
FROM HISTORIOGRAPHY TO ARCHEOLOGY: THE DIALECTICS OF ISRAELI POLITY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of political maturation in Israel. Various indigenous people, mainly Arabs, Jews and what was left of the populace from the various crusades, were present in a sparsely populated and Ottoman ruled Palestine, at the turn of the 20th century. In the late 1800s a new group was making in-roads as European Jews chose to turn to their biblical homeland and began arriving as settlers, mainly seeking agricultural sustenance and, for the most part, bolstered by beneficent philanthropists. Many of the settlements were social experiments and destined to fail, but some continued and prospered. By the early 1900s their numbers grew and European migration, under the influence of political and utopian enterprises, most notable of which was the dream of Theodore Herzl for a Jewish homeland, increased exponentially. These numbers were bolstered by increasingly virulent anti-semitism, and groups, known as Aliyot, were now succeeding on the farms, in the commercial and trade crafts and increasingly appearing in cities as well. By the 1920s under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion, who arrived in Palestine in 1906, serious nation building aspirations were unfolding. As social structuring demanded, political and social groups ranging from capitalism to socialism appeared and organized. The article then continues to trace the development of statehood, the birth of the independent nation of Israel in 1948 and the political system as it evolved into present day eventuality.

Keywords: history of political maturation, historiography, israeli polity, Israel

Introduction

From a worldview, it is an intuitive notion to state that the state's political machinations are based on and directed toward the nationalistic temperament of the general population and in addition, an elite group of individuals from whom mass power flows and from within whose ranks future leaders are propelled to serve. This present work addresses an abbreviated version, a sort of Cliff's Notes approach, of what makes Israel politics flow and the why(s) and where such forces originate. Now, at this point, if you're thinking Zionism, you are correct, but with a

caveat. Zionism is a complex political term, which when separated from current controversies that the current media serves up on a ‘*soup du jour*’ basis, is steeped in historically diverse political and psychological influences, much too complicated to detail for the scope of this paper.

Yeshuv and settlement periods:

Encompassing a vague period from the late 1890s to the mid 1920s is sufficient to commence the discussion. This period also corresponds to the dates of the first four Aliyot, although many current scholars currently doubt the commonly applied definitions and suggest much more subtle forces at work during this time period. The 5th Aliyah occurred in the 1930s.¹

We speak of Zionist pioneers, who were followers of Herzl’s proposition, but even that had multiple streams, often in direct conflict with each other. Others were mere settlers searching for a better life and benefiting from the opportunities provided through Jewish philanthropists such as the Baron de Rothschild. Of note is that some of these organizations, such as the Hovevei Zion were operating well before Herzl’s time, in the late 1800s.²

If we step back and look at all the characters or players in the foregoing, we see a group of Zionist idealists who were striving for similar political goals. Most telling perhaps would be a closer examination of the young settlers who formed the Beit Alpha, a communal settlement in the Esdraelon Valley. The settlement was founded in the early Twenties by young men and women belong to the socialist youth movement *Hashomer Hatzair* (Young Guard). They subscribed to a bizarre combination of utopian Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the then fashionable German *Jugendkultur*, with its Romantic worship of nature, cult of eroticism, and disdain for bourgeois values. But there was more to it: an anti-religion attitude. The young kibbutzniks, full of the fervor of Russian radicalism, had only a year or two earlier come out of Eastern Europe with—as the saying went at the time—“no clothes, but with copies of *Das Kapital* and Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* in their knapsacks.” A few were still teen-agers. Others were in open rebellion against their Orthodox religious fathers. Some had actually run away from home to help build socialism and create the “new Jew” in the historic land of his forefathers: a utopian community not unlike those of the late 1960s in which their identity would be redefined and based on socialism and love. Religion was the opium of the people. In the end,

¹ (Alroey 2004) Detailed research demonstrates that the waves of immigrants were not exclusive to some set ideology-the 4 Aliyot typically listed-but were influenced by micro-events and took place in small-localized fashion.

² (Ben-Artzi 1996) A discussion of the various ideological considerations during early settlement periods.

the fact remains that these were Jewish efforts, *sans* the imprint of Zionist statism (at this time at least), by young men and women merely searching for a better way.³

The Yeshuv matures:

While the New Yeshuv-as differentiated from the pre-Zionist post Talmudic and often messianic settlements that took place over a few centuries-might officially date back to 1883, when the Hovevei Zion members first arrived in Palestine, was composed of a variety of politically, or even apolitically oriented settlers in the beginning. A consolidation of ideologies began to take form by the late 1920s. What might be termed Political Zionism, the kind of ideology espoused by Herzl, was transforming into Labor Zionism.⁴ The Jewish population of major cities began to mature into centers of trade, manufacturing, and craftsmanship, and in the agricultural areas the farmers needed to organize in collective efforts to negotiate favorable conditions. Jews in the Yeshuv were moving towards organized efforts that would guarantee sustainability. David Ben-Gurion, whose initial arrival in Palestine in 1909 was as a volunteer for HaShomer-the Jewish volunteers who formed the guarding forces of early settlements-began a long term association with Berl Katznelson and the two split from the left leaning Poalei Zion in order to form the Labor Zionist movement in February of 1919. This would then coalesce into the Histadrut, The Zionist Labor Federation of Palestine. In the early 1930s the labor Zionist movement was composed by Mapai-a centrist socialist force-and Mapam that constituted Ben-Gurion's further left leaning followers. In 1935 Ben-Gurion was named head of the Jewish Agency, a position he held until the 1948 formation of the State of Israel. Throughout these times the major ideologically different forces would be followers of Ze-ev Jabotinsky, the Revisionists.⁵ It has been argued that Revisionism was modeled after Fascism-not the Nazi associated notion-but the more business friendly statist ideology we have come to know as modern capitalism.

1948 and the formation of The State of Israel:

There were three political ideologies present during early statehood: The right was under the umbrella of Revisionism-a force that would later form the backbone of Likud-and the left comprised of the left leaning labor party. A smaller contingency of religious parties made up the rest. These parties were at the center of life of their members, providing health plans, pensions,

³ (Elon 1997)An excellent discussion of the earliest encounters of archeological finds in the Yeshuv and the political consideration they elicited.

⁴ (Shapira 1982) The early labor movements, developing out of a need for contract bargaining and daily life choices, matured with time into an ideology that was a foundational cornerstone of the future country.

⁵ (Heller 1995) The Revisionist movement was politically strong from the 1930s onward and would resurface ideologically as the Likud Party in the 1970s.

education and most other basic necessities. Israel is governed under a parliamentary system with the Knesset comprised of 120 members elected by mandated elections every 4 years, or sooner if the leadership majority fails. The leadership is under the Prime Minister as head of the leading coalition and a largely powerless President, who nonetheless has the role of naming the Prime Minister once a majority support is announced, which is then followed by the Prime Minister selecting his cabinet.⁶

Under Ben-Gurion's leadership, the narrative begins to be subjugated to national aspirations of a very political nature: the nation building vision of Ben-Gurion. His concept of *Mamlakhtiyut* is a difficult subject and far too complex for me to discuss in detail, but this observation by Nir Kedar is insightful, "From this point of view, it would appear that Ben-Gurion rejected connection with the word "community (*kehilah*), preferring to sever the association between the nascent Jewish-Israeli polity and the Jewish people's recent lachrymal past in the galut ("exile"). In this struggle to forge a "new Jew," Ben-Gurion jettisoned the traditional political symbol of galut life, the Jewish community, by replacing it with a re-modeled image of Jewish sovereignty."⁷

Whatever the merits of Ben-Gurion's visage and its employment, what is certain is that it worked. Oz Almog's book, "The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew" examines the product of the earlier generation of settlers and pioneers, who were educated in a social framework of labor Zionism, offspring of Kibbutzim and Moshavim, and now were the citizens of Ben-Gurion's new Israel. ⁸What is most remarkable is that a near uniform generation emerged and Jews unified under a new national culture populated by Jews who felt altogether separate from the exilic remnants of World Jewry.

The first decades:

During the first two decades, the labor movement, socialist ideologies, and a collectivist ethnos, that encompassed the Kibbutzim movements, along with major manufacturing labor, dominated government. Dominated by Ashkenazi originating Jews,⁹ Israel has had a population make up comprised of a numerical majority of Mizrahi Jews, or those originating from the mid-east, who

⁶ (Mahler 2016) Condensed in a few decades, the maturation of Israeli government and political organization had to endure the growing pains experienced by other nations over centuries.

⁷ (Kedar 2002, p. 119)

⁸ (Almog 2000, *passim*) The fact that this book was a national bestseller in Israel in the year 2000 is a testament to its appeal to the nativist folklorist personage it described. Here was the perfect mixture of land and myth, which flowed easily from the urban centers to the moshave and kibbutz.

⁹ (Goldstein 2010) The subtle differentiations between various branches of Ashkenazi Jews and their counterparts would emerge as a forceful effect in political circles.

were given a second rate lifestyle and suffered discrimination. Their political unity finally coalesced with the formation of the Shas under the leadership of Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Joseph.¹⁰ The early influences of religious politics and the role of the Mizrachi, which would become pronounced after the 1970s, have assumed powerful influences today and no government can form a majority without their consideration.¹¹

Likud Ascendancy:

Founded by Menachem Begin in 1973, the Likud party rocked the political landscape by a surprise landslide election victory in 1977. Likud was able to enlist the support of various religious parties, and more recently, the Shas have thrown in their lot with Likud, being guaranteed key cabinet positions. The 1970s have been referred to as the beginning of the *second republic*, marked by individualism as opposed to collectivism and bolstered by a rising judiciary whose Supreme Court began modeling the US Supreme Court in its role in society, with an emphasis on individual rights that marked a shift from the collectivist vision of earlier times.¹²

Due to the intrinsic nature of a parliamentary system and an electorate accustomed to personally catered politics, Israel has witnessed a number of parties, often formed de novo, coalescing around a charismatic figure. In a major split from Likud, Ariel Sharon in 2005 formed Kadima. Yisrael Beiteinu [Avigdor Lieberman], Yesh Atid, Kulanu [Moshe Kalon], Zionist Union [Isaac Herzog, Tzipi Livni], make up some of the recently prominent parties. The Arab population has coalesced around The Joint List and enjoys a substantial number in the Knesset, but has never joined in any coalition. Finally we come to the religious parties such as the United Torah Judaism [Yaakov Litzman], The Jewish home [Naftali Bennett], which have developed a stranglehold on Israel politics because so often they make up the crucial numerical minority necessary to form a government. During elections, based on a national numerological system a threshold of 3.25% (this number has varied) is necessary to place a member in the Knesset.

Conclusion:

I have tried here to present a factual account without any bias, and while I wish there was a conclusion, there is none, because it is what it is. Faced with existential threats, a mandatory draft, and terrorism on a daily basis, it is not difficult to imagine the “hot button” electioneering

¹⁰ (Chetrit 2000) An excellent overview of the maturation of Mizrachi politics.

¹¹ (Mahler 2016) Just how the religious parties have evolved into their present roles is established by a long history of presence that was early on overlooked.

¹² (Hallote and Joffe 2002) A look at the shifting nature of Israeli society through the lens of politics in archeology.

tactics that Netanyahu invoked, when on election eve, March 17, 2015 he warned on a live Facebook feed that Palestinians were being bused to vote.¹³ The Israeli electorate is continuously faced with the normal economic fears of most societies and, in addition, with the notion of survival that transcends Right or Left politics.

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