

Religious Education and Coalition making in Israel – the first 25 Years

1.

The State of Israel has never defined itself in its legal code. Its leaders, like most of the citizens and foreigners, consider it a democracy and a “Jewish State” – or the state of the Jews. Until 1977 it was also regarded as a socialist, or “socialistic” state. The ruling party in the country had been, ever since – even before the state was established – a socialist one.

These two characteristics have caused some confusion, as they seem hard to reconcile with one another. Socialist parties tended to oppose, sometimes sharply, any sign of religion and religious symbols. In many cases, the prime target for these parties had been the religious education, which they actively tried to eradicate.

In such a state like Israel, with these two characteristics being so deeply rooted, it might be expected that the tension between religious parties and public on the one hand and the liberal and socialist parties and public on the other hand, would be particularly great. In fact, this tension grew once the right wing came to power. But this can be attributed to the fact that right wing government in Israel could only be established if it had the support of the religious parties. Left wing government never needed religious parties to build their coalition even though they always invited them to take part in the government.

It might be because of this, but in any event, unlike what might have been expected and albeit the undeniable differences between the Left and the religious camp, these differences had never been at the level of contradiction that could not be resolved.

One explanation is that it was the international situation of the state that made the relations between socialists and religious work. Israel was subject to severe external pressures since its inception; these even led at times to actual wars. Under these circumstances, overall ideological goals had to be reduced into situational motivations and strategies that were mainly concerned with survival. This meant that different parties gave up their long run aspiration for the “ideal society” and ideal state embedded in their ideological platforms.¹

Another reason would be the Zionist nature of all the parties – save for the Communist Party and the orthodox parties.² This meant that they all saw in the State of Israel the National Homeland for the Jews and shared the hope that as many Jews as possible would eventually come to live in Israel.

Zionism perceived itself as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. As such, it treated Judaism both as a religion – to be left for those who wished to practise it – and as a nationality and national and historic culture. Its main thrust was, however, the breaking away with the Jewish traditional attitudes towards the questions of sovereignty and statehood that were shaped and influenced by religious codes and motifs. At the same time, it embraced Jewish history as it was, that is, mainly a history of religious group and the Jewish reference to the Land of Israel. Unlike the religious practice, that left the liberation of the land to God and to God’s future, the Zionist movement was determined to practically liberate the land and establish in it a Jewish (non-religious) state. This attitude was behind the attempt of the Zionist leaders,

¹ E.g., socialist parties – to build a socialist, egalitarian society; the religious parties – the hope for the revival of a “state of Torah” that would embrace God’s laws, etc.

² The Communist parties openly rejected Zionism. The religious parties claimed that it was they who were the “true” Zionists although they rejected the Zionist platform as developed in the Zionist movement.

from the very beginning of the movement and including most of its leaders, to include all the Jewish parties within its framework – even those opposing parts of its platform.

The socialist – or Labour – movement was no exception in this. It had never been anti-religious in its policies nor did it reject religious parties. This was true when it led the Zionist movement and it remained so when it led the State of Israel since this was established in 1948.

The socialist parties had an absolute majority both in the Zionist movement and later on in the state. The socialist main political party, Mapai, had itself such a majority not only in the Zionist movement, but also in the Labour Federation that was the biggest economic power in Israel. But even though it had always been the largest single political party, it had never been able to secure such a majority in Parliament (the “Kneset”). This made coalition government a necessity.

Because of its advantageous position, Mapai was able to choose its coalition partners. It seems that it preferred religious parties as its main – or first – coalition partners. These parties were mainly interested in less overall political and more sectorial issues and this served Mapai’s interests. They had little or no demands in the main fields – of foreign affairs and defence. They were willing to get relatively little, as they knew that Mapai did not need them to govern and that it could always invite other parties to fill the gap if they left the coalition. Thus, for relatively minor concessions, Mapai was able to retain absolute majority in the government and to have its own way in the actual running of the country. It was rather convenient for Mapai. Its economic, foreign and defence policies differed from those of both Left and Right parties but the gap with the religious parties on these issues was not that great – if it existed at all. There had been only one field where difference in attitudes, policies and interests between Mapai and the religious parties was apparent: Education. This was also the only issue that seemed to have been more important to the religious bloc than to Mapai.

2.

The status of religion in Israel is somewhat unique and is certainly unlike other Western countries. In France, for example, or in the USA, the constitution determines that the state is secular. In England or in the Scandinavian countries, the Head of State is also the Head of its state-church. Israel has religious institutions and hierarchy regulated and financed by the state. This religious institutional hierarchy enjoys far reaching powers that touch many aspects of life of both the state and its citizens.¹ But however powerful and although its composition reflected the power of the religious parties, the Rabbinical set-up did not intervene, as such, in either state politics or in education. These were the domains of the religious political parties.² The Rabbanuth, which is the official religious leadership, has legal power only as far as religious life is concerned. This does not include the field of education or even questions of curriculum. In England, in the USA or in France, the Church had always maintained its own educational systems. In fact, at times, these systems played decisive role in the development of education. This, however, was not the case in Israel. Here, the religious authorities did not have a schooling system and they did not have any inspection power in even in religious schools. These functions

¹ e.g., in marriage and divorce, Kosher inspection with licensing power attached, etc.

² One exception – that led to more involvement of the institution of the Chief Rabbis in politics – was in 1974. One faction in the NRP (the “Youngsters”) tried to recruit the Rabbis to support their objection to join Rabin’s coalition. It led to a severe tension between the two Chief Rabbis. The Ashkenzi Chief Rabbi, Slomo Goren, participated in this process and in fact was behind the request of the “Youngsters” of the Rabbis to issue a verdict in this matter. The Sefaradic Chief Rabbi, Ovadia Yossef, boycotted the process altogether. It must be noted that the rabbinical echelon is legally forbidden from participating in any political process. However, since it enjoys enormous respect, it had been able to make the party obey and follow the instruction to refrain from joining the coalition.

had to be fulfilled by the religious political establishment. Before the establishment of the State, it was political organisations and parties that ran schools. Therefore, when the State took over education and established its State Educational System, the debate on religious education was political and did not involve at all the religious authorities.

In England and France, the Church was the first organisation to own and run educational systems. These systems provided private, non-state education on a large scale and almost indiscriminately. When the State, in both countries, established its own educational systems, the church could claim a central role in the public debate on education. Not only as an interested party, but also as a proprietor of educational system and institutions. Again, this was not the case in Israel. Here, ownership was of political organisations and even so-called private schools were somehow affiliated to political organisations and were supported by the public, through the political mechanism.

One more point that must be borne in mind is that education in Israel, from its very beginning, has always been Jewish. At least in as much as all the educational institutions regarded themselves as Jewish – if not in religious terms, than in cultural terms. This is true for both religious and non-religious schools. While religious schools had incorporated into their activities the performance of religious rituals (prayers etc.) non-religious schools did not. Like their religious counterparts, they also had, however, Bible studies as a central subject in their curricula. In many cases, they took critical or literary approach to Bible and to other materials from the religious code. Another subject that was considered as important also in non-religious schools was that of Jewish history that was taught separately from general history. All in all, regardless of how close schools might have been to religion, all Israeli schools made it a point to maintain what they might be called “the Jewish spirit.”

Indeed, because Judaism – or “Jewishness” – involved not only religion but also aspects of nationality, culture and history, also the question of secularism was different from that in other countries. The Israeli Proclamation of Independence,¹ as the Balfour Declaration² and to an extent, also the League of Nations Resolution regarding the Land of Israel,³ had all identified the Land of Israel as the “National Homeland of the Jewish People.” This term says nothing about state religion or even the connection between Jewish nationality and Jewish religion. The Proclamation refers to “Jewish life” but it leaves it open for each and every individual to self-determine their identity – which is certainly something any religion would have problem with. It suggests that Israel is a Jewish State but it also guarantees equality in law regardless of religious affiliation.

Judaism – or Jewishness – has always assumed that its subscribers shared some common traits of tradition, history, culture and reference to the Land of Israel. It never had any reference to the question of citizenship or even statehood. The religious claim that religion and nationality in Judaism is one thing. But if this means that it is the basis also for nationality than it is somewhat unsubstantiated an argument. On the other hand, the same claim by Zionism, coupled with the aspiration to create an independent, sovereign state, makes perfect sense, but also means that there is a strict separation between religion and nationality in Judaism.

This question has always remained unresolved in the dialogue (or conflict) between religious and non-religious factions within the Jewish people. But in a way it did not matter that much, since for both, Jewish national identity was in itself something beyond debate. Therefore, the main difference between religious and non-religious was the degree of observance of the religious code. Here, however, there have been differences also between various factions within

¹ of May 1948

² of 2nd November 1917

³ of July 1920

the religious “camp.”¹ As to the non-Jewish groups, here education was not divided according to the level of religiousness. The educational system only recognised a general “Arab Sector” which was the overall sector of national minorities. Within it, children of the different denominations were entitled to religious education according to their faith. This part of education was not compulsory and was mainly offered through the local religious organisations.

The State offered two separate national schooling systems, namely, the “National” Network and the “National-Religious” Network. Both sections are financed by the state budget and managed by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry sets the curricula for the schools in both sections and it also maintains a supervision system to assure adherence to the curriculum as well as the teaching quality control. Theoretically, both sectors were supposed to have the same curriculum, save for enhanced religious studies that would be offered in the religious schools. However, there were changes in the curriculum of the religious schools that were made so as to adjust the material taught to the spirit of the Jewish religion. Thus, if scientific subjects might have challenged religion, they would not be taught in religious schools. Also, in some of the schools there had been separate classes for boys and girls, in addition to mixed classes and the parents could choose in which of these type of classes their children would be. Unlike the secular schools, religious schools had synagogues and featured prayers and other religious rituals as an integral part of school life.

This situation enabled to circumvent the classical “church – state” controversy that characterised schooling systems in other countries. Yet, if not the contents of studies within religious schools, their availability to various segments of the population – mainly new immigrants – and the registration systems to such schools in the various localities, were real political issues. So much, that they even managed to topple no less than three governments. Indeed, these political struggles were in a way connected to the religiousness of the state and the influence that the religious parties - especially the National Religious Party (NRP) - could gain in the Ministry and to the amount and nature of resources that would be available to these parties in general.

The last point was particularly important. The religious parties, especially the NRP, thought that the better their schools the more attractive these schools can become – not only for their children, but also for non-religious pupils. Having such pupil in their system might not make them religious but it may well expose them to the religious values. This, in the mind of the religious leadership, would improve the moral backbone of these children. It would also be advantageous from practical point of view. The more pupils their school would have, the more money would come their way. Also, if the educational system, that was mainly identified with the NRP, would be considered successful (and increase in the number of pupils would certainly be an indication of this), the success would rub onto the Party. It would then be able to attract more voters and increase its parliamentary representation and thus enjoy greater political power. Greater political power would mean better position within the coalition that would manifest itself in better access to resources and in the number and quality of ministries controlled by the party. This eventually happened in 1977, not so much because the NRP grew in terms of voters and parliamentary representation, but because its relative power and bargaining position improved – so much that it could appoint, for the first time in Israel, the Minister of Education. Until then, the Labour Party – and Mapai before it – had always insisted to control this ministry. It enabled the Party not only to determine the contents of education, but also to use it so as to increase its appeal to potential voters, including religious, as the only power that really takes care of the education of these voters’ children.

Education has been a critical issue in the relations between religious and non-religious factions within the Israeli society, at least in the first decades since the state was established. It is true

¹ i.e., ultra-orthodox, orthodox, conservative, reform, etc. Some of these groups had also internal divisions.

that education has been, traditionally, a most – if not the most – important trait of Jewish life. But it has been also an issue because education touches every single person within the society. Before the state was established, education was organised in politically oriented and controlled networks and thus was also the basis on which the future members of the political organs involved, were moulded. Still, there is yet another factor that plays an important role in the debate – or struggle – pertaining to the educational systems and contents. This is the self-perceived “state of siege” that characterises Israel - the existence of which has been commonly shared by most of the Israeli people. It was intimately related to education in as much as education was thought to have been the most effective instrument to nourish patriotism and willingness, on the part of the people, to contribute more to the state.

As indicated, the statistics of participation in the educational process, could not be dismissed. Out of approximately three million Jews in 1974/75, about one-third – one million – were pupils in elementary schools alone. The budget channelled to education was the largest devoted to any civilian matter and in addition to it, yet another budget was dedicated to education within the armed forces. The education budget represented some 7.3% of the total national budget. This is even more significant when we consider that over 50% of the total budget go to defence. This means that education receives more than 15% of the total civilian budget. The inter-sectorial division of the budget is also of great interest. Enrolment in the religious network covers some 27.1% of the total enrolment in both elementary and secondary education. But the share of this network in the education budget is 30.5%. These figures cover both the national religious network and other independent religious networks. The national secular network in which some 72.9% of the pupils’ population is enrolled, receives only 59.0% of the budget. This gives the religious sector an advantage of 12.5% in terms of public money.

The relations between the two sectors are anchored in what is known as the “status quo” of the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The origins of the “status quo” can be traced to the agreement reached between David Ben-Gurion and the leaders of the religious parties that enabled their participation as signatories of the Proclamation of Independence. It developed along the development of a series of “Fundamental Laws” that attempted to organise the bases of the state life, in the absence of a formal constitution.¹ According to the “status quo” it was agreed that “religious life [in the State of Israel] was to be left ‘as is’ in May, 1948, when the state declared its independence.”² It settled the status of the Chief Rabbis and the Chief Rabbanuth, including its control over the religious courts. It ensured that state kitchens, including those within the armed forces, would maintain kosher rules and have kosher inspectors to ensure it. It also prevented public transportation on Saturdays³ and other such arrangements that seemed

¹ The Proclamation stated that the writing of the constitution would be completed by 15th October 1948. However, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper (one of which was that it has always been easier for rulers to rule without restrictions that a constitution might present), this endeavour of constitution has never been completed. The “Fundamental Laws” or “Basic Laws” were to be the articles of the future constitution and they differed from all other laws in that they could not be altered or changed by Parliament unless an absolute majority would secure such an alteration or change. Also, in case of contradiction between a “Fundamental Law” and any other law, the former would prevail. Only few such laws were passed by Parliament and the first ones were those that set the status and modus operandi of Parliament itself, the government, the courts of law and the Presidency.

For further discussion of these laws see: Aktzin, B. (1966), “Introduction to a Project of a Constitution for the State of Israel” [Hebrew], in *Public Administration*, Vol. IV, pp. 9-15. The English version of this paper appears in Naomeni, T, D. Rudavski and A. I. Katsh, eds. (1974), *Israel: Its Politics and Philosophy*, New York, Behram House, Inc., pp. 48-52/

² See: Birenbaum, E. (1970), *The Politics of Compromise: State and Religion in Israel*, Cronbury, NJ, Associated University Press, pp. 28-30, 75.

³ Excluding taxies and except in Arab towns and in Haifa, which prior to 1948 was populated heavily by Arabs (and thus had always public transportation on Saturdays) and was now one of the “mixed towns” along with

important to the leaders of the religious parties. In education, the “status quo” guaranteed religious education in the same structure that developed during the British rule. The status quo recognised the supremacy of state law over religious institutions and laws but the administration of some aspects of life (notably marriage and divorce) was left for the religious courts and councils and was to be handled according to the religious codes.¹

Acre, Jaffa, Ramla and Lydda. The arrangement was instituted in the country by the British Mandatory regime, along lines that were practised in the UK.

¹ See: Rotenstreich, N. (1966), “Secularism and Religion in Israel” [Hebrew]. *Judaism* (Summer), pp. 259-283. Religious courts could only act within the limits set by the State Law and were subject to the jurisdiction of the state courts. The Sefaradi Chief Rabbi Y. Nissim, described the situation, in this matter, in the following way: “The Knesset [Israel’s Parliament] cannot pass religious laws but it can authorise the Religious Court to implement its decisions.” Nissim (1956), “Religion and the Jewish State” [Hebrew], in *Jewish Life* March-April), p. 8