

Ultrationalism and Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Case of Shas

Nissim Leon¹ 

Bar-Ilan University

Israel

Abstract: Israeli scholarship has noted the prominence of hawkish and ultranationalist views among the Shas electorate, as well as the structural and historical conditions responsible for them. Attention has not, however, been paid to the contexts and the ways in which Mizrahi-Haredi discourse processes these views in its encounter with this population. The present article looks at one of the main components of the relationship between Shas and its supporters in Israel's social periphery – the *teshuva* movement. Fieldwork on the discourse of local *teshuva* preachers shows that they have used the ultranationalist message to illustrate the importance of adhering to Jewish religious tradition and relying on its rabbinical authorities. A complex and fluid version of religious ultranationalism was detected as well, one that demands communal separation but is not, however, averse to cultural interaction between Jews and Arabs.

Keywords: Ultrationalism, Ultra-Orthodoxy, *Mizrachim*, Shas Movement

Introduction

Ultrationalism is an ideological stance that asserts the primacy of the ethnic-national identity that is dominant in a nation state. Ultrationalists regard ethnicity not only as a source of cultural distinctiveness, but as the basis for delineating political hierarchies (Art 2011). In the ultranationalist view, the relevant group identity's primacy should be expressed in state institutions and in the nation's culture, political system, and citizenship laws (Van der-Veer 2003; Mammone 2012). This outlook is sometimes represented as part of a critical stance toward the liberal state, whose social and cultural openness is thought to facilitate the collapse of core traditions and

¹ Nissim Leon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar-Ilan University. His main researches focus on ethnic and religious relations in the Israeli Society. Nissim is the co-author of *A Flock with no Shepherd: Shas leadership the Day after Rabbi Ovadia Yosef* (2018) and a number of articles on related topics. Email: nissimnu@bezeqint.net, Nissim.Leon@biu.ac.il

identities (Richards 2013; Abutbul-Selinger 2020). The loading of the hierarchy with a differential system of civil privileges, purist practices, or cultural and physiological interpretation narrows the ideological and practical distance between ultranationalism and racism.

Jewish ultranationalists in Israel want to see “Jewish primacy” manifested in state institutions and in the country’s citizenship laws (Shafir and Peled 2002). For many years the ultranationalist outlook had a presence on the fringes of the Israeli right. It found political expression in far-right parties such as Kach and Moledet, and was associated with organizations (such as Lehava) that were led by figures on the margins of Religious Zionism (Engelberg 2017), and with radical ideological circles (Fisher 2017). However, the past decade has seen ultranationalism, in its various religious forms, become conspicuously present along the spectrum of Israeli right-wing parties (Pedhazur 2012). This development appears to reflect a *hadata* or “religionization” process undergone by the Israeli right, with the transition from a politics of commitment to the primacy of the state, to a politics of commitment to Jewish primacy (Peled and Peled 2020).

One of the political forces prominent in the ultranationalist religionization process underway in Israel is the International Union of the Sephardim, Guardians of the Torah, better known by the Hebrew acronym Shas. Ultranationalism in the case of Shas is connected with negative attitudes toward a variety of other issues: labor migrants, recognition of Reform conversions, the Jewish identity of FSU immigrants, and more. In this article I want to address another significant issue that makes itself felt in Israeli ultranationalist discourse and, in particular, in the discourse of the Shas electorate: Jewish-Arab relations.

Research on Mizrahi-Arab relations has long noted the prominence of hawkish and ultranationalist views among Shas supporters, and the structural and historical conditions responsible for this (Cohen 2022; Peled 1998). However, scholars have not addressed the way in which these views are processed and interpreted in local Mizrahi-Haredi discourse. The present article will therefore focus on one of the Shas party’s major agents of consciousness – the *teshuva* movement.² This movement is a factor of great importance in the relationship between the Shas agenda and the social and local world of the Mizrahi public in Israel’s social periphery (Lehman and Siebzeher 2006). Fieldwork I conducted in 2019-2022, in the midst of Israel’s political crisis, was focused on collecting and analyzing ultranationalist messages that arose in the discourse between local *teshuva* preachers and the Mizrahi public, most of which is non-Haredi.

My findings showed how the ultranationalist message on Jewish-Arab relations in Israel was used by the preachers to stress the importance of adhering to the devout

² *Teshuva*, lit. repentance – return to strict observance of religious Jewish law.

Haredi religiosity identified with Shas – and, in particular, of heeding rabbinical authority. In this context, a somewhat fluid version of religious ultranationalism arose. On the one hand, this religious ultranationalism required strict communal separation between Jews and Arabs; on the other hand, it did not balk at intercultural interaction between the groups. My objectives in this article are as follows: to present the fluid ultranationalist outlook as conveyed by the sermons of *teshuva* preachers in their work with the public targeted by Shas; to understand the social background against which this form of ultranationalism arose and its role in organizing the religious and ethnic reality renewed by Shas; and to parse its meaning relative to the Jewish-primacy stance championed by circles originating with Religious Zionism – circles that see themselves as continuing along the ultranationalist-fundamentalist path of Rabbi Meir Kahane and the Kach movement (see Magid 2021).

My fieldwork was yet another segment of an ongoing, two-decade-long research project on the Haredi and nationalist ideology of the Shas movement. The ethnographic findings presented here are based on participant observation work that included listening, recording, and observing *teshuva* sermons delivered at local community centers, synagogues, and public venues in Israel's social periphery – the periphery from which Shas seeks support. The fieldwork focused on the message conveyed by two prominent preachers of the past decade. One of these is Rav Raphael Zer, who heads a Petah Tikva community of Mizrahi *hozrim biteshuva* (returnees to religion) and Mizrahim who are strengthening in religious observance, many of them in their twenties and thirties. Rav Zer is a preacher who belongs to the second generation of *teshuva*-movement rabbis active in the Mizrahi community for over four decades. His older brother, Rav Daniel Zer, is one of Israel's most veteran *teshuva* rabbis; a large and longstanding community of *hozrim biteshuva*, for whom he is an authoritative rabbinical figure, has developed around the yeshiva he founded in Pardes Katz, a lower-class and strongly Mizrahi neighborhood at the edge of Bnei Brak (El-Or 2006). Rav Raphael Zer is likewise trying to develop a project of this kind in a Petah Tikva neighborhood of similar class profile. The other preacher is Rav Ronen Shaulov, a former soccer player and a *hozer biteshuva* of Mizrahi background, who has become one of Israel's foremost *teshuva* preachers over the past decade. Rav Shaulov does not head a community; he is active primarily on the outreach plane and is invited to deliver faith-strengthening sermons in Mizrahi communities and in synagogues oriented toward a religiously devout lifestyle. His talks may be characterized as preacher "performances;" the audience expects him to deliver religious interpretations of actual events. Both Raphael Zer and Ronen Shaulov self-identify as Haredim and as representing a Haredi outlook. They also give the impression of viewing the rabbinical authorities who lead Shas as their own spiritual leadership. Both are also regarded by their target audiences as highly assertive in their style of preaching, as well-informed

on current events, and as capable of sternly admonishing their listeners. In the eyes of target groups, this style of preaching makes them “men of truth,” that is, they are felt to be speaking “truth” with the force of religious faith. Neither hesitates to employ the various social-media messaging systems to get their message across. During the fieldwork period, each of these preachers, separately, mobilized to campaign for Shas and were, in fact, an inseparable part of the popular-mobilization infrastructure that this Mizrahi-Haredi political party has been employing for many years. Their lectures attracted audiences through announcements distributed throughout the neighborhoods where they are active or where they come to give talks; they also gain listeners through YouTube recordings of their sermons.

The fieldwork was complicated somewhat by the fact that between February 2020 and November 2021 it was hard to get into the field itself due to the coronavirus pandemic and the state restrictions on movement, contact, and public gatherings. It should be noted that the state directives limiting the size of gatherings and spacing worshippers at synagogues were largely complied with in the Mizrahi-Haredi spaces. These restrictions enjoyed the support of leading rabbis, the Shas *Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah* or “Council of Torah Sages” foremost among them. A considerable number of observations were conducted both before and after the pandemic; during the pandemic time was devoted to view a large number of sermon videos. Once the limits on gatherings were lifted in June 2021, the sermons started returning to schedule, and it became possible to return to the field in measured fashion – and, in the course of 2022, without restriction.

It should be pointed out that the ultranationalist message discussed in this article is hardly notable for its political correctness. I often hesitated to quote statements that could be viewed as offensive. However, I chose to faithfully reflect the research field, its spokespeople, and the fraught reality from which my findings were extracted.

Haredism, Mizrahiyut, and Shas

Before we go on to analyze the ultranationalist stance in the discourse of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement associated with Shas, a few words are in order regarding Haredism and Mizrahiyut, and about their relationship with Shas. I will discuss the *teshuva* movement at length at a later point in the article.

“Haredism” denotes a deeply devout form of Judaism that emerged among eastern and central European Jewry in the nineteenth century, in response to modernization and secularization. Those who converged around this approach – referred to as “Haredim” or “ultra-Orthodox Jews” – embraced social separatism and life within homogeneous enclave communities (Friedman 1998; Sivan 1995). During the twentieth century the Haredi ideology and way of life also

took hold among Jewish communities with roots in the Middle East and North Africa, those referred to by Israeli sociologists as “Mizrahim” (Deshen 2005).

The concept of “Mizrahim” is meant to differentiate, at least analytically, between Jews of Middle Eastern and North African extraction and Jews whose families hailed from eastern and central Europe, known as “Ashkenazim.” It is an Israeli ethnic category that has been subject to debate, in particular regarding the shared cultural foundations of the communities classified under it, which vary widely. And yet an important factor in the ethnic categorization of Mizrahim is the class situation common to many families within that category who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s. These families were channeled to peripheral towns of sparse economic opportunity, and faced persistent negative stereotyping and devaluation of their cultures of origin vis-à-vis the dominant culture which they associated with the “Ashkenazim” (Ben-Rafael 1982). The development of ongoing mobility and status disparities between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim was a source of ethnic division that beset Israel for many years and from which the Shas party emerged as well (Smootha 2008).

In Israeli society as a whole, the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi rift is a perennial topic of social criticism aimed at negating the distinction or changing the situation. However, in the Haredi world, from which Shas sprang, the rift is a fundamental ethnic reality with two separated subsectors: A Mizrahi sector (referred to by the Haredim as “Sephardim”) and an “Ashkenazi” sector (divided between “Hassidim” and those opposed to the Hassidic approach, known as “Lithuanians” or “Litvaks”, see Leon 2016). The two sectors are associated with separate political parties. The Ashkenazi Haredim and a small proportion of the Mizrahi Haredim converge around the United Torah Judaism party, while a large share of the Mizrahi Haredim, especially those belonging to families that have returned to religious observance, converge around Shas. The two parties share the Haredi ideology and two of that ideology’s main missions: to protect the system of civil arrangements secured by Israel’s Haredi leadership (the “society of learners” model, see Heilman and Fridman 1995), and to promote religion and state arrangements that accord with the Orthodox outlook (Fisher 2016). Shas’s ability to inspire a pool of non-Haredi voters to support Haredi ideology made it a significant political player in Israeli society as a whole, and in Haredi society specifically.

Shas was established in 1983 as part of the Mizrahi-Haredi struggle against ethnic discrimination in the Ashkenazi-Haredi systems. Since its founding, it has been one of a number of relatively stable parties that emerged after the rightist rise to power in 1977. A number of factors contributed to the party’s stability. Prominent among these was its ability to manage a new field of hybrid politics

that connects the fact of its being a Haredi party with its representation as a Mizrahi party (Yadgar 2003): “Haredi” because of its ideological commitment to the interests of the Israeli Haredi sector, and “Mizrahi” because of its political commitment to the ethno-class agenda of the Mizrahim. This connection endowed Shas with an impressive ability to maneuver between different political-identification motivations, which may explain how it managed to survive in the long term, as opposed to the Mizrahi parties that preceded it (Chetrit 2000).

During the period when my fieldwork was conducted, Shas was still beset by a number of challenges that it had faced over the past decade. The first among these was the need to strengthen the movement’s spiritual leadership after the passing of its preeminent spiritual leader, Rav Ovadia Yosef, in 2013. The party’s Council of Torah Sages was headed by Rav Shalom Cohen, a figure whom Shas may perhaps have represented as stepping into the shoes of Rav Ovadia, but with whom the wider public was less familiar. After Cohen’s passing in August 2022, no new rabbinical figure was appointed to head the Council. One way or another, the situation highlighted another challenge facing Shas: the standing of Aryeh Deri, who became the party’s strongman and political regent. Deri, one of the movement’s founders and the person who, in the 1990s, had led it to electoral pinnacles, bore the image of a corrupt politician who had been convicted on bribery charges and who was prone to various other complications. During the period 2001-2012 he was excluded from the party’s political leadership, but returned to the leadership echelon in 2013; since 2014 he has again been head of the party. The third issue faced by Shas was an apparent erosion of its electoral power, due to the rise of a Mizrahi middle class that, for Shas, constituted a structural-social challenge. The political affiliations of the Mizrahi middle class, especially those of its growing academically-educated subset, spanned the right-wing and centrist parties; the tendency to vote for a Haredi party such as Shas was lower (Cohen and Leon, forthcoming). The spiritual mobility offered by Shas was countered by a proliferation of academic-mobility options, thanks to Israel’s “college revolution.” Alongside the Haredization project, another project took hold, led by academically-trained Mizrahim – the Masortiyut or “traditionalism” project. A fourth challenge took the form of electoral leakage: Shas voters began to support ultranationalist-rightist parties, in particular OY (*Otzma Yehudit*; Jewish Power), led by elements who had revived the Jewish-primacy agenda of Rabbi Meir Kahane’s ultranationalist fundamentalism. OY strove to enlist support not only in the Religious-Zionist settlements on the West Bank, but also in areas where Kahane had garnered large-scale support in the 1980s, before his party was banned – especially within the social periphery from which Shas had drawn support (Peled 1998). The outcome of all this has been

ongoing electoral uncertainty and a growing investment in the stability of the Shas electoral base. Accordingly, there is increased dependence on influencers to constantly transmit the spiritual message of Shas to the non-haredi Mizrahi social periphery, and to persuade this population of the importance of obeying the Haredi rabbinical leadership. Here a significant role has been played by what students of Mizrahi Haredism commonly refer to as the *teshuva* or “religious revival” movement.

Shas and the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement

The “*teshuva* movement” is a term used to designate various outreach organizations and communal efforts aimed at making the devoutly religious Haredi model the standard for a properly Jewish way of life (Caplan 2001). The historian Hillel Cohen describes how, in addition to stirring social movements such as Gush Emunim (on the right) and Peace Now (on the left), the latter half of the 1970s saw the emergence in Israel of the great Haredi *hazara biteshuva* (return to religion) movement that took the Mizrahi population in Israel’s social periphery by storm (Cohen, 2022, 313-315). Preachers and rabbis such as Reuven Elbaz, Nissim Yagen and Daniel Zer offered Mizrahim living in disadvantaged areas a mobility path and an alternative to low-status life on the margins of Israeli society (El-Or, 2006). The *teshuva* rabbis and preachers proposed replacing class marginality with religious centrality (Picard 2007). What their audiences weren’t told was that returnees to religion ended up on the ethnic and no-less-disadvantaged margins of Haredi society. Shas sought to manage this paradox.

In the second half of the 1980s, in an effort to extricate itself from the Ashkenazi-Haredi sponsorship that had helped it become established and to cultivate a regular voter base of its own, Shas itself provided political sponsorship to the *teshuva* movement. The movement’s messages and charisma of its rabbis and preachers were major factors promoting the spiritual revolution spoken of by Shas’s spiritual leader. The movement provided a useful and creative explanatory/outreach apparatus that was anchored in the field and that helped Shas establish the channel it sought for consciousness-raising and community interaction. The *teshuva* movement’s rabbis and preachers were compensated with local state-funded rabbinic positions, with large budgets for their organizations, and with a sympathetic ear in the Shas-controlled municipalities and government ministries (Tesler 2003). Additionally, Shas provided means and resources for the new way of life chosen by the Mizrahi *bozrim biteshuva*, and the latter rewarded it with a major independent support channel that viewed the party’s spiritual leader, Rav Ovadia Yosef, as a quasi-papal figure (Ettinger and Leon 2018).

Most of the *teshuva* rabbis and preachers are unfamiliar to the broader Israeli public, but are well-known to the religious and tradition-observing Mizrahi community. Firstly, a fair number of them currently fill the ranks of the official local-community rabbinate. Such, for instance, is the case with Rav Eliyahu Illouz, a neighborhood preacher from Netanya, who with Shas support over the years became the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of the city of Or-Akiva. Such is also the case with Rav Moshe Pinto of Petah Tikva, who started his career as a *teshuva* preacher in one of that city's Sephardi synagogues but later founded a large community of families that have returned to religion or are strengthening in religious observance – a community that includes educational institutions and a yeshiva. Pinto is considered to be one of the most prominent Shas rabbis in Petah Tikva, and his name has been mentioned as a candidate for the post of Sephardi Chief Rabbi of the city. Shas, at the municipal and national levels, is the party most intensively engaged in caring for this population, representing it vis-à-vis the authorities, and advancing its interests. In every municipal or national election cycle, these rabbis are enlisted to express support for Shas – albeit hinted, rather than explicit, support. The support is non-explicit for two main reasons: (1) some of these rabbis have obtained official rabbinical positions and are therefore prohibited by the state from expressing support for any political party; (2) Sephardi synagogue culture, eschews a clear link between politics and religion and does not expect such linkage to be promoted by its rabbis. This is a permanent source of tension with regard to Shas, one that lies beyond the scope of this article. In any case, a large proportion of the major *teshuva* preachers were prominent figures not only among Shas supporters, but also within the general Mizrahi public in Israel's social periphery, including a sizeable subgroup of semi-secular Mizrahim – what Israelis refer to as “Masortim” (traditionalists) (Leon 2009).

The classes and lectures of the *teshuva* preachers fill auditoriums, and pictures of the more prominent among them grace local businesses. By systematically listening to their sermons, one can gain an impression of the rhetorical response these speakers provide on a variety of topics raised by their audiences: faith, marital relationships, parent-child relationships, lifestyles, education, personal/public health, and more (Sharabi 2015). Beyond answering questions, however, the *teshuva* discourse also produces questions that help it present a critical, wary, and restless approach to the social construction of “secular” reality, while repeatedly explaining that the Haredi way of life provides “true” answers rooted in a source that is absolute (Caplan 2000). Shas, as noted, benefits electorally from all of this: during election seasons, the preachers' Mizrahi-Haredi profile and community activity translate into identification with the party closest to this discourse, which it also cultivates – Shas. The outcome is that, in contrast to the Ashkenazi United Torah Judaism, Shas gets votes not only from major Haredi strongholds, but also from small and

heterogeneous local *teshuva* communities that emerged during the 1990s.

“*Teshuva* communities” in the social milieu targeted by Shas are not necessarily organized or institutionalized entities. They constitute a complex field – “human capital,” in the language of sociology – that binds together a broad and religiously-heterogeneous public regularly exposed to the Haredi-inflected return-to-religion message, as an intrinsic part of the religious thought that surrounds it and that aims to shape its way of life. An important place in the social construction of this bond is occupied by local synagogues where the sermons of *teshuva* preachers generally aim to illuminate religious events of various kinds: holiday sermons, exegetical discussions of the weekly Torah portion read in synagogues on Shabbat, or memorial speeches about deceased individuals. But these interpretive/exegetical exercises will invariably segue into appeals –interspersed with discussions of current events – for *teshuva* and for stricter religious observance. This kind of appeal not only helps connect the *teshuva* preachers’ Haredi message with the non-Haredi audiences they address; it also connects the preachers themselves with the audiences in whom they wish to inculcate the basic Haredi principle of deference to the rabbinical leadership. And this is no simple matter in the social periphery where Shas is active.

Jewish Power or Rabbinical Power? A View From a Local Synagogue

There was an inherent contradiction in the spiritual revolution that marked Shas for many years: the relationship between an authoritarian Haredi leadership and a broad and diverse public that was not Haredi and did not operate according to the political control and obedience model that characterized Haredi society. The sociological literature on Mizrahi religiosity embodies assumptions about the honor accorded to rabbis and the level of popular faith in them (Shokeid 1995; Deshen 2005). In reality, however, we find that political obedience to rabbinical authority in the environment targeted by Shas is fluid and not self-evident (Leon 2009). I will illustrate this fluidity through the story of the Beit Aharon Synagogue on the eve of one of the 2019 Knesset elections.

Beit Aharon is located in one of the new neighborhoods of Petah Tikva, near an old neighborhood that in the distant past had been an immigrant *ma’abara* (absorption camp) that housed Jewish immigrants from Morocco, Iran and Iraq. The synagogue was founded by Iranian immigrants, and the Mizrahim who fill it on Shabbat are “housing upgraders” from the old neighborhood, which still has a disadvantaged image. Beit Aharon’s regular worshippers, a core group of 30 families, are working people. Most engage in non-academic occupations, e.g., taxi drivers, bus drivers, grocers, welders, and the like. Donations to the synagogue are modest, although obvious care has been taken over the building’s aesthetics. Most of

the worshippers describe themselves as Dati or Masorti, a minority as *mitchazek* or “strengthening in religious observance,” but not as Haredim. Some of the younger worshippers identify as *mitchazkim*. “To be Haredi,” one of them told me, “you have to be strongly [*kaved*, i.e., ‘heavily’] religious, but I’m not there, maybe later on, who knows?”

Rav Raphael Zer is a prominent preacher and a figure greatly admired by the Beit Aharon worshippers. His regular talks at the beit midrash he established in the neighborhood are attended by Beit Aharon worshippers, including a group of young people, second-generation congregants. Despite his Haredi appearance and garb, Rav Zer reminds the older attendees of rabbinical figures of the past. Younger attendees view him as an astute and stimulating speaker who prompts them to think critically about the world around them. In his talks, quotes from sacred texts mingle with real-life anecdotes that come his way.

Regarding current events, everyone knows who gets Rav Zer’s support. He is a sought-after participant in municipal events organized by local Shas representatives, and mobilizes on the party’s behalf when general elections are underway. In his preaching, however, he avoids explicitly calling upon his listeners to vote for Shas; at most he will say that one should support the party of “Maran” – “our great teacher”: the authority-projecting honorific given to Rav Ovadia Yosef. There appears to be a dual reason for this. Firstly, his audience gives the impression of taking a complex view in which politics and rabbis are two separate things. Shas activists may be allowed to talk politics, as that is their “profession,” but it is not appropriate for rabbis like Zer to do so. As they see it, the party rabbis are “forced” to talk politics due to their obligation to the Shas ideology, but most of their time is devoted to spiritual matters. Furthermore, rabbis like Zer seem to prefer not to put their authority to the political test. They want to represent themselves as being above the fray. They may fear losing their authoritative appeal in the eyes of a public whose political preferences are fluid.

All this complexity was put to the test in Israel’s first round of elections in 2019, even before it was known that there would be five such rounds in the space of three years. At that time, media polls began to show an upsurge in the popularity of the OY headed by Itamar Ben Gvir, a young religious Mizrahi politician and resident of the Kiryat Arba settlement identified as an adherent of Rabbi Meir Kahane’s ultranationalist and racist creed. Under Ben Gvir’s leadership, OY proposed a starkly Kahanist agenda, packaged with less rage and more smiles: The solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict is the exertion of significant force; accordingly, one should not hesitate to identify Palestinians who undermine the national effort and to seek their deportation. Of foremost importance is a commitment to Jewish primacy in Israel.

The OY election campaign included synagogue visits in areas with large National Religious populations. One Shabbat about two weeks before the elections, Ben

Gvir and his associates came to Beit Aharon. I was there as well. While the nearby Ashkenazi Religious-Zionist synagogue gave Ben Gvir a chilly reception, complete with accusations of having disrupted the Religious-Zionist sector's political arrangements, Beit Aharon welcomed him warmly and enthusiastically. After a short speech by Ben Gvir about the importance of Jewish power in the face of Arab provocation, some worshippers told me that they would unquestionably be transferring their support from Shas or Likud to OY. "He's a *man*," one congregant was heard to say, and another swiftly concurred: "He'll do what needs to be done with the Arabs and the entire left."

Polls published in the newspapers during that period showed OY to be eating away at the support for parties like Shas. This trend worried the leadership of the Mizrahi-Haredi party. Its power had depended to a considerable degree on a social environment along the lines of the Beit Aharon synagogue, as constituted by its worshippers and their extended families. Shas didn't stand idly by. Large local gatherings were organized, and senior politicians and well-known rabbis came to the neighborhood. Local preachers such as Raphael Zer were enlisted for an expedited synagogue campaign, in which they raged against "this heedlessness of believing Jews who spend big money on *aliyot laTorah* [being called up to the Torah] on Yom Kippur, but vote for those who disregard the great rabbis."

One event that played into the hands of the preachers was an advertising campaign launched by the secular centrist parties. In big ads they announced their intention of forming a "secular unity government," i.e., a government without Haredim or Datiim. On the last Shabbat before the elections, while giving his regular talk before a large audience aware (as one attendee put it) that things were "going to get interesting," Rav Zer was visibly agitated. He had a single message to convey, which he repeated several times: without a sense of obligation to Jewish tradition and to the rabbis, and without political power loyal to those rabbis and, in particular, to the lifework of Maran – Rav Ovadia Yosef – the secular unity government would go from words to deeds and bring destruction to the faith and, with it, to the state – no less. To drive home his point, he described the great distress that the present events were causing to the soul of Rav Ovadia.

Two weeks after the elections, I again visited Beit Aharon. To my astonishment, I found that nearly all those who had unequivocally assured me of their intention to vote for OY had ultimately voted for Shas, including some who had shifted their support from Likud. "Nothing else could be done," one of them told me. "It's a matter of being responsible for Judaism in the country." "If we don't follow the rabbis – the left'll destroy religion here. It'd be better to have the Arabs in control. At least they're believers," another said. "If we don't listen to the rabbis, there's no state, no state," a third explained. "Me, go against Rav Ovadia??? That'd be calling down the

wrath of Heaven. Terrifying. No way!” said a fourth. OY did not pass the electoral threshold in that round of elections. It needed four more rounds. The “Jewish primacy” message conveyed by OY was momentarily defeated by the “rabbinical primacy” message conveyed by Shas, but the rabbis and supporters of Shas appeared to find themselves battling once again for their authority in the provinces of what might be termed “soft Haredism.”

The *Teshuva* movement and Soft Haredism

Existing scholarship tends to portray ultranationalism as projecting absoluteness, definiteness, fear, and aggression in the service of an unequivocal message about group primacy. However, one should also consider the possibility of complex interaction between an ultranationalist stance that claims group primacy, and the social contexts in which it is present. This complexity, it must be said, fuels a considerable amount of literature and creative work that highlights not only ultranationalist aggressiveness, violence, and fascism, but also the paradoxical, tragic, and ironic sides of the phenomenon in real life: how the definiteness sometimes gives way to embarrassment, how consistent thinking is replaced by contradictory behavior; how aggressiveness is replaced by hesitancy. This possibility leads me, in light of the case discussed in this article, to reflect on the idea of a fluid ultranationalism, one that stands on principle but without forgoing complexity. This pertains, for instance, to the possibility of insisting on social separation between sectors while also avoiding a hierarchical and ethnic-purist stance on culture. This, in essence, is the heterogeneous social and religious space, a complex space rife with contradiction (in Haredi eyes, of course), encountered by preachers like Raphael Zer in synagogues like Beit Aharon.

One problem with which the *teshuva* discourse proved helpful was that of building religious infrastructures and shared social capital for a diverse public made up of Haredi yeshiva students and semi-secular working people, who had nothing in common up to that point but their ethnic identity and class status. The *teshuva* idea, through rhetoric, symbol, ritual, and appropriate community structures (Feldman 2012; Sharabi and Guzman Carmeli 2013), went from being a personal or symbolic act of personal transformation to social capital situated within a wide-margined and heterogeneous Haredi reality-maintenance framework known to scholars as “soft Haredism” (Leon 2009): Haredism, particularly in the dominant form of the Ashkenazi yeshiva world, placed institutionalized male Torah study at the center of Haredi life, while calling for separation between Haredim and non-Haredim, but in the Mizrahi-Haredi case the *teshuva* movement made the idea of *teshuva* and religious strengthening central to Haredi life, with the heterogeneous groups engaging with it connected symbolically not just on an ethnic basis but also on a religious basis. This

approach offered a softening of the Haredi enclave boundaries and the creation of a kind of social continuum, with those embracing a strong religiosity – the Haredim – at one end, and those characterized by a weaker religiosity – the non-Haredim – at the other. At one end, the Haredi beit midrash of Rav Raphael Zer, and at the other end the Masorti synagogue, exemplified by Beit Aharon.

So how does this continuum tie together? How does an authoritarian Haredi leadership and culture connect with a non-Haredi public that does not feel committed to the Haredi way of life? How does one enlist such a public for the spiritual revolution? One answer lies in an ethnic and class narrative that repeatedly emphasizes the link between the weakening of religious tradition and the weakening of the Mizrahim. A stirring expression of this message was the late-1990s Shas campaign surrounding the criminal conviction of the party's political leader, Aryeh Deri (Yadgar 2003; Leon 2011). Another answer lies in the religious attachment of non-Haredi but tradition-keeping Masortim to the rabbinical world; a connection anchored in religious faith in the power of the rabbinical blessing (Deshen 2005). Shas has made meaningful use of this connection and for many years has been incorporating it into its campaigns by spotlighting rabbinical figures whom its target population identifies with the power of the blessing – Rav Yitzhak Kaduri in the past, and Rav David Abuchatzeira in the present. A third answer to which I would like to devote some attention is the ultranationalist message that emanates from the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement's homiletical discourse.

Romantic Relationships as a Divine Test

Research on Mizrahi-Arab relations in Israel has examined the hawkish and ultranationalist views held by Mizrahim, especially those in the social periphery. Two different approaches are used to explain these views. Some scholars note a possible relationship between the places of low mobility opportunity where Mizrahim in Israel's social periphery live, and this population's ultranationalist views, which underscore the substantial, and advantageous, symbolic capital they enjoy as citizens – their Jewishness (Peled 1998). Another approach explains Mizrahi ultranationalism in terms of Zionist socialization: The Mizrahim had been encouraged to turn their backs on the Middle Eastern world from which they had come through an emphasis on their Jewishness, which provided a means of overcoming their ethnic devaluation (Khazzoom 2003). One major path for this was the religionization of Mizrahi identity, which for four decades has been going through the *teshuva* movement discourse mill.

The issue of Jewish-Arab relations is not used by *teshuva* preachers to delineate a political-class outlook or a patriotic outlook; rather, it is used to illuminate basic

issues addressed by the *teshuva* movement discourse, among them a critical message regarding the link between religious weakness and national weakness. One major example of this is the discourse's growing attention to romantic relationships between young Jewish women and young Arab men in Israel's social periphery. The deeply fraught nature of this issue was driven home to me by the passionate discussions, full of interest and apprehension, that it always sparks during sermons by *teshuva* movement preachers. But before we look at the *teshuva* preachers' response to the phenomenon, a word should be said about its scope.

In 2021, the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics reported that Israel is home to 1.3 million couples with at least one non-Jewish spouse. Most of these instances involve non-Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, who were able to obtain Israeli citizenship on the basis of Israel's Law of Return (Fisher 2016). A very small number are mixed Jewish-Arab couples, including cases where Jewish men married Arab women (Karkabi-Sabbah 2017). Nor is this a new phenomenon from a historical point of view. Historians are aware of mixed couples as far back as the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods, especially in socially disadvantaged areas (Bernstein 2008). While in the past these cases were managed by moderate clerics of both faiths (Cohen 2022), today, although the numbers are small, the phenomenon comes up in the discourse that convey a critical ultranationalist message.

Prominent in this regard are the successors of Rabbi Meir Kahane, the leader of the Kach movement (Magid 2021). Kach was declared illegal in Israel, but it has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years through a new generation of rabbis, politicians, and functionaries. These figures actively promote an assertive politics of Jewish primacy in Israel; one of the means they employ is the depiction of romantic relationships between Jewish women and Arab men as embodying the threat of Jewish assimilation within the Jewish state. Notable in this regard are organizations that originated in the Religious Zionist sector, such as Lehava or the OY party. These organizations fight for the support of a complex social milieu. That milieu includes politically strong populations such as the Religious Zionist settlers; it also includes socially disadvantaged populations such as young Haredim who have fallen through the cracks of their sector's educational institutions, or large numbers of Mizrahim in Israel's social periphery whose support Shas has been seeking for years. The *teshuva* preachers' intervention on this issue is not new, but given the political competition with assertive Religious Zionist organizations that occupy an ever-larger place in this discourse, their intervention is becoming an intrinsic part of the longtime ideological and political competition between Religious Zionism and Shas.

From the perspective of the *teshuva* movement rabbis and preachers, the mixed-couple phenomenon illustrates the deterioration of the Jewish state founded by secular Zionists. Though interfaith marriages are few in number, their existence is

used by the preachers to paint a “big picture” (in their view) of reality. The preachers employ two generic narratives for this purpose: One features a young Arab male seducer and a naive young Jewish woman. The former wants to win the Jewish girl’s heart and courts her enthusiastically, but his aim is not romantic. Rather, it is part of a nationalist plot to wrest control of the land from the Jews and restore it to the Muslim Arab nation. How is the girl “seduced?” She is generally described as being distant, or as having distanced herself, from religious observance; when faced with everyday material want, the preachers explain, one can easily be tempted. The young Arab man is described as a smooth talker during the courtship period, the kind who knows how to make promises and brings gifts that can turn the head of a girl from a poor family. The girl discovers his heavy hand and violent ways after the wedding, but by then it is hard to turn back. The gullible girl is trapped, her children – though halachically Jewish – belong to the father per Muslim tradition, and if she tries to flee she endangers her life.

In the other narrative, the seducer is replaced by a shrewd Arab, one who knows Jews from up close, is familiar with their ways, and knows how to put their faith in the rightness of their presence in the Holy Land to the test. He is described as one able to distinguish between “authentic” Jews who observe tradition, and “fake,” secular Jews; between those whose claim to the land stems from strong religious faith and deep knowledge of the sacred Jewish texts which, the preachers maintain, are esteemed by the Arab himself, and those whose claim to sovereignty is founded solely on an artificial sense of power and erodes over time. The religious, kippa-wearing Jew who observes Shabbat and kashruth, dons tefillin, studies Torah, and clings to eternal Jewish tradition is the one whom Arab believers respect and esteem.

The *teshuva* preachers depict the interfaith romance phenomenon as part of a divine test of the Jews on their return to the Holy Land. In the preachers’ view, the secular Israeli state that purports to be the state of the Jews has come to the brink of disaster. The danger of assimilation, i.e., marriage between Jews and non-Jews, that had always been thought of as a Diaspora phenomenon, especially in the United States, has become a looming danger to the new Jews of Israel as well, one that threatens not only Jewish primacy but Judaism itself. The preachers suggest that only by adopting the Haredi way of life, or becoming more firmly entrenched in it through connection to rabbis and recognition of their authority, can one hope to pass this test and preserve Jewish identity in the Holy Land which, under secular-Zionist governance, is no easy feat. Another means advocated by the preachers is that of maintaining strict separation between the communities.

“Who’s to blame for this?” thunders Rav Raphael Zer in one of his talks at a synagogue in Or-Yehuda; who is to blame for the romantic relationships that develop between young Jewish women and young Arab men? And he answers: “We are!”

And what is needed to fight the phenomenon, he explains, is “a buffer. Not to argue with them. To respect them. To give them what they’re entitled to, but at a distance – you’re an Arab man, I’m a Jewish woman. You’re an Arab, I’m a Jew. There’s a wall here between us.” Zer doesn’t invalidate the Arab side; he advocates treating them with respect. But at the same time, he asks for one thing: to keep the communities separate.

Communal Separation and Lessons From the Bible

As noted, one of the most important figures in the Mizrahi-Haredi discourse is Rav Ovadia Yosef. The high esteem he enjoyed in the Haredi world and in the *teshuva* communities was reflected in the massive turnout for his funeral in November 2013; over half a million men and women attended the event. Rav Ovadia’s authority was based primarily on his accomplishments as a *posek* (adjudicator of Jewish law); in one of his most famous rulings, he permitted the exchange of land for peace. “Should it be ascertained beyond any doubt,” he wrote, “that there would be true peace between us and our Arab neighbors if territories were returned to them – the territories should be returned to them, as nothing takes precedence over *pikuach nefesh* [the principle that saving human life overrides other religious rules]” (Leon 2015). Rav Ovadia appears to have come to this ruling by way of his efforts to annul the marriages of women whose soldier husbands went missing in the October 1973 war between Egypt/Syria and Israel. A ruling that he issued a year or so after the war reflected the conclusion reached by some of those who fought in it and witnessed its terrible cost: namely, that peace should be achieved between Israel and the Arab states. Unlike them, however, Rav Ovadia did not take to the streets to demonstrate for peace; what he did was to issue a ruling that laid the foundations for an eventual peace treaty between Israel and Egypt (1979) and, later, for the participation of Shas in Yitzhak Rabin’s government, which signed accords with the PLO (1993–1995) (Leon 2015).

This is all very well. But it should be noted that Rav Ovadia explained in his ruling that peace does not mean living together. In his rationale, he chose to portray the other side, the Arab side, in demonic terms: “Predators who do not regard the person of the old, nor show favor to the young.” The Arab enemy, Rav Ovadia explained, is a cruel and wild animal; his conclusion is no less blunt: “*She’yistalku me’aleinu* – [“They should go away from us’].” This expression can be understood in two ways. One is in political terms: the threat of war should “go away” from Israel. The other meaning is the communal one discussed by Rav Raphael Zer, namely that it is right to separate the two communities socially.

The call for communal separation as a means of reaching an appropriate

arrangement between Jews and Arabs has been a feature of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict for many years. As far back as the Arab revolt in Palestine (1936–1939), the British recommended separating the two nations through the establishment of separate Jewish and Arab states in Mandate territory. This would become the official position of the United Nations in 1947; Arab opposition to it was exploited by Israel to expand its territory in 1948 and 1967 (see Ben-Dror 2007). Precisely because of this, however, the discourse of separation continues to feed the political and social imagination of those hoping for an agreement between the parties.

On the Jewish side, the demand for political separation became associated with the political parties of the Zionist left. But it also found a place in the Shas movement under Rav Ovadia's leadership, as reflected in a peace conference sponsored by European organizations with the participation of Shas-affiliated Mizrahi rabbis and Muslim clerics. The sociologist Nissim Mizrahi recounts in an interview that Aryeh Deri, the Mizrahi-Haredi party's veteran and experienced political leader and one of Rav Ovadia's closest associates, told the conference attendees that the path to reconciliation between the communities was one of strict separation between them, with each community knowing its place and maintaining its way of life and its boundaries (Mizrahi and Weiss 2020).

There appears, however, to be a significant difference between the separation desired by Israel's Zionist left and the separation envisioned by *poskim* such as Rav Ovadia Yosef, politicians such as Aryeh Deri, and local preachers such as Raphael Zer. In the case of the Zionist left, separation is advocated between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and is meant to ease concerns about time and demography producing a binational state and putting an end to the idea of a Jewish-majority state (Shenhav 2012). In the case of Shas and the *teshuva* movement, the desire is for communal and local separation – not civil separation – between Jews and non-Jews within Israel. In both instances the wish for separation is fraught with anxiety. The Zionist left fears a Levantinization of Israel and the death of the Western dream cherished by the upper middle class; some think that these concerns also drive the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi ethnic rift, including the fear of Shas (Khazzoom 2003). The Mizrahi Haredim fear that the interreligious boundaries will be overstepped and that, due to class similarities and geographical proximity, this will cause more individuals to breach communal boundaries, as in the case of romantic relationships between young Jewish women and young Arab men.

To illustrate this kind of religious thinking, I will turn to a talk I attended by another prominent local preacher with the *teshuva* movement – Rav Ronen Shaulov. Shaulov had been a soccer player in his youth; at some point he decided to become religiously observant. After a few years' study in yeshivot oriented toward Mizrahi *hozrim biteshuva*, his oratorical gifts and Torah knowledge made him a sought-after

teshuva preacher in the soft-Haredi world. Like Rav Raphael Zer, Rav Shaulov, who could be described as a third-generation *teshuva* movement preacher, holds firm views and employs clear language that shifts easily between engaging narrative and incisive instruction, charming anecdote and bitter reproof. Rav Shaulov had addressed the issue of interaction with Arabs on more than one occasion, but in the specific talk I attended the topic arose against the background of Jewish-Arab tension and difficult conditions in mixed Israeli cities. Although public attention tends to focus on the ultranationalist settlement efforts carried out in such cities by Religious Zionist activists, there is another ultranationalist discourse, one involving Mizrahi-Haredi preachers like Shaulov, who encounter local low-income Mizrahim in those same mixed environments. In one lecture, Shaulov chose to explain his position on the issue, asserting that “there is no peace with Arabs. They say it themselves. I like Arabs. I respect Arabs. There are Arabs who honor religion. But you see how they are, they’re savages [...] They’re godless. They control us.”

The term “savage” (*pere adam* – “wild man”) employed by Shaulov recurs regularly in sermons and discussions about Arabs in the Mizrahi-Haredi world; it is not far from Rav Ovadia’s dehumanizing portrayal of Arabs as “predators.” The characterization of Arabs as “savages” is rooted in Jewish tradition, which superimposes the biblical category “Ishmaelites” upon the sociological category “Arabs.” This categorization constitutes a form of labeling: the “Ishmaelites” are the descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham the Patriarch, about whom the Bible says “And he shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand shall be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the face of all his brethren” (Genesis 16: 12). Because, from the perspective of rabbis such as Ovadia Yosef and *teshuva* preachers such as Shaulov and Zer, today’s reality is merely a reflection of the sacred biblical text, which they believe to be of divine origin, this definitive characterization explains the brutal ongoing struggle between the descendants of Isaac – the “Jews” – and the descendants of Ishmael – the “Arabs.” A former Shas Knesset member, Nissim Ze’ev, once introduced this idea into a parliamentary discussion of the Palestinian suicide bombers: “The Ishmael of then is the Ishmael of today. [...] I want to tell you something very important [...] Why was Ishmael said to be a ‘wild man’? It isn’t said that he’s a bad man. There’s an adjective and there’s a noun. Usually [in Hebrew] the noun precedes the adjective. A good person, a good neighbor, a bad neighbor [in Hebrew: ‘a person good,’ ‘a neighbor good,’ ‘a neighbor bad’]. With regard to Ishmael, the ‘wild’ [*pere*] precedes the ‘man’ [*adam*]” (Knesset 2004).

The biblical demonization of the Arab and his representation in essentialist terms as a cruel, primitive, non-human entity – a “wild man” or savage – explains the desire for communal separation. The Mizrahi Haredim are loyal to the historical Haredi view that one should not provoke the non-Jews. The Zionist enterprise, from

this point of view, is problematic in and of itself, but because it has accomplished its purpose and is now a political fact, matters should be handled wisely, as per biblical recommendation. The biblical approach also clarifies two aspects of the ultranationalist stance in Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* discourse and in some Shas circles. Firstly, the negative traits attributed to Ishmael are the opposite of what one finds in Isaac's Jewish descendants. Secondly, Jewish-Arab relations are not a matter of security relations and demographic policy, as promised by Zionism (Shapira 2002). Rather, as noted, they are an unceasing divine test. So long as the descendants of Isaac adhere to tradition and remain faithful to God, Ishmael is the loser; when the Jews distance themselves from tradition, Ishmael gains the upper hand.

The outlook described above may be hard for readers to relate to. But one need only observe the great interest and frequent nods of agreement elicited by that outlook, as conveyed by preachers in the soft-Haredi world. The Hebrew Bible is part of the fabric of life for Beit Aharon worshippers, as well as for Rav Shaulov's audience and for followers of Rav Ovadia. Like Knesset member Nissim Ze'ev, they return regularly to Jewish scripture, which is never far from their minds, and to its traditional commentators who emphasize Jewish primacy over the savagery of Ishmael, seen as the forefather of the Arabs. They also learn from rabbis such as Zer and Shaulov that the struggle with Ishmael is not a confrontation between the Israeli army and the Arab armies, but rather part of a divine test of their commitment to religious tradition and their obedience to the rabbis. A statement by a member of Rav Zer's audience sums it up: "If the Jews here are becoming less religiously observant, then they're becoming less Jewish. The children of Ishmael, meaning the Arabs and all the Muslims, also have a right to this land. If Jews here won't be Jews, observe the mitzvot and listen to the rabbis, then they [the Arabs] will take over by right and not by sufferance. They are our test; they'll always be our test."

Between Soft Haredism and Fluid Ultranationalism

Thus far we have looked at how the ultranationalist position within the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement is formulated. We have also examined the social background to that formulation: the problem of rabbinical authority in a reality of soft Mizrahi Haredism. With regard to how the position is formulated, the *teshuva* world's ultranationalist message may have struck us as aggressive and even fascist, given the motif of fear and dehumanization present in its attendant images – images that may also invite a violent interpretation, especially on the part of young people exposed to this discourse as forcefully depicted in Israeli cinema (Chetrit 2022). However, more extended observation of the Mizrahi synagogue congregations addressed by preachers such as Zer

and Shaulov, by *poskim* such as Ovadia Yosef, and by politicians such as Aryeh Deri reveals a more complex picture. On the one hand, there is the shrill and aggressive tone taken by the *teshuva* movement preachers to the issue of romantic relationships between Jewish women and Arab men, as well as the biblical images that provide an interpretive framework for the preachers' stern message. On the other hand, unlike the neo-Kahanist circles among whom a Jewish-primacy discourse prevails, the *teshuva* preachers do not call for violent action; their main recommendation is for communal separation, a message that, in principle, does not differ from the one conveyed by Jewish and Muslim clerics in the distant past (Cohen 2022). But what makes the ultranationalist outlook in its Mizrahi-Haredi form somewhat fluid is that it does not take hierarchical or ethnic-purist approach to Arab culture. By way of explanation, I will return for a moment to the visit by Itamar Ben Gvir, leader of OY, to the Beit Aharon Synagogue.

Immediately after Ben Gvir's short speech, the *hazzan* (cantor) Yaakov ascended the podium to lead the Mussaf prayer service. I listened to the pleasing cadences, the distinctive trills, the tonal command. Yaakov is an outstanding *hazzan*. As someone who studied Mizrahi *hazzanut* in his youth, I knew he was using *'ajam*, a melodic mode or *maqam*, to embellish the prayers. None of the worshippers asked him to stop. The synagogue resounded with the Arabic melody vocalized by Yaakov, and the worshippers went out of their way to praise him. "A pleasure to listen to," said one. "[May you be] strong and blessed, R. Yaakov. God hears you and is pleased," gushed another.

The *maqam* system mastered by Yaakov has its origins in traditional Arabic music. For many years it has fueled Yerushalmi or "Jerusalemite" Mizrahi *hazzanut*, whose sources are disputed by experts but which all agree constitutes a liturgical bridge between the culture of *piyyut* [Jewish liturgical poetry]/*hazzanut* and Arabic/Muslim music (see Seroussi 2016). This culture has developed intensively in Israel over the past two decades. Though once on the peripheral fringe of Arabic music in Israel (Perlson 2006), Yerushalmi *hazzanut*, in particular that identified with classical Arabic music, has become a sought-after cultural consumer good. One factor behind this development was the spiritual revolution of the *teshuva* movement and the Shas party, which sought to "restore the crown of Torah/Sephardic heritage to its original glory;" this mission included a return to the musical world of the community's countries of origin. Added to this was the younger Mizrahi-Haredi generation's quest for a clear marker of its ethnic identity, given the claim of Ashkenazi influence on it. Another factor that contributed to the genre's popularity was the development of *piyyut* culture among upwardly-mobile Mizrahim who also sought a marker

of their elusive ethnic identity (Aharon 2013). *Hazzanut* and *piyyut* thus served as a bridge: between Haredi culture and the culture of upward mobility, and between Arabic music and Jewish liturgy.

Arabic music is enjoying popularity in concert halls as well, with orchestras such as Firqat Alnoor and the Jerusalem Orchestra East and West. Quite a few of the past decade's acclaimed artists – instrumentalists, vocalists, and composers of *piyyut* – come from the “softer” end of Mizrahi ultra-Orthodoxy. This is true of such veteran *hazzanim* as Moshe Habusha, who served as Rav Ovadia Yosef's house cantor during Yosef's lifetime, and younger *hazzanim* such as Ziv Yehezkel, known for having gained an audience in the Palestinian Authority. The lyrical strains of Mizrahi *hazzanut* have become a kind of liturgical bridge between Jews and Arabs.

I have introduced this point because it may shed light on the complexity and fluidity of the ultranationalist message within a social setting where the *teshuva* movement is present on an everyday basis, and which Shas targets in every round of elections. This is not an ultranationalism of ethnic purification, at least with regard to Arab culture. Firstly, those associated with Shas, including the movement's spiritual leader Rav Ovadia Yosef, have proudly and publicly acknowledged their roots in Arab culture. For example, a recently-discovered Rav Ovadia manuscript contains a list of Arabic songs from 1962, entitled “The Songs We Have.” Secondly, *teshuva* preachers such as Raphael Zer and Ronen Shaulov repeatedly affirm that the Arabs should be treated with “respect.” And this is not due to the need to maintain good social relations but because Islamic piety is seen as a positive example of how true believers conduct themselves, with an emphasis on adherence to the rules of gendered modesty and separation between the sexes. Furthermore, mention is sometimes made in *teshuva* sermons of the shared life of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa, a social existence where religious life and beliefs were respected, albeit under conditions of social separation. This narrative does not negate the “savage” narrative we discussed in the previous section; so long as there is clear separation between the communities and so long as religious practice is upheld, respect will prevail on the other side as well. As Rav Zer has said in one of his sermons: “Don't disparage the Arabs. They are the children of Ishmael. And listen well: Do you remember who gave him his name? The Holy One, Blessed be He. And what's in his name? *Yishma – El*; God will hear. Understand? The Holy One, Blessed be He gave him his name, the Holy One, Blessed be He Himself. So yes, he's a savage – but also a believer.”

Conclusion

The ethnographic findings presented in this article show how the ultranationalist message, generally relating to Jewish-Arab relations, is used by preachers in the Israeli *teshuva* movement to demonstrate the relevance of the devout religiosity of Shas and its rabbis. The ultranationalist message serves the cause of addressing a reality of soft Haredism. Raising the national walls (ultranationalism) takes the place of raising the walls of religiosity (Haredism). At the same time, a more fluid version of ultranationalism arose, one that indeed seeks communal separation but without an aversion to cultural interaction. It turns out that the ultranationalist discourse of soft Haredism is not devoid of Orientalism, as reflected in a cultural attraction-repulsion relationship (Said 1995), in this case with regard to Arab-Muslim culture. On the one hand, the Muslim-Arab is depicted as the Ishmaelite savage; on the other hand, Muslim-Arab society produced the *maqam* used in Mizrahi Jewish prayer. Social separation on the one hand; on the other, a lack of cultural purism. To this may be added an attitude of respect toward Arab-Muslim culture for its religiosity, seen as reflecting deep popular faith and stringent compliance with the rules of gendered modesty. In this approach, the competition between the peoples is not national in nature but rather religious; not for the Holy Land, but rather for the heart of the God of the Bible.

The fluid ultranationalism of Mizrahi Haredism emerges in comparison with the ultranationalist message of rightist parties such as OY. My fieldwork revealed a possible distinction, one requiring scrutiny, between the point of departure of Religious-Zionist ultranationalist discourse and that of the ultranationalist *teshuva* discourse of Mizrahi Haredism. The former seems to proceed from a theological assumption that the divine test has ended: Israel is a theological fact, an inseparable part of the redemption process that must not only be safeguarded but also completed through political force, settlement activity, and purist-military effort. Messianism, Jewish primacy, and nationalist aggression are mingled here. The Mizrahi-Haredi model holds that the divine test is constant and is a religious test of the national right to the Holy Land, which can be retained only through compliance with the laws of the Torah whose authoritative interpreters are the Haredi rabbis. So long as those laws are disregarded, local relations between Jews and Arabs will be dependent on the divine charity that allowed the State of Israel to be established but does not ensure its eternal existence, certainly not under secular influence.

On the theoretical plane, it may be that we need to distinguish between two versions of the ultranationalist outlook. One version wants to insist on separation between the communities. Another version sees a hierarchy between

the communities. Those who take the former approach are prepared for social and civic partnership in everyday life, but oppose inter-community mixing, particularly through marriage ties. The latter version, by contrast, entails not only separation of the communities, but also the cultivation of a clear position of primacy. Additionally, we can distinguish between a rigid ultranationalism that is opposed to any contact with Arabs or with Arab culture, and a fluid ultranationalism that differentiates between everyday contact, with an emphasis on gender relations, and social contact, with an emphasis on work and cultural relations – even including liturgical influence.

How, then, should the Mizrahi-Haredi case be understood? As noted, one of the key questions in the study of Mizrahi Haredism is that of soft Haredism: the way in which firm religious boundaries are created in a reality of soft social boundaries. We have seen in this article that one answer to this question is the ultranationalist stance. But even this version of ultranationalism is fluid, and can thus be subject to continual instability inasmuch as it spans two conflicting vectors. On the one hand, one finds major outbreaks of violence toward Arabs, driven by friction in shared disadvantaged spaces – Israel's mixed cities and neighborhoods. On the other hand, there is the possibility of social symbiosis, such as occurs in common workplaces and in cultural connections, exemplified by liturgy and music. The outcome is a complex and complicated reality, exposed to the propagandists of a religious and ultranationalist order.

References

- Abutbul-Selinger, Guy. 2020. "We Are Not Racists; We Are Nationalists: Communitarian Perceptions among Beitar Jerusalem Fans." *Israel Studies Review* 34, no. 3: 64–82. <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2019.340306>
- Aharon, Meirav. 2013. "Riding the Culture Train: An Ethnography of a Plan for Social Mobility through Music." *Cultural Sociology* 7, no. 4: 447–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975512457137>
- Art, David. 2011. *Art, Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ben-Dror, Elad. 2007. "The Arab Struggle against Partition: The International Arena of Summer 1947." *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 2: 259–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200601114117>
- Ben-Rafael, Eliezer. 1982. *The Emergence of Ethnicity: Cultural Groups and Social Conflict in Israel*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Bernstein, Deborah. 2008. *Women on the Margins: Gender and Nationalism in Mandate Tel-Aviv*. Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi. [Hebrew]
- Caplan, Kimmy. 2001. "Israeli Haredi Society and the Repentance (Hazarah Biteshuvah) Phenomenon." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4: 369–98.
- Caplan, Kimmy. 2000. "Self-Criticism in the Haredi Society of Israel." In *Being Different: Minorities, Aliens and Outsiders in History*, edited by Shulamit Volkov, 299–330. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History. [Hebrew]
- Chetrit, Sami Shalom. 2000. "Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 4: 51–65.
- Chetrit, Sami Shalom. 2022. "The Tragedy of Shas." In *Our Boys: A Debate*, edited by Tammy Riklis, 151–162. Tel-Aviv: Am-Oved. [Hebrew]
- Cohen, Hillel. 2022. *Enemies, a Love Story: Mizrahi Jews, Palestinians and Ashkenazi Jews from the Rise of Zionism to Present*. Jerusalem: Ivrit publishers. [Hebrew]
- Cohen, Uri and Nissim Leon. Forthcoming. *The Mizrahi Middle Class in Israel*. Jerusalem: Magnes.
- Deshen, Shlomo. 2005. "The Emergence of the Israeli Sefardi Ultra-Orthodox Movement." *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 2: 77–101.
- El-Or, Tamar. 2006. *Reserved Seats: Religion, Gender, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Israel*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved. [Hebrew]
- Engelberg, Ari. 2017. "Fighting Inter-marriage in the Holy Land: Lehava and Israeli Ethnonationalism." *Journal of Israeli History* 36, no. 2: 229–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13531042.2018.1466468>
- Ettinger, Yair, and Nissim Leon. 2018. *A Flock with no Shepherd: Shas Leadership the Day after Rabbi Ovadia Yosef*. Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute. [Hebrew]
- Feldman, Anat. 2012. "Carnival by Night: A New Practice of Modern 'Tikkun' Rituals." *Democratic Culture* 13: 81–120.
- Fischer, Shlomo. 2017. "From Yehuda Etzion to Yehouda Glick: From Redemptive Revolution to Human Rights on the Temple Mount." *Israel Studies Review* 32, no.

1: 67–87.

- Fisher, Netanel. 2016. "The Fundamentalist Dilemma: Lessons from the Israeli Haredi Case." *International Journal for Middle East Studies* 48, no. 3: 531–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816000477>
- Friedman, Menachem. 1998. "The 'Family-Community' Model in Haredi Society." *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 14: 166–77.
- Heilman, Shmuel, and Friedman Menachem. 1995. "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim." In *Fundamentalisms Observed*, edited by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, 197–264. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Karkabi-Sabbah, Maha. 2017. "Ethnoreligious Mixed Marriages among Palestinian Women and Jewish Men in Israel: Negotiating the Breaking of Barriers." *Journal of Israeli History* 36, no. 2, 189–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13531042.2018.1541530>
- Khazzoom, Aziza. 2003. "The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel." *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 4: 481–510. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/1519736>
- Lehmann, David, and Siebzeher Batia. 2006. *Remaking Israeli Judaism: The Challenge of Shas*. London: Hurst.
- Leon, Nissim. 2015. "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the Shas Party and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process." *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 3: 379–95. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mej.2015.0058>
- Leon, Nissim. 2009. *Soft Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Religious Renewal of Oriental Jewry in Israel*. Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi. [Hebrew]
- Leon, Nissim. 2016. "The Ethnic Structuring of 'Sefardim' in Haredi Society in Israel." *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 1: 130–60. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.22.1.04>
- Leon, Nissim. 2011. "The Political Use of the Teshuva Cassette Culture in Israel." *Contemporary Jewry* 31, no. 2: 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-011-9068-5>
- Magid, Shaul. 2021. *Meir Kahane: The public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Mammone, Andrea, Godin Emmanuel, and Jenkins Brian (eds.). 2012. *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe: From Local to Transnational*. London: Routledge.
- Mizrachi, Nissim, and Weiss Erica. 2020. "'We Do Not Want to Assimilate!': Rethinking the Role of Group Boundaries in Peace Initiatives between Muslims and Jews in Israel and in the West Bank." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 7, no. 2: 172–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2020.1727350>
- Pedhazur, Ami. 2012. *The Triumph of Israel's Radical Right*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Peled, Yoav, and Herman Peled Horit. 2020. *The Religionization of Israeli Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Peled, Yoav. 1998. "Towards a Redefinition of Jewish Nationalism in Israel? The Enigma of Shas." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4: 703–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01621439808542111>

- org/10.1080/014198798329838
- Perlson, Inbal. 2006. *A Great Joy Tonight: Arab–Jewish Music and Mizrahi Identity*. Tel Aviv: Resling. [Hebrew]
- Picard, Avi. 2007. "Voting for Shas: The Rational Answer to Emotional Distress." *Democratic Culture* 11, 151–201.
- Richards, Barry. 2013. "Extreme Nationalism and the Hatred of the Liberal State." In *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*, edited by Nicolas Demertzis 124–42. London: Springer.
- Said, Edward W. 1995. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Seroussi, Edwin. 2016. "Muslim–Jewish Sonic Encounters." In *The Routledge Handbook of Muslim–Jewish Relations*, edited by Josef Meri. London: Routledge.
- Shafir, Gershon, and Yoav Peled. 2002. *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shapira, Anita (ed.). 2008. *We Hereby Declare: 60 Selected Speeches from Israel's History*. Or Yehuda: Kinneret-Zemora-Bitan.
- Shapira, Anita. 2002. *Land and Power*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.
- Sharabi, Asaf, and Guzman Carmeli Shlomo. 2013. "The Teshuva Bargain: Ritual Healing Performances of Rabbi Yitzchak's Rallies." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 27, no. 2: 97–110.
- Sharabi, Asaf. 2015. "Religion and Modernity: Religious Revival Movement in Israel." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 44, no. 2: 223–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241614530159>
- Shenhav, Yehouda. 2012. *Beyond the Two-State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay*. Malden, MA: Cambridge Polity Press.
- Shokeid, Moshe. 1995. "The Religiosity of Middle Eastern Jews." In *Israeli Judaism: The Sociology of Religion in Israel*, edited by Shlomo Deshen, Charles S. Liebman, and Moshe Shokeid, 255–284. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Sivan, Emmanuel. 1995. "The Enclave Culture." In *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, 11–68. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Smootha, Sammy. 2008. "The Mass Immigrations to Israel: A Comparison of the Failure of the Mizrahi Immigrants of the 1950s with the Success of the Russian Immigrants of the 1990s." *Journal of Israeli History* 27, no. 1: 1–27.
- Tesler, Riki. 2003. *In the Name of God*. Jerusalem: Keter. [Hebrew]
- Van der-Veer, Kees. 2003. "The Future of Western Societies: Multicultural Identity or Extreme Nationalism?" *Futures* 35, no. 2: 169–87.
- Yadgar, Yaakov. 2003. "A Disintegrating Ritual: The Reading of the Deri Verdict as a Media Event of Degradation." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20, no. 2: 204–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180302780>
- Yadgar, Yaakov. 2003. "SHAS as a Struggle to Create a New Field: A Bourdieuan Perspective of an Israeli Phenomenon." *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 2: 223–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712372>

Нисим Леон

Ултранационализам и ултра-ортодоксија: случај партије Шас

Сажетак: Савремена литература указује на постојање ултранационалистичких вредности код припадника партије Шас, али и на структуралне и историјске услове који су до тога довели. Међутим, није посвећено довољно пажње самом контексту и начинима којим Мизрахи-Хареди дискурс утиче на ове ставове. Овај рад истражује једну од главних компоненти односа између Шас партије и њених следбеника који се налазе на самој периферији израелског друштва – покрета *teshuva*. На основу теренског истраживања локалних свештеника који припадају овом покрету показујемо да они користе ултранационалистичке поруке да илуструју важност поштовања јеврејске верске традиције и ауторитета рабина. Поред тога, откривамо и сложен феномен верског ултранационализма – који захтева одвајање заједница, али није против културне размене између Арапа и Јевреја.

Кључне речи: ултранационализам, ултра-ортодоксија, Мизрахи, Шас покрет