agenda within Shas. The partnership was immortalized in a treaty signed by both sides (Adamker 2015).<sup>10</sup> For its part, Shas, or perhaps mainly Aryeh Deri, embraced the council and even shaped its election campaign in the spirit of its messages regarding the "transparent" members of society whose voices are never heard. Another manifestation of the penetration of the council's ideas into the party was its use of the term Mizrahim and its appropriation of the Mizrahi critique of the underrepresentation of Mizrahim in the echelons of social and cultural power, thus referring to the Mizrahi middle class and seeing the Mizrahim not only from the perspective of material and spiritual poverty.

The establishment of the Civil Council was not accepted unanimously by Mizrahi activists.<sup>11</sup> In a way, it resonated the debate about the relation to Judaism and political religiosity in the Keshet. It thus reflected how the dilemma of religious politics has never been resolved in the context of Mizrahi politics, but also marked its change. First, while Shas has always been expanding to non-ultraorthodox Mizrahi communities, it is uncommon that Mizrahi activists from non-ultraorthodox background would affiliate themselves with the party. Thus, while individual Mizrahi activists may have supported Shas they never sought to change it. Toubul however, and later the Civil Council, sought to restructure it and make it a model for "new" Mizrahi politics. Still, while many novice Mizrahi activists showed optimism, many of the veterans were less optimistic, and less naïve in their own view. They suspected that while Deri and Shas would reap the rewards of that support, and remain devoted to the party's ultra-Orthodox credo, the activists will not only suffer disappointment, but also be blamed for this failure. Moreover, many criticized the move on the grounds that the party's ideological commitment to ultraorthodox politics, and given its weak record in supporting social laws in the past, will prevent it from developing

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<sup>10</sup> Shas announced the main principles of the platform and the signing of the agreement at a press conference in Kfar Shalem, in the presence of members of the Civil Council, on March 2, 2015. The event was broadcast on the Facebook page of council member Shira Ohayon, and about a week later also on Deri's page (March 10, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> The main debates took place on Facebook and blogs between novice and veteran activists and occasionally on the opinion pages of the traditional press (e.g., Chetrit 2015; Arad 2015).

universal inclusive social policies. They were not proved wrong.

Second, the Civil Council was the subject of severe criticism on a topic that had previously seemed to be no longer controversial in Mizrahi politics – the status of women. Toubol was not blind to this and it is important to note that in his debut speech he demanded that Shas becomes committed to gender equality. This was true for all members of the Civil Council. Still, most of them were willing to sacrifice this goal in the short term for the sake of cooperation, or what they saw as a partnership. For example, one members of the Civil Council wrote:

”As a Mizrahi feminist, I certainly cannot accept a party in which women do not serve as Knesset members. On the other hand, I refuse to scrutinize this party and the processes happening within it through white, feminist glasses. It is very important that healthy developments take place within the public itself and from a place of maturity and readiness – even if it is clear to me that women must serve as members of the Knesset, this decision cannot be made from the outside, without the real readiness of the ultra-Orthodox public. That's why I put my hopes in the council of intelligent women that was established and hope that it will have as broad an impact as possible” (Shani-Shitrit 2015).

Eventually, Shas had proven to be less moderate than its portrayal in the eyes of the activists. The activists continued to emphasize the value of Sephardi religious moderateness in order to justify their willingness to partner with Shas, including postponing the demand for gender equality, whereas Shas remained loyal to its own principles and political base. In other words, while the activists moved to meet Shas halfway, the party remained in the same place where it was as a home for traditionalist Mizrahim led by an ultraorthodox leadership.

The Civil Council dissolved after the 2015 elections, but the religiosity of Mizrahim has remained a contentious issue. For veteran and novice Mizrahi activists this is a matter of identity, not a mere political issue. Just a few days before elections day, at a rally of the left-leaning “Zionist Camp” party, a renowned artist, Yair Garbuz, condemned the Likud voters as being “the kissers of amulets, idol-worshipers, and those who prostrate themselves on the graves of saints.” Such an utterance from an Ashkenazi middle class public figure could not be taken as other than a paternalistic insult directed towards the Likud’s Mizrahi electorate, who are commonly referred to as non-moderns



and primitives. Carmen Elmakiyes-Amos, a Mizrahi feminist activist, later a founder of *Breaking the Walls* activist group, responded:

”Graves of *tzadikim* [righteous ones] is my culture. Let it be clear. I really wish they [the left-wing and Ashkenazi secularists] would go and learn about these righteous people and what great people they were. To tut-tut and belittle this great culture that we grew up on. You can't mock their religion and trample everything related to these believers and then say, “Wow, why don't they vote for me?”

It was not incidental that the attempt to form a unified Mizrahi front of nonorthodox Mizrahim and the ultraorthodox Shas occurred in preparation for the 2015 elections. It was shortly after Netanyahu's third government, that was based on a coalition that excluded Shas and the ultraorthodox parties dissolved (Levy 2014b). It turned out that being Mizrahi had gained some currency in the political arena. Indeed, Shas was not the only religious party to court voters who are Mizrahi but not necessarily religious. The historic National Religious Party (Mafdal) had built its political power on recruiting Mizrahim while maintaining ethnically based hierarchy between its Ashkenazi leadership and the Mizrahi ranks (Zelniker and Kahan, 1976). The Jewish Home, its offspring that was led then by Naftali Bennett, sought to ride on the Mizrahi agenda and recruit former footballer Eli Ohana on the “Mizrahi ticket” during the elections campaign. This move confronted harsh opposition from within the party's old guard, who did not seem to bother in the past with the Mizrahim as long as the ethnic hierarchy was kept intact. This move was blocked but it did remind many of the way Mizrahim had been treated within the Zionist-religious movement as a token.

Indeed, already before the elections were announced, the right-wing Zionist-religious newspaper *Makor Rishon* published a special weekend supplement dedicated to the issue of Mizrahim in the movement. The editor explained the motivation behind the supplement as follows:

”When we were thinking of doing an issue about the relationship between religious Zionism and Mizrahim, I told a good friend about it. He, a graduate of ultra-Orthodox-Lithuanian yeshivas, was taken aback by the very idea. “After all,” he said, “religious Zionism is the only Israeli sub-

society where there is no ethnic discrimination; it is devoid of any division into Sephardim and Ashkenazim.” He then added passionately, “It’s only among those with the knitted kippahs that everyone marries everyone, everyone studies with everyone – so why would you create a discussion about a problem that doesn’t even exist?”

The editor also adds:

„And I did a little experiment. I asked a number of respondents whether they thought this topic deserved a special issue and behold: The five Ashkenazim I asked said that there is no discrimination, so there was no reason to devote an issue to the subject, and that in general this was a non-issue and constituted a forced return to the 1950s. The five Mizrahi respondents, however, said that it was necessary to devote an issue to the topic, and perhaps even a series of issues“ (Nir 2014).

While this Mizrahi recount of the past was not unfamiliar to those who were engaged in Mizrahi critique along the years (e.g. Chetrit 2004), the contributors to the supplement exposed how abundant and deep were the discrimination against and oppression of Mizrahim in this camp. Yehouda Yifrach, a senior legal editor at the newspaper, wrote about the suspicious reception with which his parents were met when they moved to the West Bank settlement of Beit El, even though “they were not ‘regular’ Moroccans – a graduate of a [Zionist-religious, GL] Hesder yeshiva and a graduate of the Hebrew University are not the classic welfare cases – but still, they were Moroccans. And not just any Moroccans – Moroccans from Kiryat Malachi<sup>12</sup>” (Yifrach 2014). Others described how they were forced to part with the Sephardi prayer traditions and customs in favor of Ashkenazi ones, and one explained: “The ethnic ‘mix’ so beloved in the religious-Zionist ideology (as part of the holy hyphen connecting ‘religious’ and ‘Zionism’) means creating small “reserves” for Mizrahi tradition in a kind of generosity of winners” (Hasson 2014).

<sup>12</sup> A development town in south central Israel that was primarily founded as a transit camp for new immigrants from Iraq and Romania and later for immigrants from North Africa.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

What do these stories tell us about Mizrahi politics and the question of religion? What is common to these articulations of political religiosity and what is different in these approaches? On a theoretical level, can these two articulations of Mizrahi politics and religion be adequately explained by either Peled's multiple citizenship paradigm, or Mizrahi's worlds of meaning? And how should we understand Mizrahi citizenship in light of this?

As we have seen, Peled's model of multiple citizenship was part of a shift in political sociology that marked the demise of structuralist-functionalist understanding of ethnicity and ethnic relations from within the logic of nation building as a failure of an otherwise successful process of modernization. To a large part, by shifting the focus to the state and its function as an incorporation regime, ethnic relations are seen as manifestations of power relations rather than as presupposing these relations. Thus, instead of assuming the inclusive logic of nation building, this model asks what are the inclusionary and exclusionary interests that drive this process. Yet, while the model refrains from attributing specific groups with a predestined capacity or incapacity to integrate in a modern state, it falls short of accounting for the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of citizenship. Put differently, its inclination towards structuralist explanations leaves the model insensitive to societal shifts as well as to socio-demographic diversity within groups. The model grants state institutions the power to shape the incorporation regime based on three discourses of citizenship: the (ethno) republican discourse is ascribed to the Ashkenazi middle class that enjoys the upper hand in the context of a neo-liberal, capitalist order in determining the public good and benefit from this; the ethno-national discourse grants non-dominant Jewish groups, mainly Mizrahim, the benefit of inclusion but this is conditional on them being excluded from the corridors of power; and lastly, the liberal discourse of citizenship benefits, again, the mostly Ashkenazi middle class, but also allows the state to retain its democratic image in the face of its discriminatory practices towards Palestinian citizens.

The persisting material gaps between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim led Shafir and Peled to suggest that:

”One result of this gap is that even when they attain individual social mobility Mizrachim [sic.] have to struggle against exclusionary stereotypes. Thus, notwithstanding the socio-economic differentiation among Mizrachim, it is still appropriate to view their citizenship status as an issue that unifies rather than divides them” (Shafir and Peled 2002, 79).

Indeed, this argument can be made even stronger if we consider that beyond stereotypes, Mizrahim have suffered sheer racism (e.g., Shohat 1998), and this have not changed even when they were making their way into the middle class and the echelons of power. Put differently, once the Mizrahim were designated as non-modern, and even worst, as incapable of modernizing given their proclivity to retain some of their cultural and religious traditions, this image became inescapably inscribed in their citizenship status.

Nissim Mizrahi’s starting point is the critique of liberalism as the epitome of “good citizenship”. While the Multiple Citizenship paradigm does not claim this explicitly, it does share this assumption about liberal citizenship. In fact, in the very last sentences of their book, Shafir and Peled advocate for a liberal, multicultural order in which citizenship is based “on a foundation of equal, universal, and effective individual rights” (Shafir and Peled 2002, 348). Mizrahi, notably, is suspicious of this “liberal grammar” which not only narrows the “interpretive space” of sociology as a discipline, but also renders the resistance to the liberal discourse a “social anomaly” (Mizrahi 2016, 37). Hence, he claims, to understand why marginalized Mizrahim resist this liberal discourse one should listen to what they say and how *they* interpret their reality (Ibidem, 51). Based on communitarian philosophy, Mizrahi asks sociologists to understand that “the liberal message poses an existential threat to the core identity of nonliberal groups, making it a problem rather than a solution for its target population.” (Ibidem, 58). Yet, by schematizing Jewish society as being divided into liberals vs. traditionalists, and pitting one group against the other, this approach fails to consider other Mizrahi voices that reject the secularist disregard of (Mizrahi) religiosity and, still, recognize the social context in which Mizrahim became identified as religious. Moreover, and similarly to the Multiple Citizenship paradigm, Mizrahi’s approach also explains only one form of difference that sets Mizrahim apart, namely being traditionalists. In this respect, again like in Peled’s model, Mizrahi renders the category of Mizrahim fixed and fixated.

Thus, Peled’s structuralist perspective infers that it is the inclination of

Mizrahim to be traditionalists which contributes to the reproduction of the social hierarchy, and therefore they are bound to remain marginalized as long as class-particularism reigns the social order. Mizrahi on the other hand, being not as concerned with social reproduction, asks instead to explain the rejection of universalism by lower class Mizrahim, or even their resistance to it. In this view, their traditionalism is not a problem, but rather an expression of their sense of honor and worlds of meaning. Intentionally or not, both explanations take the religiosity of Mizrahim and its relation to their citizenship as a given. Specifically, the two models tell too particular a story about Mizrahi religiosity and citizenship, according to which it is their innate inclination towards traditionalism that imbues their citizenship with a social meaning. Given the political reality in Israel, it is more than obvious why such explanations gain traction. Yet, occasionally it is the “road not taken” which is more telling. Indeed, the stories that unfolded here offer a different possibility.

The two case studies, I propose, allow us to think of how had the Mizrahim become identified as traditionalists. Neither the Keshet’s approach to state-religion relationship, nor the inclination of the New Mizrahim to accept this order as given, stem from an innate tendency of “being Mizrahi”. Alternatively, I propose the idea of *ethnic thinking* for explaining the performative aspects of citizenship and practices of making claims for a share in society (Isin 2017; Tully 2014).

The idea of *ethnic thinking* denotes a process whereby certain social facts become social truths through labelling social problems by using ethnically-specific cultural terminology. This thinking dominates the public discourse in a way that, in our case, religiosity becomes the (only) way to explain what being Mizrahi means. Moreover, it suggests that Mizrahi political behaviour is determined by the relation to Judaism. Still, while the Mizrahi electorate is identified with supporting Shas and the Likud, neither ethnicity nor religiosity alone explain their vote (Levy et. al. 2022). For contemporary Mizrahi activists too the question of religiosity *is* a Mizrahi question that cannot, and should not, be waived or ignored. And indeed, one can identify three responses to these entanglements which, I argue, both Peled and Mizrahi fail to explain. For explaining these entanglements requires relinquishing the binaries of liberal vs. traditional or religious vs. secular.

The two case studies that are discussed here propose that Mizrahi activists seek their own avenues to perform their citizenship from within the political entanglements of religion and state. On the one hand, the Keshet was advocating

for a regime change and a shift to a multicultural diverse order, in which religion is not politicized yet where religiosity is not a determinant of one's citizenship. On the other hand, the New Mizrahim seem to accept the order of things and seek ways to become deserving citizens while maintaining a traditionalist way of life. In this way, then, the two Mizrahi avenues expose the liberal bias of both Peled and Mizrahi, forcefully rejecting the two scholar's incorrect presupposition that liberalism underpins the Israeli citizenship regime.

In this context it is interesting to see how my two case-studies end, or more accurately, where do they stand at this point, when Israel experiences a prolonged political crisis. Throughout the constitutional and electoral crisis, manifested in five consecutive general elections in three years (2019-2022) – the Mizrahi vote has become a contentious issue. This, it is argued, due to the fact that Mizrahim unfailingly support the political parties that are either religious (mainly Shas) or show sympathy to traditionalism (mainly the Likud). While it has already been shown that the Mizrahi vote is more diverse and dynamic (Shalev and Levy 2005; Levy et. al. 2022), the idea that Mizrahim act from their position as religious or traditionalist is almost an axiom of the political discourse. But what if this is only a situated position, an act which is required by the logic of ethnic thinking and not immanent to Mizrahi identity?

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## *Мизрахи политика, религија и етничко мишљење*

**Сажетак:** У последњих неколико деценија развила су се два приступа објашњења односа између Мизрахи ентитета и држављанства у Израелу. Још од раних 90-тих, Пеледова парадигма *вишеструких држављанстава* доминирала је у разјашњавању различитих и фрагментираних инкорпорација од стране режима. Према овој парадигми, афилијација са јеврејском вером била је део етно-националног дискурса држављанства који је држао Мизрахи Јевреје (Јевреји са пореклом из муслиманских земаља) између хегемоније Ашкеназа (Јевреја са пореклом из Европе) и Палестинаца. Међутим, у скорије време развија се алтернативно објашњење које предлаже фокус на интерпретативне репертоаре који обликујују политичко понашање Ашкеназа и Мизрахи Јевреја. Супротно либералној парадигми вишеструких држављанстава, ово објашњење ставља већи фокус на културу, а не на материјалне факторе, и њен утицај на политичко понашање. На тај начин, овај приступ идентификују обе етничке групе са супростављеним културним репертоарима. У овом раду уводим концепт „етничког мишљења“ и анализирам улогу религије у Мизрахи политици фокусирајући се на две студије случаја: *Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow (the Keshet)*, и на *New Mizrahim*. Одбијајући да означи Мизрахи заједницу као традиционалистичку, овај рад изазива оба доминантна приступа који занемарују перформативни аспект Мизрахи држављанства.

**Кључне речи:** Мизрахи студије, Мизрахи религиозност, пост-либерализам, перформативно држављанство, етничко мишљење