

JEWISH POLITICAL TRADITIONS AND CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI POLITICS

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The central puzzle of Israeli politics is how democracy has been maintained at all, given the lack of democracy in countries of origin, the deep internal divisions, and the permanent state of war. At least part of the answer lies in understanding Jewish political traditions. The Zionist movement was, in large degree, a revolt against Jewish history. But inevitably Zionists were influenced by an extensive Jewish experience of self-government in the East European shtetl. This experience involved political institutions that were voluntary, inclusive, pluralistic, and contentious. It was also a closed system, facing a hostile external world and not equipped to deal with non-Jews as a group. It was marked by the necessity of bargaining, lack of defined hierarchy, proliferation and influence of organized groups, and the reality of power-sharing, rather than undiluted rule of the majority. These patterns of behavior have much in common with what contemporary political scientists call "consensus" democracy, in contrast to the more common majoritarian model.

The claim of a strong political tradition for a people who lacked statehood for some 2,000 years may, at first glance, seem somewhat odd. Yet the Jewish experience in self-government over the centuries has been a rich one, as a growing literature attests. Consider, for example, the following description of Jewish politics:

The actual mechanics of election vary widely, but a constant feature is the campaigning inseparable from all elections, the forming of factions, the influencing of the humble members by the city bosses....The meetings are not notable for parliamentary procedure. On the contrary, there is little order and more talking than listening....Majority rule is followed but not accepted. The minority may concede momentary victory but the issue is not considered settled.... There is no blind following of a leader on the theory that he is right and we will support him whatever he says. On the contrary, the leader's dictum is always subject to analysis and criticism. "Every Jew has his own Shulhan Aruch," they say, meaning his own interpretation of the Law.¹

One might take this for a description of the Israeli Knesset, or some other contemporary Jewish organization. It is, however, an account of

Jewish Political Studies Review 2:3-4 (Fall 1990)

political life in the *shtetl*, the nineteenth-century Jewish community in the towns and villages of Eastern Europe. Since this was the immediate political legacy of most of those who shaped the political institutions of Israel, a certain amount of similarity should not be surprising. Political patterns that had developed over centuries of experience in self-government could hardly fail to leave an imprint. The aim of this study, then, is first to identify the political traditions resulting from that experience — with special attention to the immediate milieu in which the Zionist movement developed — and secondly, to identify tentatively some lines of continuity from these traditions, through Zionism and the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine (the Yishuv), to the politics of Israel. Though an analysis of this scope cannot definitively establish a causal relationship between Jewish political traditions and Israeli political behavior, the identification of similar patterns in the two cases should at least be suggestive and help to stimulate further thought and research on the roots of the Israeli political system.

Jewish communities throughout history, and not only in Eastern Europe, had in fact long experience in maintaining many institutions of a self-contained political system. In Tsarist Russia — where half the world's Jews lived in the nineteenth century — Jewish communities had enjoyed a wide-ranging autonomy that the regime was trying, belatedly, to whittle down. Jewish communities were organized politically and regularly elected both secular leaders and rabbis, they levied taxes (or apportioned the taxes levied on the community as a whole by the state), they maintained courts with varying types of sanctions, they established extensive welfare systems, they passed laws (*takanot*) regulating extensively all aspects of life in the community from commerce to codes of personal dress, and they appointed agents (*shtadlanim*) as “diplomats” to represent the community in its relations with external authority. A distinctive and persistent political tradition grew out of the normative institutions of Judaism as shaped by the peculiarities of diaspora existence that most Jewish communities (non-European as well as European) experienced in common.²

Some elements of this rich and variegated experience are of more relevance than others to subsequent political developments. Of particular relevance is the political culture of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewry, not only because of its demographic centrality in world Jewry at the time, but also because it was the immediate setting from which most founders of Zionist and Israeli politics emerged. Certain features of this environment strike a familiar chord to anyone familiar with the political history of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel.³

Clearly, the voluntary character of Jewish self-government was of decisive importance. Except in such limited spheres as collection of

state taxes (backed by state enforcement), the Jewish community had very limited means of coercion at its disposal. The ultimate sanction available — the *herem* or excommunication — had been of great importance in the pre-Emancipation period when life centered around religion and the community, and was still of some importance thereafter. But in the circumstances of Tsarist Russia, by the late nineteenth century, active participation and cooperation was highly dependent on the good will of community members. In a very real sense, it was government by consent of the governed. In Daniel Elazar's analysis, it was a "covenantal" relationship whose roots lay in the biblical covenants freely contracted between God and Israel. This also had "democratic" implications, since government based on contractual relationships suggests formal equality and a general right of participation, as reflected by the regular conduct of elections in an age and geographical setting where the right to vote was unknown. Shmuel Eisenstadt refers to "the basic 'democratic' or rather egalitarian premises of the Jewish tradition, premises of basic equality and of equal participation and access of all Jews to the centers of the sacred realm...in contrast to the potentially more oligarchic tendencies of priesthood, the predominant modes of Jewish belief."⁴

Since it was voluntary, Jewish self-government also had to be inclusive. Disgruntled groups and individuals were not at the mercy of the will of the majority; they could opt out of active participation in the community. Given the need for unity against a hostile environment, there was a strong incentive to give all groups in the community a stake in the system. It was understood that benefits must be broadly shared among all members of the community, even where this meant overcoming deep social, ideological, and religious divisions that would ordinarily make cooperation difficult. The principle of proportionality in the distribution of power and benefits was widely understood and applied before the term itself came into use, as the only conceivable approach in a community or movement that lacked governmental powers. This was clearly the only course open to the early Zionist movement, which lacked even the slight aura of governmental authority enjoyed by Jewish community leaders. The logic of the situation was expressed by Max Nordau at the Third Zionist Congress, in 1899, when he appealed to religious Jews to join the movement: "Within Zionism everyone is guaranteed full freedom to live according to his religious convictions....For we do not have the possibility of imposing our will on you if it happens to be different from yours!"⁵

It follows from these two points that Jewish politics were inevitably pluralistic. In the first place, each community chose secular officials as well as a rabbinic leadership, and the lines of authority between the two were often unclear and thus the cause of controversy (as Jacob Katz writes, "there was no clear-cut dichotomy between the

lay and rabbinical authorities").⁶ This softened the theocratic potential inherent in the selection of a religious hierarchy, and set the precedent of a tension between political and religious authority as well as a blurring of the line between political and religious issues. Apart from this there was a proliferation of groups of all types: artisan guilds, mutual aid societies, cultural associations, political parties, educational groups, savings and loan associations, defense organizations, charitable associations, burial societies, and workers' groups. Given the Jewish emphasis on charity, the emphasis on communal welfare activities was especially notable; some communities could be said to have a functioning "welfare system" in an almost modern sense. According to one estimate, each Jewish community had on the average some 20 different associations, while the large city of Vilna, in 1916, had a total of 160.⁷

The presence of so many groups, many of them carrying out quasi-governmental functions, served to increase the diffusion of power and further blur the lines of authority within the community. An essential unity was preserved through mutual recognition and accommodation among the groups, and by an underlying understanding that the legitimacy of these divisions rested on the adherence of all to the collective norms and interests shared by the entire community. But the result was that the formal structure of government was often at odds with the informal arrangements by which governmental functions were actually exercised. In such a situation, bargaining and uneasy compromise among the *de facto* power centers was often of more import than formal decisions. The existence of different centers of power also helped legitimize opposition to decisions that might be reached, by providing institutionalized alternatives. Even rabbinical decisions could be impeached, since there were competing authorities who could be invoked against each other.⁸

It is, therefore, no surprise that the style of politics under such conditions was contentious. The bargaining by which the system operated was noisy and confrontational, since the rules were themselves fluid. Each group sought to influence communal affairs as best it could, and the outcome tended simply to reflect the pressures that they were able to mobilize. Battles between contending factions could even turn violent.

Furthermore, while the stress on law and the quality of legal institutions was always one of the hallmarks of Jewish life, the lack of clear jurisdictional lines encouraged an attitude of expediency toward the law. The laws of the state were considered inferior to Jewish law, and were submitted to only out of necessity. Where possible they were avoided, often by the prevailing Eastern European pattern of bribery (a tendency reinforced in Palestine by the Ottoman "*baksheesh*" culture). These attitudes also carried over within the community, where the

letter of the law was regarded as less than decisive, and personal arrangements ("*proteksia*") operated alongside formal procedures as a parallel method of handling relations between the individual and the state.⁹

Finally, it is important to note that the Jewish community was politically separate, as far as it could manage, from its environment. It was assumed, not without reason, that the outside world was basically hostile, and that the interest of the community lay in minimizing the role of non-Jewish authorities. Habits of secrecy, of concealing community affairs from the unwelcome attention of outsiders, became ingrained. For necessary dealings with external authorities, *shtadlanim* were chosen to represent the community as a whole. As a logical corollary, Jewish law and Jewish politics within the community were understood to apply to Jews only. Relations between Jews and non-Jews were under the jurisdiction of the state and governed by non-Jewish law, but within the community Jewish law prevailed. This idea of a dual system of law and governance was normal for the time and place; as Jacob Katz says, "The double legal and moral standard was not merely a mental reservation but was the accepted practice in all sections of society. The respective Jewish and non-Jewish sections of society were governed by their own mutually exclusive laws."¹⁰

This is not to say that Jewish law is silent about the treatment of non-Jews. There is considerable discussion of the *ger toshav*, or resident alien, in the traditional sources. Generally these sources call for the humane and hospitable treatment of the alien, "for you were strangers in Egypt." But at the same time, in the very nature of things, there was no suggestion that a non-Jew could become a full-fledged member of a Jewish community.¹¹ This stress on the rights of individual aliens to humane treatment did not provide for any collective legal or political expression of non-Jewish identity, but the matter was never seriously tested under diaspora conditions. There the Jewish law of the *ger toshav* was adequate to deal with those non-Jews who chose to live, as individuals, in a Jewish community. Jewish communities never had under their jurisdiction large non-Jewish populations seeking to maintain their own collective identity, and thus Jewish political traditions were singularly unequipped to deal with such a situation. It is not that these traditions were discriminatory or exclusivist; they simply had nothing to say on the subject.

Yishuv and State

These various Jewish political traditions add up to a strong pattern of consensus politics within the Jewish community itself. The necessity of bargaining, the lack of defined hierarchy, the proliferation and

influence of organized groups, and the reality of power-sharing rather than the undiluted rule of the majority, mark the system.

Of course the political traditions of their communities were not the only influences acting on the early Zionist movement, or on the early pioneers of Jewish settlement in Palestine. The ideologies sweeping the Russian Empire at the time — socialism, populism, nationalism — are customarily given pride of place in discussions of the intellectual roots of Zionism. Western liberal democratic thinking was also apparent, whether through the agency of key Zionist figures (such as Herzl himself), or by virtue of the British Mandate over Palestine. Though these topics are beyond the scope of this essay, they clearly must be taken into account in any effort to gauge the impact of Jewish political traditions on Zionist and Israeli politics. Nevertheless, it should also be clear that these traditions were in many ways strikingly relevant to the conditions and opportunities that the Jewish Yishuv faced in the historic homeland. Both the Ottoman millet system and the British colonial style of indirect rule provided an opening for Jewish skills in self-government. Under the Mandatory government, the Yishuv could draw on long practice with autonomous institutions in establishing their own state-within-a-state, complete with institutions that in some cases — political parties, educational and cultural groups, charitable and welfare bodies, burial societies, religious organizations, economic guilds, workers' groups, and even private companies — were hardly more than a transplant from the diaspora.¹² Whatever the importance of previous experience in this community-building enterprise, it remains a fact that by the end of the Mandatory period the Jewish community had far outstripped Palestinian Arabs in establishing communal self-government, and that this provided an easier transition to statehood.

The continuity of "Jewish" elements in Israeli politics is also quite remarkable. Consider, for example, the use of a proportional representation electoral system in a more undiluted form than almost anywhere else. By providing representation to even the smallest groups, such a system mirrors the voluntary and inclusive essence of Jewish politics and the Zionist movement. At a time when such systems were relatively unknown in practice, the First Zionist Congress adopted the principle of proportional representation of national federations, according to number of members; when political parties began presenting separate lists for election soon afterward, this evolved into a *de facto* proportional representation of parties, and the system carried over into the institutions of the Yishuv and of the state. In 1958, furthermore, the principle of proportionality was entrenched in the Basic Law establishing the Knesset, being made subject to amendment only by an absolute majority of Knesset members, rather than a majority of those

present (as is the case with ordinary legislation) — once again pulling Israel away from the practice of purely majoritarian parliamentary regimes.

Proportional representation also led to the development of the “party key,” according to which offices, budgets, and ultimately the full range of institutional resources are divided among parties according to their electoral strength. The World Zionist Organization, to take one case, eventually elected a total of eight vice presidents so that each party could sit on the presidium. A better expression of inclusiveness and proportionality could hardly be found, nor does any student of Israeli politics need to be reminded of the ubiquity and significance of the party key on the contemporary scene.¹³

It is also remarkable that since independence Israel has been governed some 82 percent of the time by more-than-minimal coalitions; that is, parties have been added to the government even though their votes were not needed to achieve a majority in the Knesset. On three occasions (1967-1970, 1984-1988, and 1988-1990) this has even brought the two major blocs together in a government of national unity, a development which has only occasionally been matched by democratic regimes elsewhere. It is even more remarkable in the Israeli case given the depth and intensity of division between the two blocs on key issues facing the state. But, again, precedents in Zionist history and the Jewish political experience before that are not hard to find.

Another point of similarity is that the governing process in Israel, like that of the historic Jewish community, can often be described as a matter of bargaining and shared powers among autonomous or semi-autonomous subgroups. Israeli politics is marked by a diffusion of power, masked by the parliamentary facade; it is, in Daniel Elazar’s term, a “compound polity.” Functions that are ordinarily handled by governments elsewhere are carried out by bodies only partially subject to governmental control. The Histadrut determines much public policy in such areas as health care, welfare, pensions, and wage policies, and is a key participant — not just a source of influence, but an actor in the system — in broad economic decision-making. The Jewish Agency is active in immigration, settlement, economic development, and relations with Jewish communities abroad. The Jewish National Fund handles the purchase and management of public lands.

The political parties are, of course, primary actors in the drama, and the crucial “governmental” decisions themselves are, as often as not, actually made in party councils, whether by the dominant party alone or in bargaining among the parties. The most important governing “document” in Israeli politics may be the coalition agreement among the parties following each election, which in fact sets the Knesset agenda until the next election. Since parties often represent basic social

divisions — particularly the religious parties — this is the stage at which some key minority interests are registered and taken into account.

Interest groups in Israel reflect this state of affairs. There is relatively little legislative lobbying of the traditional sort, since the important decisions are not made in the Knesset. Interest groups are organized to bargain with, or to pressure, the governmental ministries, parties, and other bodies that together make such decisions. For this purpose, interest groups not only approach decision-makers directly, as they would in most pluralist democratic systems, but sometimes become a part of the process themselves (in the case of the more important and better-organized groups). The kibbutz and moshav movements are closely tied to the Ministry of Agriculture; the Israel Manufacturers' Association works closely with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. To an unusual extent, in comparison to like situations elsewhere, doctors strongly influence the policies of the Ministry of Health, bus drivers those of the Ministry of Transport, and teachers those of the Ministry of Education. In some cases, especially on economic issues, the interest group goes beyond the role of bargaining for its own interests, and itself becomes a participant in a "neo-corporate" style of decision-making.¹⁴ At a minimum, many such groups are able to veto proposals that they consider inimical to their interests.

Even in the area of local government, usually considered the most centralized feature of the Israeli system, recent developments have led to some diffusion of power. Elazar points out that as local governments have almost no restriction on their borrowing, they often go deeply into debt and then bargain with the state for funds to repay the loans. So long as local expenditures do not violate state policy, the state usually ends up covering them (the Knesset has passed a law to prohibit such practices, but it has not been effective).¹⁵ Even more importantly, perhaps, there has been a trend in some of the larger municipalities toward increasing financial independence by increasing local taxes, and foregoing the fiscal support of the national government upon which they had depended in the past.

As indicated, the role of the Knesset in this process of bargaining and power-sharing among numerous power centers is a secondary one, and for this reason an analysis of Israeli politics that focuses on the formal parliamentary structure is misleading. The Knesset serves to register the results of an election, and thus the bargaining strength of each party, until the next election is held. It is also where the bargains and decisions reached are formally validated by legislative approval, serving, in other words, a "legitimizing function" primarily — a status similar, actually, to that of many other legislatures throughout the world.¹⁶ But only seldom do deliberations in the Knesset change the content of these decisions, or do votes depart from the negotiated script.

Fully 94 percent of the laws enacted have been government-initiated, and only once has the Knesset passed a vote of no-confidence in the government. Studies of the Knesset stress the unhappiness over its powerlessness; surprisingly, Knesset members state that they derive more satisfaction from their service to constituents (supposedly a weak point of the proportional representation system!) than from their influence on policy. Where such influence exists, it is usually by virtue of a member's position in his party, or his ties to an external body such as the Histadrut or the kibbutz movement.¹⁷

The working of the Israeli system is typified by the triangular bargaining among the Ministry of Finance, the Histadrut, and the Manufacturers' Association that precedes any major change in economic policy, and often many specific agreements on wage policies. A recent study of health policy in Israel, by Yair Zalmanovitch, stresses the role of Kupat Holim Klalit (the Sick Fund of the Histadrut) as a "veto group" in the setting of that policy.¹⁸ The proposal for a five-day work week was the subject of negotiations between the Histadrut and the Ministry of Finance. Reforms in energy policy were negotiated among the Ministry of Energy, the three major oil companies, and the corporation operating the refineries. The transfer of absorption services for new immigrants from the Jewish Agency to the government was the subject of difficult negotiations between the Agency and the Ministry of Absorption, with the Ministry of Finance also involved. The examples could be multiplied extensively, involving a variety of public, semi-public, and private bodies according to the subject involved.

The diffusion of government functions among non-government bodies was at the root of David Ben-Gurion's attempt to promote *mamlachtiut* (statism) in the early years of independence. The outstanding achievements of *mamlachtiut* were the unification of the army (as opposed to units associated with different political movements) and the merger of independent secular school systems into a single state system. But as Ben-Gurion himself was forced to concede, by and large *mamlachtiut* was not a success; even with regard to schools, he was forced to accept a separate religious state school system, closely linked to the religious-Zionist party, as well as the continued existence of an independent religious school system serving the ultra-Orthodox community. And where some services were transferred from political movements to the state, the "party key" arrangements in the government meant that parties continued to share jobs, funds, and control over these services as before.¹⁹

In both the Jewish political tradition and in modern Israel, a system of informal bargaining and unclear lines of authority encourage a high level of direct action and a confrontational political style. Already only two months after publication of *Der Judenstaat*, Theodor Herzl remarked in his diary, concerning Zionist infighting, that "we

have not got a country yet, and already they are tearing it apart.”²⁰ After a period of relative quiescence in the 1950s and 1960s, the incidence of protest and demonstration has reached a level surpassing that of almost any other democratic regime.²¹ A symptomatic political event of recent years was the 1982 demonstration by some 400,000 Israelis — nearly 20 percent of the country’s adult population — demanding an official inquiry into the Sabra and Shatilla massacre in Lebanon (a demand that the government was forced to meet). The rise of extraparlimentary movements is another dimension of the increasing tendency toward direct action in politics. Yet another is the “illegalism” that Ehud Sprinzak has identified as a recurring feature of Israeli politics rooted in Jewish history.²²

The fractious style of Jewish politics should not, however, be allowed to conceal the underlying consensus that characterizes it, just as common identity against an outside world cemented an internal solidity in the *shtetl*. As Elazar has noted:

Here the outside observer should not be fooled by the decibel level of Israeli politics. The tone of Israeli political debate does tend to be strident, so much so that, taken by itself, the Israeli polity always gives the impression of being on the verge of collapsing or fracturing irrevocably. But the collapse does not happen because of the strong forces that propel Israelis toward unity. Both the stridency and the tendencies toward unity are part and parcel of Jewish political culture.²³

Clearly not all Jewish political traditions of the past have their modern Israeli counterpart, nor does all Israeli political behavior fall into the patterns described. The superiority of rabbinic law is no longer assumed; Israel now has a body of civil law, much of it derived from or influenced by Western sources, that takes precedence. The influence of Western secularism also creates a stark contrast, as the coercive authority of religious leaders is limited to a very small sphere apart from those who voluntarily accept rabbinical leadership. (On the other hand, in the area in which they do wield authority — basically family law — rabbinical courts are now backed by the police power of the state.) In addition, the oligarchic and aristocratic elements of earlier Jewish politics have been attenuated or at least transformed in the modern setting.

The Israeli political structure also includes elements from other sources. Most central is the parliamentary structure, with its fusion of legislative and executive power and an executive dominance with few if any checks and balances. Political parties play a different, and much more powerful, role in the system. The degree of national centralization — of the subordination of local government — is in striking contrast to the essentially local character of traditional Jewish politics.

Security constraints have also pushed the system into novel responses; the army, and defense and foreign policy generally, operate basically outside the “bargaining” framework and are almost totally “statist” in their functioning (one area in which *mamlachtiut* was successful). In foreign policy, one approach was dominant before 1977, and another for the most part since then; though the national unity governments have been able to work compromise on many domestic issues, they have not been able to break the stalemate on significant moves in diplomacy. It could also be pointed out that power-sharing worked better on the intra-party than the inter-party level during the period of Labor dominance; for example, the right-wing Herut party was excluded from any meaningful power-sharing before its entry, finally, into the national unity government in 1967.

Finally, some institutions — the Histadrut, the kibbutz movement, and similar cooperative endeavors — seem more the products of (non-Jewish) socialist ideology than the *shtetl*. And though the agrarian ideal has to be seen in perspective in a country that is overwhelmingly urban, that part of Ashkenazi Zionism that represented a rebellion against traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe still has an imprint on contemporary life. Old Jewish habits may be emerging as the strength of classic Labor Zionist ideology continues to decline, but it can be argued that without it, there would have been no state.

The importance of the “power-sharing” patterns in Israeli politics can be examined more closely by looking at them in the context of the three major cleavages within the country. Such political practices, based more on consensus than on the unadulterated rule of the majority, are assumed by political scientists to be more suitable to societies, like Israel, that are relatively heterogeneous (see below). Israel is marked by a “communal” division between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, by a religious division between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, and by an ethnic division between Jews and Arabs. Though the “Jewish” patterns of politics play out somewhat differently in these three different contexts, they nevertheless provide evidence of where political traditions are relevant to the problems Israel faces — and where they are not.

The Communal Division: Ashkenazi-Sephardi

The potential for conflict among Israeli Jews from different backgrounds should not be underestimated. European Jews — Ashkenazim — founded the Zionist movement, dominated it, and overwhelmed the long-existing Sephardi community in Palestine. They imposed their institutions and values on the politics, society and culture of the new State of Israel, assuming that Jews from “backward” non-European areas would simply have to adjust to the established order. The bulk of

Asian and African Jews, on the other hand, arrived on the scene only after the state was established, often as uprooted refugees who had been stripped of all their property and other resources. Initially, the gap — economically, socially, politically, or on any other dimension — was enormous, and the resentment of the newcomers was further fueled by attitudes of paternalism and contempt for non-European culture on the part of the Ashkenazi elite.

Given the potentially disruptive impact of this division, the Israeli political system responded reasonably well (at least over time). With some delay, and though still underrepresented, Sephardim have gradually been integrated into Israeli politics. Generally there was little bargaining with and accommodation of Sephardim *as a group*, but nevertheless the process of integration reflected traditional Jewish patterns. The entrance of Sephardim into politics has usually proceeded on an individual rather than a collective basis, and often by a process of cooptation — one of the hallmarks of “inclusiveness” in traditional Jewish politics.

Behind this, the very strength of the sense of common Jewishness, on both sides of the divide, has far outweighed the subgroup identities within the shared framework. The importance of this shared Jewishness was greatly reinforced, of course, by the existence and intensity of the conflict between Israel and the Arab world, from where many of the Sephardim had fled. And while the Zionist movement was dominated by Eastern European Jews, Zionist feeling — albeit of a more traditional, almost messianic variety — was no less intense in many non-European Jewish communities. Sammy Smooha points out, for example, that on a per capita basis, Iraqi Jews contributed to Zionism two to three times as much as Polish Jews in money and in immigrants during the Mandate period.²⁴ There was never any doubt about the strong Jewish identity of the Sephardim who arrived in Israel, whether as voluntary immigrants or as refugees, and the centrality of Jewishness on both sides made a “Jewish” approach to their differences inevitable.

Despite the Ashkenazi attitudes of superiority and contempt toward non-European cultures and immigrants — attitudes that have been amply documented²⁵ — the universal goal of integration, accepted by all parties, limited the scope of conflict and helped define the methods for dealing with it. There was little Ashkenazi resistance, for example, to coopting Sephardi leaders into the system, and less tendency on both sides to engage in group bargaining which might have suggested the permanence and sanctification of communal divisions. In discussing the response to those group protests that were made (principally the Black Panthers in the 1970s), Etzioni-Halevy mentions some typically “Jewish” steps: the protest is allowed, symbolic reassurances are given, benefits are dispensed, and some of the demands are actually fulfilled. But, she stresses, the group protests were also

undercut by the upward social mobility and cooptation of their leaders.²⁶

Thus separate party lists on a communal basis have generally been unsuccessful in Israeli politics, with the exception of two Sephardi-religious lists that won from three to six seats in the 1981, 1984, and 1988 elections (in an electoral system extremely favorable to such tactics). The existing parties moved quickly to attract Sephardi votes by placing Sephardim on their own lists, at first in a kind of tokenism but increasingly as serious representation. Cross-cutting affiliations also undercut any effort at separate lists, as Sephardi voters were to some degree pulled in different directions by religious, ideological, and socio-economic issues, which outweighed the importance of communal interests.²⁷

It is true that the Sephardi community is disproportionately hawkish on Israeli-Arab issues, and disproportionately represented on the lower socioeconomic levels (leading to alienation from the "establishment" Labor party), and that this could conceivably lead to a polarization in which communal division reinforced by these other divisions became the basis of Israeli politics. Voters of Asian-African background have given disproportionate support to the more hawkish and "anti-establishment" Likud in the last four general elections. But even here, it should be pointed out, the Sephardi influence has been wielded within the existing party structure, as these votes went to a party whose leadership was as predominantly Eastern European as any other. It is possible, of course, that the Likud, or at least the Herut segment of it, will become the *de facto* vehicle for Sephardi aspirations, but without placing the political system on an explicitly communal basis.

In the meantime, the success of individual integration into the system should not be underestimated. Already from the 1960s, Sephardi candidates began to dominate local council and mayoral elections in the development towns, where the population was largely Sephardi. In recent years Israel has had a Sephardi President, Chief of Staff, Deputy Prime Minister, Speaker of the Knesset, and Chairman of the Histadrut. In the economic sphere, Sephardim have served as Minister and Director-General of the Ministry of Finance, and as Managers of Bank Leumi and Bank Discount. As many as 9 of 26 Cabinet members have been Sephardi, as are 33 of the 120 members of the Twelfth Knesset (still an underrepresentation, but a vast improvement from 7 in the First Knesset). Even more important, perhaps, was the role of Sephardi voters in bringing the Likud to power in 1977 and keeping it there through the 1980s.

Progress has been made in other areas as well. By the late 1970s, the Sephardi living standard as compared with the 1950s had doubled, their share of professional and administrative jobs had also

doubled, and their attendance in post-primary schools and universities had more than trebled. Thus in both education and political representation the gap between the two communities had narrowed, and Sephardim had made considerable economic progress as well, even though the gap in this case had not narrowed due to the equally rapid improvement among Ashkenazim. In addition, measures of social distance between the two communities showed a significant decline over the years. For example, the percentage of high school students with reservations to "intermarriage" between the two communities dropped from 60 percent in 1965 to 21 percent in 1975.²⁸

This last item underlines, again, what may be the most decisive factor in the way the system has handled communal divisions: the fact that such divisions are almost universally regarded as transitional. It has been relatively uncomplicated for a Jewish political system to deal with a division that is seen as an artifact of history, and not as a legitimate and substantive split to be perpetuated in the institutions of the nation. Whatever the relative impact that Ashkenazi and Sephardi inputs come to have on the final product of integration, the striving to realize a common Jewishness is not challenged. As Smootha says:

My survey of pronouncements by Oriental spokesmen, ethnic publications and programmes of ethnic election lists shows a broad consensus with the established ideologies. The stated target is definitely ethnic integration, and separatism is out of the question. The emphasis is on uniculturalism with minor subcultural pluralism.²⁹

The "subcultural pluralism" to which Smootha refers may become the major issue in Ashkenazi-Sephardi relations in the next few years, as Sephardim strive for a better recognition of their particular Jewish cultures, within the framework of a shared "Israeliness."

A final measure of the sense of a decreasing distance is the increasing rate of intermarriage between the two communities. Marriages between persons born in Europe or North America, or whose fathers were born in Europe or North America, and persons born in Asia or Africa, or whose fathers were born in Asia or Africa, have increased steadily over the years and in the 1975-1979 period stood at 20.0 percent of all marriages (a purely random distribution of marriage partners, it would be recalled, would raise this only to the 50 percent level). By 1986, this percentage had increased to 24.3 percent.³⁰

The Religious-Secular Split

While the community cleavage may be transitional, few would regard religious divisions in Israel as a passing phenomenon. Different

degrees and definitions of observance, and competing religious authority, appear to be a part of the Jewish condition. Jewish politics has had much experience dealing with these issues, and it is therefore not surprising that Israeli politics reflects this experience very clearly. In fact religious politics in Israel appears to be a classic expression of the bargaining pattern in the Jewish political tradition, as more than one observer has noted.³¹ It will also be argued here that this tradition has enabled Israel to deal with religious division much more successfully than most observers would credit — and certainly more successfully than those actively engaged in the conflict would concede.

Negotiated compromise and power-sharing between religious and non-religious political groups have always been the rule in Israel and in the pre-state Zionist movement. The early efforts to draw in religious Jews, and the legitimization of religious Zionist parties, have been mentioned. Beginning in the 1930s, the (secular) leadership of the Yishuv made explicit arrangements with religious parties on the proportionate division of jobs and other benefits, beginning a forty-year period of partnership between Labor Zionists (mainly Mapai) and religious Zionists (Mizrahi, and later the National Religious Party).

Since 1947 the “status quo” in religious affairs has served as a point of reference which both sides have agreed to respect in its basic features — which does not rule out efforts to nudge it a bit in one direction or the other. The stability of the arrangement rests on the understanding that the autonomy of religious institutions will be maintained, and that the religious minority has a “veto power” over any major changes that would injure its basic interests. This veto power rests ultimately on its potential to cause massive disruption to the system rather than its direct political power, since in most cases the participation of religious parties in the government has not been necessary (contrary to conventional wisdom) to achievement of a majority.³² Nevertheless, the NRP, in particular, has been a coalition partner (with the exception of only brief interims) in every government since 1948.

These arrangements are accompanied by a great deal of heated and noisy debate, and even violence, that create the impression of an impending *Kulturkampf* threatening to tear the state apart at any moment. Both sides express dissatisfaction with the status quo, even though neither is in a position to challenge it seriously. Nor does the status quo express any coherent and logical solution to the issues in contention, since it simply registers the point beyond which neither side can push the other, given their relative strength (why, for example, should there be public transportation on the Sabbath in Haifa but not in Tel Aviv?).

On the other hand, most parties have some stake in the status quo as it stands, since they could also lose ground if it were set aside. The religious Zionist parties, for example, have an entire network of state-

supported religious, cultural, and educational institutions — including the Chief Rabbinate itself — that gives them a stake in the system. Even the ultra-Orthodox, who initially opposed Zionism and have maintained their distance from it, have been given benefits and concessions in order to bring them inside the tent. In 1934, Agudat Israel — representing most of the ultra-Orthodox — agreed to cooperate with the World Zionist Organization in return for funding of its educational institutions. On the eve of statehood, David Ben-Gurion made a number of assurances, on such matters as Sabbath observance and the maintenance of *kashrut* in state institutions, in order to secure participation of the ultra-Orthodox in the government. (Ben-Gurion's letter on these matters to an ultra-Orthodox leader became the basic document of the "status quo.")

A close look at the specific issues that have troubled religious-secular relations over the last few years will show that few, if any, of them involve challenges to the basic status quo. They represent, rather, mainly minor issues where the existing guidelines are murky, or efforts to move the line very slightly in one's favor; they are border skirmishes rather than full-scale warfare. Prominent among them were: opposition to bathing suit ads in Jerusalem bus shelters; the legality of organ transplants in Jewish law; the inclusion of women on local religious councils; the opening of a football stadium in Ramat Gan, and a movie theater in Petah Tikva, on the Sabbath; likewise the Sabbath operation of a cable car in Haifa; charges of archeological digs desecrating ancient Jewish cemeteries; and a continuing controversy over the right of physicians to conduct autopsies without consent of the family. None of these questions were earthshaking; the only issue with broad significance for religious-secular relations was the "Who is a Jew?" issue — the question of recognizing non-Orthodox converts as Jews in immigration policy and legal status — and even here the number of individuals directly affected was quite small.

The religious minority in Israel, unlike the Sephardim, have chosen the path of separate party lists to secure their position. This is occasionally challenged on tactical grounds by some who argue that making the major parties compete for an uncommitted religious vote would be more effective in gaining concessions from the non-religious majority. Most of the religious political activists feel, however, that the strategy of forming a religious bloc able to play off the two major parties against each other has proved itself over the years, and in terms of the protection of institutional interests they have a good case. In fact, the non-religious public commonly believes that the religious parties have achieved a political influence disproportionate to their size and are expanding the role of religion in public life. The evidence for this is arguable, however, and it is interesting to note that among the Orthodox public the opposition perception — that Israeli life is

becoming more secular — is quite common. A second look at the list of “border skirmishes” presented above also leads to the conclusion that in many cases — especially regarding Sabbath entertainment — the religious viewpoint did not, in fact, prevail.

Moreover, modernization is generally associated with secularization and the decline of traditional religious practices. And whatever the influence of the religious political parties in Israel, it appears that Israel is not immune to this development. In a 1963 survey, 30 percent of the Israeli public identified themselves as religious (meaning Orthodox in the Israeli context).³³ But in a 1986 Hanoch Smith poll conducted along similar lines, only 15 percent identified themselves as religious (while 38 percent described themselves as “traditional,” respecting Jewish religion and following some of the rituals, and 48 percent were “secular”). Other recent polls have also confirmed the 15 percent figure, while one poll of 15-18-year-olds found 12.3 percent religious, 27.3 percent traditional, and fully 59.5 percent secular.³⁴

Other indices reflect this same trend. While the religious parties increased their representation in the 1988 elections to 18 seats, this appears to be due to new developments that brought about an unusual mobilization of voters in the ultra-Orthodox community, where previously participation had been on a low level. In fact, the 18 seats simply returned the religious vote to its previous high, in 1969, from which it had declined to 13 seats in 1981 and 1984 — and meant that, for the first time, the percentage of religious seats (15 percent) matched the percentage of the population identified as religious. In school enrollment, religious schools accounted for 34.4 percent of all primary school students in 1969-1970, but only 27.2 percent in 1986-1987; in intermediate schools the decline was from 37.5 percent to 17.3 percent.³⁵ It seems clear that the decline in traditional religious observance has been sharpest in the Sephardi community, a large proportion of whom arrived in Israel as religious or traditional Jews. The second and third generations, however, have undergone a process of modernization and social mobility involving increased secularization.³⁶

This underlying secularization has been disguised by a number of factors, not the least of them the success of religious political parties in preserving their influence in the system. In fact, with the much closer balance between the two major blocs since 1977, the bargaining leverage of the religious parties increased despite the drop in the number of seats they gained (excluding 1988). In addition, the vitality of the religious subculture, as measured in new activities, institutions, publications, and visibility generally, does not reflect a shrinking base in the public, even in relative terms. Within the religious community there has also been a trend to radicalization in politics, as exemplified by the changed leadership of the NRP. The increased importance and visibility of the ultra-Orthodox within the religious community has

also served to strengthen the impression of growing religiosity, since the ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*) are often more vocal and visible in promoting their religious demands. Finally, it is conceivable that the influence and prominence of traditional religious symbols in Israeli public life has increased even as Orthodox observance declines, in accord with the "civil religion" thesis of Liebman and Don-Yehiya.³⁷

Some secular Israelis have felt more threatened by Orthodoxy lately not because of religious issues per se, but because of what they see as a linkage between religious fervor and extreme nationalism. This development could, potentially, threaten the historic bargaining relationship between secular and religious parties. The highly charged issues connected with Israeli-Arab relations, including such questions as Jewish settlement in the territories held by Israel since 1967, are widely seen as linked to religious issues, since many of the more fervent nationalists are in fact religious. It is not clear, however, that the religious dimension is, or will be, critical to this debate, save with a minority. And if the link to nationalism and the territories is removed, the success of the political system in coping with the "purely" religious issues becomes more visible.

Arab-Jewish Relations

The place of the Arab minority in Israel is quite different from that of any part of the Jewish population. While Israeli Arabs enjoy the formal rights of citizenship, including voting and access to the political system, they stand outside the sphere of traditional Jewish politics. There has been no meaningful power-sharing with the Arab community, and, despite the great absolute progress made by Israeli Arabs economically and otherwise in the forty years of Israeli statehood, no proportionate distribution of benefits. Over this period, no independent national Arab political party or organization, dedicated to the vigorous pursuit of Arab rights within the Israeli political system and speaking credibly for the Arab community or a significant part of it, has emerged (though this may be changing). Nor have there been truly independent Arab newspapers of significance or Arab leaders of national stature. In the bargaining process that characterizes Israeli politics, there has been, in short, no Arab negotiating partner. As Lustick summarizes the situation, "there simply does not exist an elite cartel within which leaders of the Jewish and Arab communal groups engage in quiet ethnic bargaining and careful apportionment of social, political, and economic resources."³⁸

Though Arabs now constitute about 18 percent of Israel's population, a survey carried out a few years ago showed that they held only 1 of every 60 senior government positions, and only 1 of every 300 university

posts. There has never been an Arab cabinet minister or supreme court justice, nor has any large economic institution in Israel ever been headed by an Arab.³⁹ The economic gap also remains substantial; for example, in 1986, the average density in Jewish homes was 1.07 persons per room, compared to 2.04 persons per room in non-Jewish homes. Among Jews, 32.0 percent held scientific, professional, or managerial positions, while among non-Jews the figure was 12.4 percent. The median years of education for persons 14 years and over was 11.6 for Jews and 8.3 for non-Jews.⁴⁰

Jewish political traditions, as noted, were almost a blank when it came to the treatment of non-Jewish minorities falling under Jewish majority rule. Jewish politics dealt with the non-Jewish world as a separate and hostile external environment, potentially overwhelming and to be kept at bay as far as possible. The early Zionists thus had no traditions to fall back on regarding the place of an Arab population in a Jewish state, as the very confusion of their responses to this issue would indicate. Some may have tried to ignore the problem, as the common accusation would have it, but it is unfair to characterize Zionism as a whole in this way; rather, the answers provided were so varied as to provide no clear direction. In Kimmerling's words, "It was not that Zionism did not have any answers: it had many answers it could and did give."⁴¹ The very proliferation of ways of viewing Arabs — as Semitic cousins, as natives, as Gentiles, as Canaanites, as oppressed class, as a second national movement alongside the Jewish one — indicated the lack of a clear dominant view tied to the essence of Zionism or the Jewish political tradition.

Nor was the Zionist movement, before 1948, actually forced to grapple with the practical issues of Arabs within the Jewish realm. The one aspect of tradition most readily applicable to the situation was separation, and it was assumed, with no explicit thought of exclusion, that the institutions of Zionism were established by and for Jews. Arab participation in them was not a major issue, though it did cause ideological difficulty for some. The principle of *avoda ivrit* — the employment of Jewish labor in all Jewish enterprises in the Yishuv — may appear as illiberal discrimination to later generations, but at the time had the progressive connotations of self-reliance, the rebuilding of a normal Jewish occupational structure, and the avoidance of colonial practices based on exploitation of cheap native labor. All of the institutions established during the Mandate, including even the Histadrut and cultural bodies, limited their activities to the Jewish community, and for those on both sides, save a very few, this seemed the normal and natural state of affairs.

The Arab population, under the millet system and the British Mandate, had their own institutions and rejected the idea of participating in Zionist undertakings. But the result was that in 1948 no

groundwork had been laid for Arab participation in frameworks organized and dominated by Jews. Israeli Arabs lacked an understanding of how Jewish politics worked, and of how organized groups within the system could fight to protect their interests. Even more importantly, perhaps, they lacked an inclination to pursue the possibilities that were at least partly open, not being a part of the Zionist consensus upon which Israeli politics was premised. Subordinated suddenly to an alien order that they neither understood nor accepted (and until 1965 subjected to direct military control of most areas in which they lived), their reticence to play the game by the rules was understandable. But it was equally inevitable that, as a result, they would lose out in the shuffle, even if no special obstacles had been placed in their way. In the Israeli system, resources tend to be distributed to groups according to their success in playing the game.

Arab unpreparedness or unwillingness to join in the scramble is thus enough, in itself, to explain in part why their share of the spoils has been so meager. But one must add to this the resistance on the Jewish side to the idea of a system of sharing power with the Arabs. It is precisely the thought of independent Arab organization that invokes some of the most serious fears for security, and thus the strongest opposition. In one recent poll, only 15 percent of the Jewish respondents favored the establishment of an independent national Arab political party.⁴² Even though access to organized political activity is formally open, therefore, this opposition has been expressed in a variety of informal ways of discouraging truly independent national organization. Political activity is directed to approved channels, rivalries within the Arab community are exploited, some groups and leaders are "bought off" by minor concessions, and any effort at organization above the local level is likely to encounter obstruction (the universities, for example, have generally refused to recognize separate Arab student unions).

This should not be taken to indicate that Israeli governments since 1948 have followed a clear, consistent policy of obstruction — or a clear policy of anything else — toward the Arab minority. The main feature of government policy in this area, in the eyes of most observers, has been its lack of coherence. Suddenly faced with a large non-Jewish minority, and without clear guidelines based either on traditions or experience, the government's policies have reflected this confusion in its lack of consistency or overall direction. Thus critics of that policy are also inconsistent, charging Israel with both neglect and overly tight control, with both isolation and cooptation, with creating dependence, on one side, and refusing assistance, on the other.⁴³ What does seem clear is that in the absence of clear and agreed guidelines, the touchstone of government policy tended to be short-term security considerations.

Certainly government policy alone does not, in any event, explain

such things as the underrepresentation of Arabs in the Knesset. Even though there are some informal obstacles, and they lack a national political organization, there has been no *formal* obstacle to Arabs voting for Arab party lists and achieving a level of representation proportionate to their share of the population. Only one suggested Arab party list has ever been blocked from participation in the elections. Yet currently there are only 6 Arab Knesset members, as opposed to the 12-15 that could be elected if Arab voters all mobilized behind Arab lists. Many Arab votes have gone to Jewish parties that "bought" Arab support in various ways, or to joint Arab-Jewish parties (principally the Communist party) whose Knesset candidates were disproportionately Jewish (compared to their voters). But the major factor in the low representation, clearly, is still the lack of skill and motivation in exploiting the possibilities of Jewish politics. In some segments of the Arab community, participation in elections is rejected out of a continuing strong sense of alienation from the entire system.

There have, however, been some positive developments as well. Though in absolute terms a large gap still remains between the two communities by any measure, in relative terms inequality has been reduced over the years. Institutional discrimination, though still prevalent, has also been reduced on many fronts, and some opportunities for broader participation opened up (for example, the Histadrut has accepted Arab members since 1959 and has been active in promoting programs in the Arab sector).⁴⁴ The number of Arabs in higher education has skyrocketed, and by 1985, about 69 percent of Israeli Arabs could speak Hebrew — a development of great importance in increasing access to the system.⁴⁵

Recent studies point to what appear, at first glance, to be conflicting trends among Israeli Arabs. On the one hand, they appear to be undergoing a process of Palestinization, increasingly defining themselves as Palestinians and identifying with the broader Palestinian community. On the other hand, there is also increasing Israelization, as they become bilingual and bicultural and look for political solutions within the framework of the Israeli state. Smootha's 1985 survey found that 64.3 percent of Israeli Arabs felt more at home in Israel than in an Arab country, and 55.5 percent felt their style of life was more similar to Israeli Jews than to Arabs in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. Also, the great majority accepted Israel's right to exist, 51.4 percent unreservedly and 31.0 percent with reservations. Furthermore, 58 percent of the sample felt it was possible to advance Arab rights in Israel "to a great or substantial extent" by democratic parliamentary means — even though only 36.5 percent of the Jewish respondents agreed with them!⁴⁶

Based on this survey, Smootha divides Israelis Arabs into four major groups politically: roughly 11 percent are "accommodationists," who are ready to work through the system as it is; about 39 percent are

“reservationists,” who are reconciled to living in Israel but reject some aspects of the system and favor independent organizations to promote their interests; 40 percent are “oppositionists” who accept Israel as a state but reject its Jewish/Zionist character; and 10 percent are “rejectionists” who oppose Israel’s existence and seek to replace it with an Arab Palestinian state.⁴⁷ This would indicate that the majority of Israeli Arabs are at least theoretically ready to work within the Israeli political system.

There have, in fact, been indications of increasing Arab willingness to play the Israeli political game according to the rules, and increasing skill in doing so. In particular, the organization of the heads of Arab local councils into a national body that bargains with the government over budgetary allotments and other practical issues — using such accepted techniques as work sanctions, strikes, and demonstrations — is an interesting and perhaps quite significant development. There is talk of establishing an Arab political party that will work within the system, much as a civil rights movement, to promote Arab interests. If such a party were to adopt a program making it a potential coalition partner for at least one of the two major blocs (unlike the Communist party and the Progressive List for Peace, which currently hold most Arab Knesset seats), this might revolutionize the political system and the place of Arabs within it. If such a party gained only half a dozen seats — half the Arab vote — it would, like the National Religious Party, have an extremely strong bargaining position to use on behalf of its constituents.

Should these trends continue, there is hope that the power-sharing patterns of Jewish politics might eventually encompass the non-Jewish population, with which it was initially ill-equipped to cope. This assumes, however, that the Israeli Arab situation can evolve relatively free from the impact of developments in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip (the territories occupied by Israel since 1967), whose inhabitants are not Israeli citizens and have no intention of being integrated into Israel, but whose presence demographically creates a new challenge to Jewish political traditions and to the principles of democracy. As this subject is beyond the scope of this essay, however, projections on the political future of Israeli Arabs must be held in abeyance.

The Israeli Style of Democracy

The obstacles to the flowering of democracy in Israel have been noted often.⁴⁸ To recall only the more obvious:

- Relatively few of the immigrants to Palestine or to Israel over the last century came from countries with a viable democratic tradition. Furthermore, most of them came as refugees, with a life experience

molded by disaster and political perceptions dominated by a sense of insecurity and vulnerability.

- Those who came were plunged into a situation of permanent war, requiring the total mobilization of manpower and resources, overwhelming dependence on the military, and a constant state of high readiness for emergency. All able-bodied males between the ages of 18 and 55 are subject to military service. Contiguous Arab states alone have a combined advantage over Israel of 18 to 1 in population and 12 to 1 in size of armed forces.
- The country is plagued by serious threats to internal cohesion, not only from a significant minority identified ethnically with the enemy, but also by deep communal, religious, ideological, and political cleavages within the Jewish community itself. It has become a commonplace, if untested, observation that, without the unity enforced by the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel would tear itself apart in internal squabbles.
- The economic pressures created by security needs, by the rapid absorption of large numbers of immigrants, and by conflicting development demands, often seem beyond the capacity of the political system to handle. The defense burden alone consumes a crushing 20-30 percent of the gross national product, an outlay unmatched by any contemporary state not engaged in full-scale war, and several times the level of defense spending in any other democratic state.
- Because of small size, historical legacy, and necessity, the Israel government formally has a very centralized structure, with authority concentrated on the national level and few institutional constraints on executive power (as long as supported by a majority in the Knesset).
- Public opinion polls continued to show that, despite a general support for democratic values, support for democracy has its weak points in popular feelings: in support for the idea of a strong leader, in willingness to limit minority rights, and in the tendency to subordinate political rights to security considerations.

How, then, has Israel preserved the essentially democratic character of its political institutions against such odds? In answering this question, it is important to understand just what *kind* of democracy Israel has managed to maintain, and where the strength of its democratic habits lie. It is useful to begin with the distinction that Arend Lijphart makes between *majoritarian* and *consensus* democracy:

Majoritarian democracy — or the “Westminster model” in Lijphart’s words — is based on the idea that majority rule is the essence of democracy, and that any dilution of this principle (a minority veto, for example) is suspect. The parliamentary system, with its bare-majority governments, fusion of executive and legislative power, and tendency to

unicameralism, is an expression of the majoritarian ideal. It also tends to be characterized by a unidimensional two-party system with one-party governments, by a plurality system of elections, by centralized as opposed to federalized government, and by unentrenched (or even unwritten) constitutions that can be altered by ordinary acts of parliament — all of this helping to guarantee that the untrammelled will of the majority will prevail.⁴⁹ The British government is, of course, the leading example of a majoritarian democracy.

Consensus democracy embodies the idea that the exclusion of losing groups — of minorities — from all decision-making is, in some basic sense, undemocratic. This model regards the diffusion and sharing of power according to some principle of proportionality as the ideal to be pursued. Lijphart identified eight elements of consensus (or “consociational”) systems that stand in contrast to the majoritarian model:

1. *Executive power-sharing: grand coalitions.* There is a tendency to share executive powers beyond a bare majority, making otherwise powerless minorities a part of the system.
2. *Separation of powers.* The executive and legislative branches, instead of being fused, serve as a check on each other.
3. *Balanced bicameralism and minority representation.* The second chamber in a two-house system usually serves as a check, representing territorial divisions or minorities to be protected from the tyranny of the majority.
4. *Multiparty system.* The presence of many parties makes it unlikely that any one party will gain a majority, necessitating coalitions among smaller parties in which the interests of each is safeguarded.
5. *Multidimensional party system.* The formation of parties along many lines of cleavage — socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, etc. — also enforces the pluralism of the system and the need to build coalitions protecting the position of smaller groups.
6. *Proportional representation.* Apart from providing the underpinning for a multiparty system, proportional electoral systems are the classic method of guaranteeing a voice to minorities and smaller groups in society.
7. *Territorial and nonterritorial federalism and decentralization.* Different levels of government serve as a check on each other, and the reservation of powers to local jurisdictions is a means of providing autonomy to distinct groups.
8. *Written constitution and minority veto.* The final guarantee for minorities is the entrenchment of provisions that cannot be changed by a simply majority, either by requiring an extraordinary majority for constitutional changes, or by providing a

formal or informal right of veto to minorities in matters affecting them.⁵⁰

The consensus model of democracy is for obvious reasons regarded as a more suitable model for societies with deep social divisions. It could be argued, in fact, that *only* this type of democracy would prove effective where basic cleavages exist, and that pure majority rule can only work in a relatively homogeneous society. In any event, the leading models of consensus democracy are the deeply-divided states of Switzerland and Belgium.

Clearly the Israeli political system has many consensual elements, but Lijphart has classified it in an intermediate position because of the "majoritarian" elements in its formal structure. These elements are: 1) its parliamentary form, including unicameralism and little separation of powers; 2) a highly centralized government with limited local powers; and 3) the absence of a written constitution or other limits on parliamentary sovereignty.⁵¹

These majoritarian aspects of the system are, however, less decisive in reality than would appear at first. To take the last point first, the Israeli Knesset has by now passed nine Basic Laws, which taken as a whole comprise the bulk of a projected constitution (only another two are projected). Some of these Basic Laws have entrenched provisions, requiring a higher majority for amendment, and in the minds of at least some jurists this constitutes a limit on parliamentary sovereignty.⁵² In any event, the Israel High Court of Justice has assumed the right to invalidate ordinary legislation in conflict with a Basic Law, while developing the practice of interpreting laws so that they do not produce such a conflict. The High Court also upheld the requirement for a qualified majority. Finally, it should be recalled that the non-adoption of a constitution originally, in 1949-1950, was itself largely an exercise in consensus politics, in that it was taken in large measure out of respect for the intense opposition in principle of the religious minority to the very idea of a secular constitution.

As for parliamentary supremacy and government centralization in general, it will be argued here that a *focus on the formal structure and powers of Israeli institutions may be misleading*. The Knesset may at first glance invite comparison to the Westminster model. But a closer look at the important policy decisions during any period will show that most of these are the product of a bargaining process in which not only various branches of the government (including the Knesset), but also important quasi-governmental bodies are all active participants in setting the political agenda, controlling the debate, and shaping the decisions that result. It is a process that owes less to formal structures of British or other provenance than — as will be illustrated below — to the way Jews have traditionally conducted their political life.

Because of its political traditions, then, it can be argued that Israeli democracy is basically a consensual system, characterized by pluralism, power-sharing, proportionality, social bargaining, and mutual veto.⁵³ While it is now being threatened by influences from another quarter — the Westernization of society and politics, technological changes, the rise of mass politics and mass communications, etc. — the continuity of certain habits in political behavior, over time, seems clear. In fact, as the influence of classic Labor Zionist ideology and other ideologies has declined, it appears that traditional political habits — protest, civil religiosity, extraparlimentary politics — have even reemerged more strongly in recent years as the somewhat atypical period of *mamlachtiut* becomes a memory.

As the Jews are a people who live by their traditions, even when rebelling against them, it should not be surprising to find continuity between the centuries of Jewish political experience in the autonomous communities of the diaspora and Israeli politics of today. In both cases, Jews have conducted their politics as an exercise in vigorous bargaining among the major groups in society, striving to include as many elements of the community as possible and sharing power among them, with uneasy lines of authority and a confrontational style, but also a saving sense of the need for unity. Jewish political traditions help to explain the consistency of this behavior and to understand many of the unusual features and recent trends of the Israeli scene.

There is at least partly a paradox here, as one of the aims of Zionism — at least in the words of its more prominent theorists — was to remold the Jewish tradition, to “escape” from Jewish history. But as in other spheres of life, the Zionist movement itself, and even more so the State of Israel later on, found themselves responding “Jewishly” to the challenges they faced, and the escape from history has proved to be partial or temporary. Even in organizing to promote their revolution in Jewish life, Zionist pioneers were consciously or unconsciously drawing on the only political practices and habits to which they had been directly exposed. And most of the immigrants who actually arrived to build the new society came not as rebels against tradition, but as refugees whose links to tradition were not questioned.⁵⁴

In any event, it would be difficult to explain the vigor of Israeli democratic institutions without reference to the values that sustained Jewish life for centuries under trying conditions (sometimes even more trying than those faced by Israel). In serving as the test case of democracy under pressure, one sees that Israel is not only the state of the Jews (as a correct translation of Herzl’s *Judenstaat* would have it), but indeed a Jewish state.

Notes

- * The author would like to thank Avraham Ben-Zvi, Avraham Brichta, Andre Eshet, Yitzhak Galnoor, Allan Schapiro, Yael Yishai, Yair Zalmanovich, and several anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.
1. Mary Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (Schocken Books, 1952), pp. 216-217.
 2. The general picture of the Jewish political tradition is based on the cited work by Zborowski and Herzog, and on the following: Stuart A. Cohen and Daniel J. Elazar, *The Jewish Polity: Jewish Political Organization from Biblical Times to the Present* (University of Indiana Press, 1984); Daniel J. Elazar, ed., *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and its Contemporary Manifestations* (Turtledove Publishing, 1981); Daniel J. Elazar, *Israel: Building a New Society* (Indiana University Press, 1986); Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (Greenwood Press, 1972); Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford University Press, 1961); and Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (Schocken Books, 1971).
 3. For suggestive discussions of this point, see Elazar, 1981, especially pp. 49-50, and Shlomo Avineri, "Yisrael k'Medina Demokratit (Israel as a Democratic State)," *Skira Hodshit* (May 1973): 25-37. It should be noted that while this analysis focuses on Eastern European political traditions, Jewish experiences everywhere had much in common, and non-European (Sephardi) political traditions were in many respects similar to those of Eastern Europe. In the Ottoman Empire, in particular, the millet system gave each religio-national community considerable self-government in religious, legal, social, and economic affairs, though generally in a more oligarchic framework. In addition, Sephardi immigrants to Palestine and Israel were likely to be more fully identified with their traditions than their Ashkenazi counterparts, who were (see below) in some senses engaged in a "revolt" against age-old patterns of Jewish life.
 4. Shmuel Eisenstadt, *The Transformation of Israeli Society* (Westview, 1985), p. 46.
 5. *Stenographisches Protokoll der Verhandlung des III Zionisten-Kongresses*, pp. 20-22, quoted by David Vital, *Zionism: The Formative Years* (Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 206.
 6. Katz, 1971, p. 126; see also pp. 96, 125.
 7. Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1844-1917* (Posner and Sons, 1981), pp. 70-71, 204-205; see also Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets*, 2nd ed. (MacMillan, 1976), p. 100.

8. Zborowski and Herzog, p. 214; Katz, 1971, pp. 93-94, 116-117; on the Jewish opposition to authority, see Dan V. Segre, "The Jewish Political Tradition as a Vehicle for Jewish Auto-Emancipation," in Elazar, 1981, pp. 300-301.
9. Katz, 1961, p. 52; Zborowski and Herzog, pp. 232-233; Ehud Sprinzak, *Ish Hayashar B'ainav — Iligalizm Bahevra Hayisraelit (Every Man Whatsoever is Right in His Own Eyes — Illegalism in Israeli Society)* (Sifriat Hapoalim, 1986), pp. 28-29.
10. Katz, 1971, p. 36.
11. Haim H. Cohn, *Human Rights in Jewish Law* (Ktav Publishing House, 1984), pp. 161-166.
12. Eisenstadt (pp. 120-121) discusses the pluralistic and power-sharing character of the political system developed by the Yishuv.
13. David Vital, *The Origins of Zionism* (Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 365, 373-374; Samuel Sager, *The Parliamentary System of Israel* (Syracuse University Press, 1985), pp. 2-3.
14. See the definitive analysis of interest groups in Israel by Yael Yishai, *K'vutzot Interes b'Yisrael (Interest Groups in Israel)* (Am Oved, 1986).
15. Elazar, 1986, pp. 91, 238-239.
16. Gerhard Loewenberg, ed., *Parliaments: Change or Decline?* (Aldine, 1971). The author thanks Avraham Brichta for bringing this point to his attention.
17. Gregory Mahler, *The Knesset: Parliament in the Israeli Political System* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981); Sager, *op. cit.*
18. The role varied from that of a direct participant in the decision-making process when the Labor party was in power, to that of a "blocking veto" from the outside, under Likud governments; see Zalmanovitch, "Hama'avak al Kviat Mediniut Briut b'Yisrael (The Struggle over the Determination of Israeli Health Policy)," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Israel Political Science Association, May, 1988.
19. Elazar, 1986, p. 81.
20. Entry of March 4, 1896, quoted by Amos Elon, *Herzl* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), p. 181.
21. Sam Lehman-Wilzig, "Conflict as Communication — Public Protest in Israel, 1950-1982," in Stuart A. Cohen and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, eds., *Conflict and Consensus in Jewish Political Life* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 1986), pp. 128-145; see also the important new study by Gadi Wolfsfeld, *The Politics of Provocation: Participation and Protest in Israel* (State University of New York Press, 1988).
22. Sprinzak, *op. cit.*
23. Elazar, 1986, p. 252.
24. Sammy Smootha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict* (University of California Press, 1978), p. 366. See also discussion in Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*:

Jews and Christians under Islam (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), pp. 146-150.

25. See especially the evidence collected in Tom Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis* (Free Press, 1986).
26. Eva Etzioni-Halevy, "Protest Politics in the Israeli Democracy," *Political Science Quarterly* 90 (Fall 1975): 514-516.
27. Elazar, 1986, p. 162; Smoocha, pp. 219-220.
28. Smoocha, pp. 180, 194-195.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
30. Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, *Israel Statistical Yearbook, 1987*, p. 105. The figures exclude marriages in which at least one partner is a third-generation Israeli or the continent of origin is unknown.
31. Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "The Resolution of Religious Conflicts in Israel," in Cohen and Don-Yehiya, p. 203; Smoocha, pp. 43-45, also points out the relevance of consensus politics in the religious context.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
33. The survey, by Aaron Antonovsky, is cited by Smoocha, p. 82.
34. Charles Liebman, "The Religious Component in Israeli Ultra-Nationalism," Eighth Annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies, University of Cincinnati (April 16, 1985).
35. *Israel Statistical Yearbook, 1987*, p. 590.
36. Smoocha, p. 113.
37. Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (University of California Press, 1983).
38. Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (University of Texas Press, 1980), p. 5.
39. Alouph Hareven, "Arvei Yisrael k'Baiya Yehudit (Israel Arabs as a Jewish Problem)," in Hareven, ed., *Ehad m'Kol Shisha Yisraelim* (One of Every Six Israelis) (Van Leer Jerusalem Foundation, 1981).
40. *Israel Statistical Yearbook, 1987*, pp. 279, 320-322, 572-573.
41. Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics* (Research Series No. 51, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1983), p. 189.
42. Sammy Smoocha, *Arabs and Jews in Israel: The 1985 Survey* (Research Report submitted to the Ford Foundation, 1987), p. 273.
43. This is a problem with Lustick's study (*op. cit.*), which adopts the idea of "control" as a framework for analysis. Though Lustick disclaims any belief in a "massive and brilliant conspiracy on the part of Jewish officials responsible for Arab affairs" (p. 78), his framework nevertheless tends to portray the policy as highly purposeful and consistent, and the conflicting elements in it as mutually reinforcing expressions of the central aim of control. Close observers of the policy, on the

other hand, whether critical or not, tend to stress the conflicts and confusion attending any effort to set a clear course in this sensitive and controversial question; see, for example, the review of Lustick by Moshe Sharon, a former Advisor on Arab Affairs to the Prime Minister, in *Middle East Studies* 18 (July 1982): 336-344.

44. Smootha, 1978, pp. 140-141, 198-199.
45. Smootha, 1987, p. 223.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 234, 263, 282, 306.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157, 310-311.
48. See the discussion in Shevah Weiss, "Hademokratia Hayisraelit b'Mivhan Shanot-Dor (Israeli Democracy after the Test of a Generation)," *Skira Hodshit* (December 1978): 28-34.
49. Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 1-9.
50. Lijphart, pp. 21-30; see also earlier discussion of "consociationalism": Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 25-44.
51. Lijphart, 1977, pp. 129-134; Lijphart, 1984, p. 215-221.
52. There is dispute on this point; see N. Hornstein, "Shirion Hora'ot b'Hok Hayesod (Entrenching Provisions in the Basic Law)," *Hapraklit* 25 (October 1969): 648-655; M. Sheftler, "Hirhurim b'She'elot Konstitutzioniot (Thoughts on Constitutional Questions)," *Hapraklit* 26 (February 1970): 6-16; Moshe Landau, "Huka k'Hok Eliyon l'Medinat Yisrael? (A Constitution as Supreme Law for the State of Israel?)," *Hapraklit* 27 (March 1971): 30-36.
53. Speaking basically of the same phenomenon, Daniel Elazar has characterized consensus democracy as a form of federalism. Since the term "federalism" has strong specific connotations in the minds of most readers, Lijphart's terminology is retained here. Elazar, 1986, pp. 36-37, 261.
54. The general thesis on the gap between official ideology and the more traditional attitudes of most immigrants to Israel is developed in Alan Dowty, "Israel: From Ideology to Reality," in Alvin Z. Rubinstein, ed., *The Arab-Israel Conflict: Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Harper Collins, forthcoming).