

Introduction

Contentious Dynamics and the Transformation of Religion

On a hot summer day in August 1953, Zerach Warhaftig and Haim-Moses Shapira, two national-religious politicians and members of the Israeli parliament, embarked on a trip from Jerusalem to the city of Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv.¹ Jerusalem was the abode of the Knesset, the parliament of the young Israeli state. Compared to Jerusalem, Bnei Brak was rather peripheral to the national enterprise. Founded as an agricultural settlement by Polish *hasidim* in 1924, by the 1950s it had grown into a small city with some 20,000–25,000 inhabitants. No central governmental facilities or other institutions of national significance were located there.² Yet Bnei Brak was home to a different kind of authority. In the city resided the gray-bearded 73-year-old Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, better known by the name of his magnum opus, *Hazon Ish*.³ It was this eminent rabbinic authority, esteemed particularly by non-Zionist Orthodox Jews in Israel, that Warhaftig and Shapira had come to visit. Several days earlier, Karelitz had penned a letter to representatives of the national-religious parties, Mizrahi and Ha-Poel Ha-Mizrahi. In that letter he had urged the politicians to vote against an amendment to the Defense Service Law that was being discussed in the Knesset during those very days.

The issue of military service was particularly sensitive for the nascent state, whose survival depended on a strong army. In the Knesset, parliamentarians of both religious and secular parties had wrangled for months over the possibility of extending the mandatory draft to include women. Secular politicians deemed their service to be a critical and nonnegotiable contribution to national security. Orthodox representatives also perceived the issue to be a critical one, albeit from a different

angle. To them, the idea of young women serving in the army next to their male peers was anathema. Religious leaders were deeply unsettled by the growing sway of secularist influences on their communities, and for many reasons the debate over women and military service stood at the center of those concerns. A rare unity prevailed among Zionist and non-Zionist rabbinic authorities, who all declared that female military service was prohibited according to Jewish religious law (*halakhah*). Taking it one step further, ultra-Orthodox leaders decried the draft of women as “religious persecution” instituted by a “regime of heretics.”⁴ To break the deadlock, political leaders had invested considerable time and effort in reaching a compromise acceptable to all sides. After much back and forth, a specially appointed commission proposed exempting religiously observant women from the draft, provided that they serve in civil institutions instead. Yet the proposed amendment only generated more commotion among Orthodox leaders. While national-religious delegates strove to facilitate the compromise, their ultra-Orthodox colleagues from Agudat Yisrael and Poalei Agudat Yisrael (PAY) quit the government under much protest, following a directive from their rabbis. In the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem, angry masses took to the streets to demonstrate.

Shortly before the actual vote, the Hazon Ish wrote the aforementioned letter to the national-religious faction. In a respectful yet decisive tone, Karelitz decreed a “prohibition by halakhah to vote for the law of conscripting girls to a civil service” and admonished the politicians to follow his ruling. “Assure me,” the Hazon Ish demanded, “that you will fulfill your duty in this regard.”⁵ Seeking clarification, Warhaftig and Shapira traveled to Bnei Brak, where they asked the rabbi to reveal the source for his pronouncement. Customarily, rabbinic decisors ground their decisions on precedent and proofs from traditional texts. By disclosing their sources, these authorities render their decisions transparent. The Hazon Ish responded tersely: he claimed the ruling to be grounded in the fifth volume of the *Shulhan Arukh*, the most widely consulted code of Jewish law. Yet the *Shulhan Arukh* comprises just four volumes. The fifth volume, Karelitz averred, was handed down solely to the greatest sages. The matter of women’s national service, he conveyed, fell under the exclusive jurisdiction of religious authorities and was not to be contested by laymen.

The encounter in August 1953 was laden with symbolic significance. The three men who convened in the home of the Hazon Ish all categorized themselves as representatives of Orthodox Jewry. And yet, a great

chasm divided the Orthodoxies of Karelitz and that of his interlocutors, Warhaftig and Shapira. Karelitz was the foremost rabbinical authority of Jews who increasingly formed a distinct and distinguishable group identified as ultra-Orthodoxy, whereas Warhaftig and Shapira represented religious Zionists, who self-identified as national-religious Jews. This distinction was fairly new. Nevertheless, by the 1950s these categories were not merely political markers, but instead denoted groups that increasingly differed in their attitudes toward *halakhah*, in their social norms and behaviors, in their garb, and, of course, in their political affiliations. Ultra-Orthodox and national-religious Jews lived in different neighborhoods, spoke different vernaculars, and sent their children to different schools. They differed in their family sizes, their places of work and sources of income, and their economic standing. Within the two groups, to be sure, there were distinct subgroups. Hasidim and their opponents (*mitnagdim*) could still be differentiated by the length of their black wool jackets and the shape of their hats. An attentive observer could distinguish a *Belzer* from a *Gerer* hasid by the way each one wore his socks, and female adherents of different streams by their choice of wig or headscarf. But many of these distinctions and attendant animosities had become less crucial and perilous than in earlier years. Quite a few of the differences that had loomed previously as existential threats to religious harmony were smoothed over. Hasidim and mitnagdim had cut back on their rhetoric of mutual war; followers of the Belzer and Gerer courts lived in adjacent neighborhoods; and sometimes Jews with Galician roots even married those of Lithuanian background. Simultaneously, new boundaries and categories had developed and turned into significant markers of identification, considerably shaping social and political realities. Orthodox Jews living in the young State of Israel were divided into two distinct sociocultural milieus.

No such clear distinctions had existed just four decades earlier, when religious leaders from across Europe met in the Silesian town of Kattowitz (today's Katowice). Threatened by encroaching secularization and alarmed by the inroads that modern nationalism was making into their communities in Eastern and Central Europe, a wide range of Orthodox authorities gathered on the afternoon of May 27, 1912, to found a new and notable organization: Agudat Yisrael. This "Union of Israel" was to serve as a platform for mustering and organizing Orthodox Jews all over Europe and Palestine. Creating this sort of umbrella organization constituted an innovation of great significance, as the different Jewish streams and factions were notorious for their internecine quarrels and

strife. Even in Kattowitz the different groups eyed each other warily. Yet despite the friction, the gathering in 1912 brought together notables from across Europe and included luminaries such as the Rabbi of Brisk, Rabbi Haim Soloveitchik. Agudat Yisrael, the conference organizers hoped, would “revive the Jewish people in the spirit of its Torah.”⁶

The convention of lay leaders and rabbinic authorities was joined by a small group of representatives of Mizrahi, the religious-Zionist movement that had been launched a decade earlier. In 1902 Orthodox activists had seceded from the Zionist movement and established their own organization in Vilna, due mainly to conflicts over cultural activities. Yet despite the tensions, Mizrahi remained part of the Zionist Organization (ZO). The movement served as a platform for various forms of social and political activity among traditionalist Jews.⁷ Its founders harbored great ambition, aiming to gather the traditionalist masses under Mizrahi’s wings. Yet the masses had, in the main, remained indifferent to Orthodox Zionism, and many religious authorities had expressed outright hostility. Mizrahists themselves were deeply divided on the matter of ideological alignments and alliances. Was their aim first and foremost to promote Zionism among their traditionalist brethren, or should they operate a priori within the Zionist realm and work to draw their colleagues in the movement closer to Orthodoxy? This question was heatedly debated among Mizrahi leaders. When the ZO decided to actively support the creation of modern Hebrew culture as an alternative to traditional Jewish culture at its tenth congress in Basel in 1911, Mizrahists were outraged. The ensuing friction between secularist Zionists and religious Zionists instilled hope among the organizers of the conference in Kattowitz that Mizrahists would eventually abandon the ZO and join the new Orthodox movement.⁸

Several of the party’s representatives did indeed participate in Agudah’s founding conference. Applause for the initiative came from their highest ranks. Meir Berlin, one of Mizrahi’s eminent leaders, lauded the conference in Kattowitz and praised its central organizer, Jacob Rosenheim, as the “[Theodor] Herzl of Agudat Yisrael.”⁹ In contrast to the ZO, which in Berlin’s eyes was unable to reach religious Jewry, he hoped Agudah would eventually coalesce *klal yisrael*, all Jews. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, religious-Zionist icon and from 1921 the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, sent his greetings, welcoming the establishment of a new organization and outlining a program for its success.¹⁰

Rosenheim and other Agudah founders placed great hope in such expressions of support. Yet not everyone was pleased with the political

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activism that the new movement represented. Many religious authorities expressed their reservations. Solomon Breuer, rabbi of the Frankfurt separatist Orthodox community, in which the idea for the new organization had first been launched and developed, railed against too much influence of the lay elite and pushed for absolute leadership on the part of the rabbis.¹¹ Agudat Yisrael, he maintained, had to be clearly distinguished from other Jewish organizations, and in particular, from Mizrahi, which led observant Jews astray by giving them cause to consider the Zionist movement a legitimate force. To this end, Breuer and his allies decided to enforce strict boundaries between the two Orthodox organizations by establishing a supervisory Council of Torah Sages intended to achieve both aims: to bolster the leadership of the rabbis and to clearly distinguish the new organization from its Zionist opponents. The conference in Kattowitz was an important stimulus for these undertakings.

The said assembly was a significant step for Mizrahi as well because it helped to further processes of differentiation between the Orthodox and Zionist affiliations of the movement. Some of its leaders left to join the ranks of Agudat Yisrael, but those in favor of firm association with the Zionist movement remained, thereby strengthening this alliance. The question of affiliations and loyalties continued to haunt Mizrahists over the course of the following decades, but its course had been set. In Kattowitz, religio-political entrepreneurs had laid foundations for the formation of two distinct Orthodox political camps around whose platforms the masses could be mobilized henceforth. The groups soon parted ways, and over the following years, the two camps thrived and developed in large part via their mutual relations and dynamics.

In the subsequent decade, leaders on both sides continued to toy with the idea of cooperation. Boundaries were in flux, and some politicians even considered a merger. In the early 1920s, however, those impulses fell by the wayside when polarizing forces on each side won the upper hand. The two movements began to focus on developing and promoting their respective platforms. During ensuing years, the parties communicated primarily through polemics and press attacks, attempting to neutralize their political opponents and further their own aims and outlooks. Each movement launched branches in multiple European countries as well as in Palestine and developed a wide network of organizational initiatives and institutions. By the time the top political echelons of Mizrahi and Agudah met again a quarter-century later in April 1938, the geopolitical and organizational frameworks of Orthodox Jewry had changed dramatically. Alarmed by the grave economic and political situation of Jews in

Europe, as well as by the prospect of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, representatives of both parties congregated in the Ambassador Hotel in the heart of Paris to discuss joint activities for the good of Orthodox Jewry. This meeting was possible precisely because the differences between the two camps had been clearly demarcated; none of the attendees considered any close affiliation between the two, let alone a merger. Although the Paris negotiations ultimately reached a dead end, the attempt was historically significant because it marked an important stage of mutual (if indirect) recognition. The summit demonstrated that Mizrahi and Agudah representatives acknowledged each other's political camps, both of which could legitimately claim to represent major segments of Orthodox Jewry.

It was against this historical backdrop that Warhaftig and Shapira paid their celebrated visit to the Hazon Ish in Bnei Brak some fifteen years later. In the aftermath of the two most momentous events of twentieth-century Jewish history, the destruction of European Jewry and the establishment of the State of Israel, Mizrahists and Agudists had finally arrived at political cooperation. Determined to pool resources in the elections for the Israeli Constituent Assembly in January 1949, leaders from all religious parties established a political bloc under the name United Religious Front (URF). Yet despite the bloc's initial promise, cooperation was short-lived and confined to safeguarding basic religious rights and services in the Jewish state. Differences between the movements' leaders as well as their constituencies had grown too significant to bridge. In 1950s Israel, Orthodox Jews experienced a final parting of ways, both politically and socially.¹² The Hazon Ish's encounter with the two national-religious politicians in August 1953 signified this break. Dumbfounded by what they had heard, Warhaftig and Shapira stepped out of the rabbi's home and made their way back to Jerusalem. In spite of the Hazon Ish's decree, religious Zionists did not leave the government. The amendment to the Defense Service Law was pushed through the Knesset with their support. From that day forward, ultra-Orthodox and national-religious Jews and their political and religious representatives departed on separate journeys.

This book focuses on the rivalries, partisan processes, and mutual struggles that paved the path to the emergence of two distinct Orthodoxies. The following pages will trace these dynamics from the early days of political organization and the establishment of the two largest and most significant Orthodox movements during the first half of the twentieth century to the formation of two separate sociocultural

environments, the national-religious and the ultra-Orthodox, in the 1950s. As noted, for most of these decades, no such clear distinctions existed. Even the labels themselves were newly coined. In the early twentieth century the term *haredi* connoted all observant Jews, but over the course of the following decades, its meaning slowly changed and gradually narrowed to denote only non-Zionist or “ultra-Orthodoxy.”¹³ At the same time, observant Jews within the Zionist camp came to call themselves national-religious.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, both Mizrahi and Agudah leaders proclaimed their intent to turn their respective organizations into the exclusive representatives of Orthodox Jewry. Mizrahists attempted to unite Orthodox Jews of all factions and streams under the banner of Zionism.¹⁴ Eventually, they hoped, “there will be only one organization within Orthodox Jewry, Mizrahi.”¹⁵ Agudists also declared themselves to be the representatives of all observant Jews, hoping to muster Orthodox forces to forestall the decline of traditionalist lifestyles and communities.¹⁶ Both groups expected it to be only a matter of time until their opponents would cave in. Calls for political cooperation were colored by the expectation that the two organizations would eventually merge. In time, however, these assumptions shifted. When the two sides discussed modes of political cooperation following the founding of the Israeli state, it was clear to all that neither ideological nor organizational rapprochement was the goal.

This, then, is the story of how nationalizing processes in Eastern and Central Europe and Palestine reshaped observant Jewry into two distinct sociocultural milieus. Their emergence was neither automatic nor a natural progression but carefully and consciously advanced by various actors and institutions. Religio-political entrepreneurs played a significant role in these processes. In order to mobilize traditionalist Jews, they shaped and translated religious norms and values into collective action. The newly formed Orthodox movements politicized religion and even transformed their very religious identifications.¹⁷ Facing each other in a battle to garner support from the masses, political leaders adapted their platforms and strategies and sharpened their organization’s profiles. This competition ultimately led to more defined and pointed political camps. Going beyond party politics, the religio-political entrepreneurs gathered in Mizrahi and Agudat Yisrael built up a wide range of institutions and frameworks and integrated existing ones into their networks. By doing so, they delineated and advanced sociocultural cleavages as well, eventually fashioning two distinct Orthodoxies.

RELIGION AND NATION

Mizrahists and Agudists were deeply divided on an array of issues, most of which crystallized around their attitudes toward cooperation with secular Jews and the ZO in particular. Mizrahists aimed to work closely with their nonobservant fellows. In sharp contrast, Agudat Yisrael intended to counter the Zionists' steadily growing influence on Orthodox Jewry. This difference in approach resulted from the movements' disparate outlooks on modern nationalism. Since the age of enlightenment and emancipation and the emergence of secular lifestyles, debates over the essence of Judaism had raged among European Jews. While the observant leaders of Mizrahi and Agudat Yisrael both claimed Judaism to represent a religion as well as a people, they attached differing significance to national and religious affiliations – or ethnic versus *halakhic* commitments. These different emphases informed their attitudes toward cooperation with nonobservant Jews.

For Mizrahists, nationalism was of central importance. “Jews,” Polish party representative Katriel Fishel Tchorsh announced in 1919, “are the sons of one people and one nation . . . not just a religion or a tribe.”¹⁸ That is not to say that Mizrahists were willing to cooperate with their secularist fellows at all costs. Indeed, the party had been founded by religious activists who were uncomfortable with the Zionist movement's position on cultural affairs. Although religious Zionists continued to participate in general Zionist frameworks, ongoing friction with secular factions nearly led Mizrahi to leave the ZO on several occasions, particularly during the early 1930s.¹⁹ Agudists, on the other hand, deemed affiliations with observant Jews to be the most significant. They aimed first and foremost to foster solidarity among traditionalist communities, and any relations with non-Orthodox Jews were judged from this vantage point. Cooperation with secular leaders was an option only on condition that it did not endanger religious cohesion. “We have no interest in replacing our prayer shawl with the Zionist flag,” wrote one author in the Orthodox daily *Der Israelit* in 1920.²⁰ Agudah leaders regularly insisted that ethnic affiliations, while not irrelevant, had to be subordinated to religious loyalties. A dictum oft-repeated by the Agudah press was, “There is no Jewish nation without Torah.”²¹

Recent scholarship has challenged deterministic narratives about the rise of modern nationalism and dispelled notions of a monolithic ideology or movement. In this context, historians have disclaimed the inevitability of nationalizing programs and have studied national loyalties as

fundamentally dynamic phenomena that individuals and groups construct under particular historical circumstances.²² They have further demonstrated that these sorts of loyalties can be transformed or exchanged and may be held in ambiguous relation to other allegiances. In fact, it has been argued in the case of the Habsburg Empire that it was indifference among the target population rather than pronounced ethnic tribalism that provoked much of the nationalist activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to some scholars, activists in different areas of East Central Europe fought over the same subjects for their national projects in an environment of national ambiguity.²³

Historians of Eastern European Jewry have, nonetheless, been cautious about denying the ethnic foundation of Jewish nationalism. Scholars generally acknowledge the novel character and features of this phenomenon, yet stress the fact that Jews maintained strong ethnic bonds throughout the ages and set themselves apart from their environments by way of their cultural and religious practices. Even during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which Jewish autonomy was sharply diminished, other institutions arose that assumed many of the functions of earlier community structures and enabled the Jewish corporation to survive well into the modern period.²⁴ While Jews in countries such as France and Germany were offered social and cultural integration on an individual basis and on condition that they relinquish their Jewish corporate formations, their brethren in Russia, Poland, and other territories of Eastern Europe generally did not have this option.²⁵ Social exclusion coupled with continuing ethnic and linguistic markers lent Jewish group affiliations in the east greater relevance than they held in Western European societies.²⁶ Jewish ethno-entrepreneurs could not just assemble random “materials” to construct their nation.²⁷ And yet, Jewish society was highly socially stratified, and strong regional affiliations and religious differences impeded the aim of activists to foster national group loyalties. Jewish nationalists, like others, had to define their group of reference.²⁸ In addition, Jewish leaders had to cope with the fluidity and fragility of such groups as well as fundamental disagreements about their character and properties. There was, in the words of David Rechter, simply “no Jewish consensus as to what exactly Jews were.”²⁹

Much of the current scholarly discourse on “national indifference” rests on Rogers Brubaker’s call to not treat ethnic groups, nations, or races as existing, stable, “internally homogenous and externally bounded” entities. Instead of accepting such groups as “fundamental units of social

analysis,” Brubaker proposes to study the practices through which ethnopolitical entrepreneurs created and established them.³⁰ While Jewish nationalists could hark back to older forms of community, they still had to find ways in which to preserve and refresh such loyalties. Traditions, even those based on strong ethnic bonds, are not simply inherited; they have to be reproduced and renewed. Thus, activities to reinforce Jewish solidarity were not limited to secular nationalists but engaged Orthodox protagonists as well. Jewish ethnopolitical entrepreneurs from across the spectrum aimed to thwart disaggregating processes among European Jews, often derogatively termed “assimilation.” While not struggling against “national indifference” in the same ways as other European nationalists, Jewish activists did certainly encounter indifference toward their new political ideologies and had to fight the decline of Jewish group formations.

Although Agudah leaders rejected nationalism as such, they too aimed to unite observant Jews on a supra-regional or “national” level, seeking to transcend regional and cultural differences while concurrently taking great care to not erase them. For such intentions they were harshly criticized by other traditionalist authorities, some of whom accused them of crypto-Zionism.³¹ To be sure, Agudah differed considerably in its *Weltanschauung* from its nationalist adversaries. While during the 1910s and 1920s the Agudists’ vocabulary increasingly borrowed from the lexicon of European nationalists, this was largely instrumental; or, as one commentator opined in 1918, their resort to nationalist language should be understood “as a sort of smallpox vaccination, with the sole aim to immunize the easily contaminated youth against the Zionist pestilence.”³² Furthermore, they did not strive for political and civil rights as an end in itself, and these goals were always secondary to maintaining the integrity of their own institutions and communities.³³ Even after World War II, Agudists seemed to deploy human rights discourse first and foremost as a tactical measure designed to bolster their demands vis-à-vis the Zionist state. Nevertheless, theirs was a conscious traditionalism, which was itself an expression of Jewish modernity, as Glenn Dynner has pointed out.³⁴ In contrast to Agudist self-depiction, this traditionalism did not merely constitute a continuation of traditional Jewish group formations. Competing on the “market place” of modern group identifications, Agudists established new institutions and mechanisms of group cohesion in order to promote their concept of Jewish peoplehood. In this respect, both Orthodox movements were invested in creating and forging modern sociopolitical formations, rather than in simply preserving well-defined preexisting social units.³⁵