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THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX IN ISRAELI POLITICS

Menachem Friedman

Does Political Participation Negate the Torah? / The Birth of Agudat Israel / How Modern Life Facilitates the "Scholar Society" / From Ecumenism to Particularism / Agudat Israel Enters Israeli Politics / A Period of Limited Withdrawal / Aguda Joins the Likud Coalition / The Sephardim Break Away / Schism in the Ashkenazi Torah World / The Role of Habad / The Price of Political Success

Does Political Participation Negate the Torah?

Prior to the elections for the Twelfth Knesset, the anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta distributed wall posters calling for a boycott of the elections. One such poster read as follows: "Jew! Did you know that a state, even if [run] according to the Torah, contradicts the passage: 'Then ye shall be Mine own treasure among all peoples...' [Exodus 19:5] [and]... denies the coming of the Messiah;...that the state is a means of uprooting the entire Torah;...that by participating in the elections you are maintaining this state and consenting to all the above? Participation in the elections is a denial of the Holy Torah."

This poster reflected the traditional

Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) view that espouses isolationist principles and the delegitimation of Zionism and all its endeavors in the Land of Israel. These principles were first formulated during the early years of the British Mandate, in the wake of the First World War and the Balfour Declaration. Today, Neturei Karta is only a small minority in Haredi society. Nevertheless, contradictions abound in the attitudes of Haredi circles towards the Israeli political system. Most Haredim do consider themselves bound in principle to historic anti-Zionist conceptions, including that of isolationism. However, the participation of Haredi parties in Knesset and municipal elections is viewed as an injunction, a religious obligation and is even described at

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
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times as a "sanctification of God's name."

The situation is similarly complex and ambiguous in the organizational-political sphere. The Haredim appear to be an organized, unified group, led by charismatic leaders of unimpeachable authority. Recently, however, Haredi society has emerged as hopelessly divided and schism-ridden, comprising subgroups which are sometimes more hostile to one another than to the secular Zionists. Such hostility is expressed verbally, especially via posters, and even physically.

The Birth of Agudat Israel

In 1912, the world Agudat Israel organization was founded in the city of Katowice, in Eastern Prussia, uniting various Jewish groups that differed radically from one another in their respective perceptions of religious lifestyle and attitudes to modern culture. Participants in the founding conference included representatives of the Lithuanian yeshiva tradition (Mitnagdim), Hassidic courts from Poland, Hungarian Jewry, and the German neo-Orthodox. This last group initiated the founding of the movement and constituted a dominant influence on its policy-making up to the outbreak of World War II. Because of their modern way of life and education, the neo-Orthodox were utterly different from the traditional Eastern European Jews who identified with Agudat Israel. Both the Hassidic rabbis and the Lithuanian Torah scholars strenuously opposed secular education and changes in tradition. The lifestyle of the neo-Orthodox in Germany was considered forbidden in Eastern Europe. From the outset, this substantive contradiction threatened the movement's unity and even its very establishment. Nevertheless, Agudat Israel succeeded in functioning as the main political instrument of the traditional religious groups in Eastern Europe -- despite these internal conflicts or perhaps, paradoxically, because of them.

The traditional religious groups of Eastern Europe were interested in maintaining Agudat Israel's integrity because they re-

alized that their society could not face the challenges of modernity on its own. The most significant social factor involved was the increasing abandonment of the traditional way of life among young people who had grown up in religious families. Eastern European religious leaders knew that without the assistance of Western Orthodox groups, they would be unable to organize and cope with this erosion.

In modern, post-Holocaust Western society, one might have expected this trend to continue, but actually the reverse effect occurred. By the late 1950s, one could already discern the inception of an upheaval which eventually led to the flourishing of particularistic traditional frameworks in the early 1970s, at the expense of the general Haredi identity represented by the Agudat Israel movement.

How Modern Life Facilitates the "Scholar Society"

The modern welfare state provided secondary and higher education for most young people. The rise in standard of living, the achievements of modern medicine and the system of health and social insurance allow many middle-class parents to support their children until the end of their studies. This development, which democratized schooling and raised educational levels among the middle strata of modern society, also enabled Haredim to send their sons to higher yeshivas and their daughters to Beit Yaakov teachers' seminaries.

At the same time, the post-Holocaust Jewish world provided a convenient atmosphere for raising funds to establish yeshivas and other religious institutions. On the one hand, Jews in the West took an active part in economic developments and their standard of living gradually rose, enabling them to contribute more to philanthropic causes in general and to yeshivas in particular. On the other hand, the Holocaust fostered guilt feelings among them. The traditional Jewish atmosphere of the cruelly destroyed Eastern European shtetl was viewed in a romantic, nostalgic

light. This increased a sense of commitment to the representatives of this ideal in modern society, namely, the yeshiva world. Many Jews perpetuated the memories of relatives and loved ones who perished in the Holocaust by contributing to yeshivas and other traditional religious institutions which they considered to be the remnants of this lost world.

Formerly, these institutions were common to all Haredim. Subsequently, however, the particularistic traditional groups, such as the various Hassidic courts, established their own educational systems, primarily for boys but including some for girls as well. At the same time, the kollel became the dominant Torah study framework for married young men. All married yeshiva students were accepted to kollels for periods of at least five to ten years. The institutionalization of the kollel as a mandatory program for all graduates of Haredi yeshivas entailed the establishment of a well-developed network of self-help institutions to assist parents in financing the costs of housing and furniture and to help the young couple during their first few years of married life. The yeshivas and kollels became the basis for the new Haredi society, the "Scholar Society," which began to flourish from the 1950s on and utterly changed the face of Haredi Jewry.

From Ecumenism to Particularism

This process ultimately led to the formulation and intensification of traditional particularistic frameworks within Haredi society, at the expense of a more general Haredi identity. The more that Haredi institutions developed, the greater the change in their character. Affinity for particularistic tradition became an increasingly important factor in fund-raising for the various institutions. Moreover, just as the yeshivas and other organizations became a primary factor in preventing departure from Haredi society, they also began to fulfill a similar function in preventing transition from one Haredi group to another.

Movements which had previously represented the ecumenical trend -- Poalci Agudat Israel and Young Agudat Israel -- became weaker and were relegated to the margins of the flourishing Haredi camp. Once Haredi Jews living in major cities did not have to identify with any particularistic traditional group; today, however, it would be very difficult to avoid doing so. Previously, one could call himself a "Hassid" without commitment to any specific rebbe or court. Now, it is nearly impossible to maintain such a general identity.

Life in the contemporary Western world appears to encourage these developments. Contemporary communications media foster direct, unmediated contact between Haredi religious leaders of a specific tradition and their respective disciples and followers, thereby enhancing the group's meaning, content and sense of belonging. On the other hand, the modern urban metropolis, which exacerbates alienation and isolation and ostensibly supports a philosophy of pleasure-seeking and permissiveness, enables traditional groups to present themselves as an alternative representing the "complete other," a well-defined, consummate tradition.

The Hassidic groups derive the most benefit from the contemporary Western social structure. From the outset, they were better organized than others, having a defined leadership -- focusing on the rebbe -- and a sense of unity and mutual commitment to group members. Virtually every Hassidic sect attempted to establish its own service institutions, which ultimately foster dependence and commitment.

By the late 1960s, Agudat Israel, which represented the ecumenical trend, began to lose its focal status as its component groups gained strength and competed with one another for funds and manpower. Each group sought to recruit new followers from the others, while making sure to close its own ranks. This internal tension also affected the religious leadership -- the Torah scholars, rabbis, heads of yeshivas and Hassidic rebbes who comprised the

Council of Torah Greats. Up to then, these "Greats" symbolized unity and a general Haredi identity. Now each of these leaders manifested a specific commitment to his own group.

These developments directly influenced the Council's functioning and status. Instead of alleviating social tensions and economic conflicts, it symbolized the heterogeneity of Haredi society and fostered the re-emergence of historic conflicts and arguments such as the dispute between Hassidim and Mitnagdim in Haredi public consciousness. Moreover, the Greats' new political function and intervention in political and economic processes necessarily accorded religious-ideological legitimacy to the conflicts of interest in the economic and social spheres. In such a situation, it is difficult to pinpoint the issues sparking internal dissent and conflict. Every attack leveled by one faction against another is perceived as a personal affront to a religious leader, sage, rebbe or head of yeshiva, which renders the situation all the more acute and intensifies the differences among the groups.

These developments explain the dissent and conflict that emerged in Agudat Israel over the past few years, leading to the establishment of the breakaway Shas and Degel Hatorah parties and the schism in the Council of Torah Greats, which once represented the essential unity of the Haredi camp. They also elucidate the character of internal disputes, as reflected in both verbal and physical violence. The decline of the movement's formal bodies made it difficult to resolve internal differences of opinion by democratic majority rule. These differences often have economic significance on the individual Haredim, leading them to emphasize their personal interests. This worsens the internal struggle and renders it difficult to find a solution or compromise.

Agudat Israel Enters Israeli Politics

Agudat Israel, as the representative of the vast majority of Haredi Jewry, entered Israeli politics in an inferior position.

Haredi Jewry was stricken both ideologically and numerically by the Holocaust. Most Haredim were concentrated in Eastern Europe and were slaughtered by the Nazis. Furthermore, in the post-Holocaust era, it appeared that the Zionist conception had withstood the frightful test of history and that those who opposed Zionism and its endeavors in Palestine had made a tragic and horrendous mistake. After the war, Haredi Jewry found itself to be a small and weak minority, entirely dependent on the Zionist Jewish community. Hence, Agudat Israel could not continue with its historic isolationist approach and refrain from participating in the country's political life. (Neturei Karta and the Eda Haredit in Jerusalem, which demanded continuation of the politics of isolationism, were only small and marginal groups in Israeli society.)

One may discern three periods in the history of Agudat Israel's attitudes towards the Israeli political system: The first period extended from the establishment of the state until 1953, when the movement's policies were determined by two issues: a shared sense of excitement about the UN decision to establish a Jewish state and the victory of the Jewish forces in the War of Independence against Arab states; and extreme anxiety over the status of religion and of religious and Haredi Jews in a state led by the socialist Labor parties and the Histadrut Labor Federation, which were considered to be manifestations of militant secularism. In the first elections to the Knesset, Agudat Israel participated in a United Religious Front of all religious parties. The Aguda school system was established, eventually to become an independent network which derived most of its budget from the state. Yeshiva students were effectively exempted from military service and Ben-Gurion failed in his attempt to draft religious girls into the army or alternative national service.

Agudat Israel became aware of one significant political-social fact in its political struggles over religious affairs. In a Western democratic state, the authorities

cannot enforce the rules of the state on a minority which is prepared to fight for its rights and pay the full price for such a struggle. They learned that contrary to their fears, even a socialist workers' party like Mapai could not and did not want to force a secular way of life on them. Furthermore, they sensed that the militant secular spirit which had characterized the socialist parties and the Histadrut in the pre-state period had lost its previous enthusiasm. Moreover, the Holocaust had essentially altered the political leadership's approach to religious Jewry and its institutions.

A Period of Limited Withdrawal

The second period began with the withdrawal of Agudat Israel from the government coalition in 1953 over the question of recruitment of religious girls for national service. As a result of their departure from the Cabinet, the Council of Torah Greats ruled that the party could not be a partner in any "Zionist" secular government because it could not "accept responsibility for actions perpetrated and sanctioned by the Zionist secular government which conflict with religion and tradition." Isolationism again became a determining factor and even Knesset participation was viewed unfavorably from a religious point of view. The Greats only allowed it post facto so that representatives of Agudat Israel could protect the vital rights of Haredi Jewry and protest all that contravened religious principles. They perceived the state as a fait accompli which could not be totally ignored. Participation in Knesset elections was perceived as a necessary minimum, to be undertaken only with explicit permission from the Greats. Indeed, the Haredi internal press often repeated the claim that according to Jewish law it is forbidden for a Haredi Jew to be a Knesset Member because "words of blasphemy and abuse against Heaven" are voiced there. But there was no choice, as the Greats declared it mandatory to save the remnants of Jewry and to declare the Jewish truth from the Knesset floor.

Thus, Agudat Israel could cope with the challenge of the Eda Haredit and Neturei Karta and participate, even if only in a limited manner, in the political life of the state.

During this period, the Haredi "Scholar Society" became consolidated, largely with the direct and indirect assistance of the State of Israel. However, the more entrenched it became, the more yeshivas it built and the more kollels it founded, the more its needs increased. Contributions from diaspora Jewry rose as well, as Haredi society in the West also benefited from the improved standard of living and could therefore increase its donations to "strengthen the Torah." But these contributions did not suffice. By the mid-1970s, yeshiva heads and Hassidic rebbes appealed to the government, both directly and through Agudat Israel, requesting an increase in allocations to yeshivas and other institutions. The turning point came in 1977, following the political upheaval and the rise of the Likud to power, under the leadership of Menachem Begin.

Aguda Joins the Likud Coalition

The third period thus commenced in 1977. Once the election results were publicized, Begin asked Agudat Israel to join the coalition. The movement had to choose between the principle of isolationism, which precluded its joining a government and sharing in "responsibility for actions which transgress religious principles" and the opportunity to uphold the principles of a "Torah world." As expected, Agudat Israel did join the coalition with the intention of saving and consolidating this Torah world -- but with one reservation: they did not want to be part of the Cabinet. Aguda's political involvement was limited to partnership in the coalition and chairmanship of the Finance and Labor and Social Welfare Committees of the Knesset which play a key role in budget allocations. This marked the beginning of a new period which would bring about a marked expansion of the "Scholar Society." However, Agudat Israel's impressive Knesset

achievements eventually caused an internal breakdown in the Haredi political system, leading to a crisis in the Council of Torah Greats. For the reasons noted earlier, neither the movement's political leadership nor the Council could secure consensus on criteria for allocation of government funds. The conflicts among the various particularistic groups ultimately undermined the entire system.

The Sephardim Break Away

The first to dare rebel against the Agudat Israel system were the Sephardim. They were never fully accepted into the Agudat Israel movement, which was more an expression of the Ashkenazic tradition than any other factor in the state. Essentially, two distinct groups of Sephardim were recruited into Agudat Israel's ranks: the first comprised elderly, traditionally-minded persons who were convinced by party functionaries that Agudat Israel was the true protector of religion in the State of Israel. The second type included young people from immigrant transit camps and development towns who were solicited by young activists of the Peilim organization and encouraged to attend yeshivas and other Haredi schools. However, when they tried to join the Agudat Israel educational or political establishments, they encountered discrimination. The stronger the tendency towards particularism in Agudat Israel, the closer the Sephardim found themselves to the bottom of the list.

During the early 1980s, a significant number of Sephardic students were attending yeshivas, metivtas (a unique type of yeshiva high school established especially for Sephardim), and even teachers' seminaries. Educational separation between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Haredi society increased because of the overall particularization of Haredi schools. At that time, a new Sephardic rabbinic leadership emerged, resembling the Haredi religious leadership in many respects. Rabbinis and yeshiva heads, such as Ovadia Yosef, Ben-Zion Abba Shaul, and Yehuda Zadka, were perceived as Greats by the

new Sephardic-Haredi elite. This development laid the groundwork for Shas's success. The resignation of Sephardim from Agudat Israel was not considered unjustified; it was accepted with understanding by Ashkenazi Haredi circles and sanctioned by the religious leadership. Nevertheless, it did reveal the exacerbation of internal tensions in Agudat Israel because of disputes over criteria for allocation of state funds attained through coalition agreements. An examination of these internal struggles and the direct intervention of the Greats indicated that it was only a matter of time before a formal split would occur.

Schism in the Ashkenazi Torah World

As elections for the Twelfth Knesset approached, it emerged that a further rift in Agudat Israel was imminent. Its roots had been evident for about five years, after Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Mann Shach resigned from the Council of Torah Greats following tensions between him and the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Simcha Bunim Alter. In the Eleventh Knesset elections, Rabbi Shach had already told his supporters to vote for Shas instead of Agudat Israel. Some perceive the schism as the reemergence of the dissent between Hassidim and Mitnagdim, as Rabbi Shach represents the Lithuanian Torah world while the Gerer Rebbe is among the most important Hassidic rebbes and represents the most significant Hassidic sect in Agudat Israel. However, it is grossly inaccurate to base the entire conflict on a renewal of the historic dispute between Hassidim and Mitnagdim which began in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The Role of Habad

Another aspect of the dispute concerns the relations between Rabbi Shach and his followers and Lubavitcher (Habad) Hassidim. Lubavitcher Hassidim were never part of Agudat Israel and their leaders never belonged to the Council of Torah Greats; the Habad school system, from the outset, was part of the state-religious educational system (with internal autonomy)

and not the independent system of Agudat Israel. Moreover, the Habad movement's operative methods, especially over the past few years, have aroused criticism in many Haredi circles, including Hassidic ones. Not everyone favors Habad's initiative in pressing for enactment of the "Who is a Jew" law, even if they do not say so publicly.

Obviously, there are differences of opinion regarding the extent to which criticism may be carried. Rabbi Shach decided that Habad and its leaders should be publicly denounced. This is hardly surprising, as the "cold war" between the two sides has been going on for nearly a decade. Just before the elections, during internal negotiations to achieve electoral harmony and cooperation in Agudat Israel circles, Rabbi Shach demanded that the Agudat Israel newspaper, Hamodia, refrain from publishing announcements about Habad events and from quoting the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. This was not the only issue in which the opposing sides could not achieve consensus; the makeup of the Knesset list was a far more serious matter, but it was convenient for Agudat Israel to cite the dispute over Habad ("the excommunication of a sacred community") as the main reason for the failure to reach agreement.

Three Haredi lists thus stood for election to the Twelfth Knesset. Some election results were amazing, especially Agudat Israel's success (five seats). Shas's rise in power, on the other hand, was hardly surprising. Shas effectively speaks with two voices, each with its own defined target group. One is directed at the steadily growing Sephardi "Scholar Society," established in parallel to that of the Ashkenazim, while the second aims at the older, traditional Sephardi population. This latter group, which had supported the National Religious Party before the Tami faction broke away and then partly turned to the Likud, now found itself increasingly identifying with Shas. The party's propaganda, which appealed to the traditional romantic-nostalgic past and the nature of

religious leaders, touched the heart of the traditional voter more than that of any other faction. The Haredi Degel Hatorah party won votes from part of the Ashkenazi Haredi community, but Agudat Israel gained many peripheral votes, which accorded it at least two of its Knesset seats. This was undoubtedly a direct result of Habad's overt involvement in the election campaign. Habad essentially worked with considerable success in Shas's "province" and among its target population -- traditional Sephardic Jews.

Many Israelis were surprised by the success of Habad propagandists in convincing people to vote for Agudat Israel. It was said that they guaranteed the blessing of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to anyone who voted for Agudat Israel and threatened those who did not with curses and excommunication. Anyone familiar with Habad's methods would find this description somewhat exaggerated and doubt the reliability of the reported threats. However, promises of the Rebbe's blessing were certainly used as a tool of political propaganda. Religious parties, especially Haredi parties, have often applied this method. Moreover, Habad Hassidim consider the Rebbe's blessing to be vital in every step they take throughout life -- and how much the more so in an election campaign which Haredim perceived as a test of their legitimacy. Habad therefore invested all its efforts in ensuring Agudat Israel's success.

The election results propelled the Haredi parties to the center of political activity. The two major parties effectively had equal power, thus increasing the political clout of parties which were not identified a priori with any one of them and could join either at their own discretion. In 1988, the only such unaffiliated parties were the Haredi parties, which were wooed in earnest by the two major parties -- the Likud and the Labor Alignment. Today, the Likud appears to be more attractive to the Haredi parties, which comes as no surprise to observers familiar with the Haredi political system.

The Price of Political Success

The Haredi victory in this election campaign was by no means simple or unambiguous. The Haredim, once a marginal group in Israeli politics, have now been thrust into the limelight. This position is none too comfortable for a group whose affinity for the basic principles of "Zionist" Israeli politics is at best ambivalent. The spotlight exposes them to public criticism and paves the way for even more extensive delegitimation of the "Scholar Society" which they created and are bound to uphold at all costs. Their maneuvering between the two major parties is a result of commitment to the "Scholar Society," whose very existence essentially frees its members from the basic civic obligation of Israeli citizens -- military service -- thereby arousing pointed questions and undermining the basis of the Haredi parties' legitimacy. Moreover, the steady growth of the "Scholar Society," primarily due to the high natural rate of increase among the Haredim, raises questions concerning the limits of public support for this "non-productive" group. Although such questions may have been posed previously, this is the first time that they have been formulated so overtly and bluntly, with a clear hint of delegitimation.

On the other hand, the internal schism introduced an unprecedented dimension of competition among the Haredi parties themselves. Factions paid more attention to the contents of their rivals' plates than their own and one party's success was often perceived as detrimental to another's. The combined threat of Degel Hatorah and Shas bodes ill for the future of Agudat Israel in its traditional power base among the Ashkenazi Haredi population. Obviously, the Haredi party that holds the keys to state budget allocations also holds the keys to victory in the next elections. Hence all rules were broken in negotiations with the major parties. Not only did the Haredi parties refuse to negotiate jointly, but each faction actually perceived the

others as rivals who must be barred from securing positions which affect allocations to "Scholar Society" institutions.

It is significant to note that in the most recent coalition negotiations, participation in the Cabinet as Ministers and Deputy Ministers was no longer considered taboo for the Haredi parties. What only recently was considered forbidden, as the last symbol of isolationism from Zionism, has now become permissible and almost obligatory. This development primarily stems from fear that a rival party will exploit a ministerial function to obtain an advantage over the others in the struggle for budgets and key positions affecting allocations to the "Scholar Society." Shas's exploitation of the Interior Ministry in the National Unity Government served as a paragon and a sign for the other two parties that this is no time for isolationism if the parties want to survive.

The achievements of the Haredi parties in the last elections reflect a severe internal crisis which challenged the status of the religious-spiritual leadership and its ability to alleviate tensions in this fractious society. Successful maintenance of the "Scholar Society" exacts a political and ideological price of so far inestimable scope. Moreover, the price of moving to the center of the political arena is likely to be so high that it will eventually undermine the very foundations of Haredi society.

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Menachem Friedman, one of the leading experts on ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel, is author of the classic work, Society and Religion. He is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar-Ilan University and Researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies. This Viewpoints is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs's Second Annual Public Policy Day.