Towards a Redefinition of Jewish Nationalism in Israel? The Enigma of Shas

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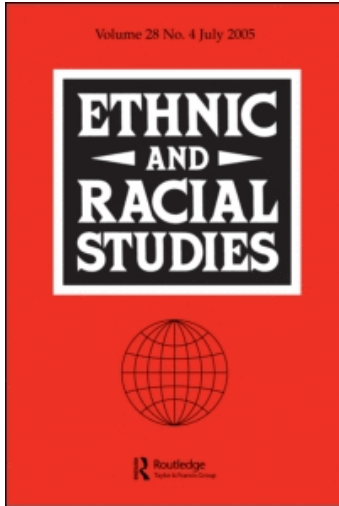
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Towards a redefinition of Jewish nationalism in Israel? The enigma of *Shas*

Yoav Peled

Abstract

The electoral success of *Shas*, a *mizrahi*, religious political party in Israel is analysed with the help of the cultural division of labour model. *Mizrahim* (Jews originating in Muslim countries) are a semi-peripheral ethnic group in Israel, located between the dominant *ashkenazim* (Jews of European origin) and the Palestinians. While most *mizrahim* have been voting Likud for the past twenty-five years, increasingly the poorer among them have been shifting their vote to *Shas*. The key to *Shas*'s success, where other efforts to organize *mizrahi* political parties have failed, is its integrative, rather than separatist, ideology. *Shas* seeks to replace secular Zionism with religious Judaism as the hegemonic ideology in Israeli society, and presents this as the remedy for both the socio-economic and the cultural grievances of its constituency. This integrative message, emphasizing the commonalities between *mizrahim* and *ashkenazim*, rather than their differences, is attractive to *mizrahim* because of their semi-peripheral position in the society.

Introduction

For over a decade now, *Shas* has been a stable and increasingly important presence on the Israeli political scene. Its electoral record has been impressive: four Knesset seats in 1984 (63,600 votes), six in 1988 (107,000), still six in 1992 (130,000), in spite of the great influx of non-*Shas* voting immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and ten Knesset seats in 1996 (260,000 votes), making it the third largest party in the 14th Knesset. During these years *Shas* has played a pivotal role in the political manoeuvres surrounding the formation and break-up of government coalitions; its leaders have held important cabinet ministries; and many of them have been subjected to criminal investigations and prosecutions.

Still, to this day (November 1997), no serious scholarly study devoted to this political party has been published.[1]

Part of the reason for this lacuna, I would submit, is the fact that *Shas* defies the conventional categories that have been used for the analysis of Israeli politics and, especially, of inter-Jewish ethnic relations in Israel. In terms of its origin, leadership and platform, *Shas* looks like a *haredi* (ultra-orthodox religious Jewish) organization. Yet, a number of considerations make it difficult to view it as a *haredi* political party and attribute its success to increasing religiosity among Jews in Israel. Firstly, according to a comprehensive study conducted by the Guttman Institute of Applied Social Research in 1991, the level of religiosity has remained more or less constant in the Jewish sector of Israeli society during the twenty-five years between 1966 and 1991. Since then, the level of religiosity has probably declined, due to the arrival of about 700,000 immigrants from the former USSR, the vast majority of whom are non-observant. Moreover, among *mizrahim* (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin), who constitute practically the entire *Shas* constituency, the level of religiosity has actually declined somewhat between the immigrant generation and their immediate offspring (Levy, Levinsohn and Katz 1997, pp. 2–3). Secondly, the bulk of *Shas* voters have not been *haredim*, but religiously traditional, poor and working-class *mizrahim* (Don-Yehiya 1990; forthcoming).[2] Thirdly, unlike the *haredi* parties, *Shas* has not shied away from full participation in the government, and has taken formal responsibility for cabinet ministries. Lastly, *Shas* is not a non-Zionist party, like the *haredi* parties. On the contrary, it claims its conception of Zionism to be the real Zionism (Don-Yehiya 1990; Horkin 1993; Levy 1995; Willis 1995).

Is *Shas* an ethnic *mizrahi* party, then? In that case its success defies one of the basic rules of Israeli politics, namely, that political organizing along inter-Jewish ethnic lines cannot be successful. (This rule has been contradicted by another political party – *Yisrael ba-aliyah* – representing recent immigrants from the former USSR, but this happened only in 1996.) How can we account for this success, after years of unsuccessful efforts to organize *mizrahi* political parties? (Herzog 1985; 1986; 1990).

So far, two answers have been offered to this question. Amir Horkin (1993) has proposed a model of political mobilization based on the network of educational and social service institutions developed by *Shas* and generously financed by the government, once *Shas* had become an important political actor. While his study sheds important light on the organizational aspect of the party's electoral success, it says very little on the actual goals for which the party sought this electoral success in the first place. It also begs the questions of both the original impetus for the party's appearance and its success in the first national elections in which it participated – in 1984 – before it had the financial and organizational

wherewithal for mobilizing its constituency (Horkin 1993, pp. 220, 225; cf. Herzog 1990, p. 102).

Gal Levy has analysed *mizrahi* political ethnicity within a model of state–society relations, and has suggested that *Shas* offers a new definition of *mizrahi* collective identity that is attractive for *mizrahim*, as well as for the state. This identity is both Zionist and traditionally Jewish and is free of the modernizing and pioneering pressures of Labour Zionism. This makes it attractive for *mizrahim*, who had been marginalized by the Labour Zionist definition of Jewish Israeli identity. Its attraction for the state, which explains the relative tolerance with which *Shas* has been greeted, stems from the fact that this identity is preferable, from the state's point of view, to its alternatives: the militant Zionism of *Gush Emunim* and the oppositional, left-leaning ethnic identity promoted by secular *mizrahi* political movements (Herzog 1990; Hasson 1993; Levy 1995).

I find Levy's analysis much more compelling[3] and shall draw on it for the present study. My own purpose in this study is more narrowly focused, however. I wish to explore the origins of *Shas*'s electoral success, and consider its implications for our understanding of inter-class and inter-ethnic relations in Israel. The questions I need to answer therefore are: (1) What accounts for the sudden surge in *mizrahi* political mobilization in the mid-1980s? (2) Why has this mobilization taken place under the religious ideological banner of *Shas*, rather than under some other ideological formula?

My consideration of the second question, especially, will be informed by Anne Swidler's suggestion that the causal significance of culture for political action does not lie in 'defining ends of action' by supplying it with values and norms. Its significance lies, rather, in 'providing cultural components [or 'tool kits'] that are used to construct strategies of action'. Thus,

> Explaining cultural outcomes . . . requires not only understanding the direct influence of ideology on action. It also requires explaining why one ideology rather than another triumphs (or at least endures). And such explanation depends on analyzing the structural constraints and historical circumstances within which ideological movements struggle for dominance (Swidler 1986, pp. 273; 280).

Analysing the 'structural constraints and historical circumstances' behind the political-cultural phenomenon of *Shas* requires a theory that can (1) explain the persistence and growth of ethnic identification in a modernizing society, where both the prevailing assimilationist theories of ethnicity and the prevailing nation-building ideology predicted its gradual demise; and (2) offer a conceptualization of the relationship between social structure and political culture. I believe that a modified

version of Hechter's 'cultural division of labour' model would be most suitable for this purpose (Hechter 1975; 1978).[4]

The cultural division of labour [CDL] model posits a stratification system in which groups marked by cultural differences are located differentially along both the horizontal and vertical axes. Vertical differentiation, or 'segmentation', occurs to the extent that particular groups are occupationally specialized; horizontal differentiation, or 'hierarchy', occurs to the extent that particular groups are concentrated at the lower or upper echelons of the occupational ladder (Hechter 1978). The location of a particular group within the CDL is not *determined* by its culture, however, but by the timing and circumstances of its encounter with industrialization. Cultural markers are used only to *identify* particular groups as belonging to particular niches in the CDL. Thus, 'the task of perpetuating the structure of inequality falls to ideas about cultural and racial differences' (Verdery 1979, p. 378).

The more pronounced the CDL, the greater will be the tendency for ethnic solidarity to prevail over other forms of solidarity, for two reasons:

(1) The rigidity of the CDL determines the extent to which members of culturally defined groups would interact with one another, rather than with members of other groups in society. Endogamous interaction leads to in-group solidarity and to the maintenance or development of distinctive cultural patterns.

(2) The CDL is usually legitimated by an ideology of the cultural superiority of the dominant group in society. Thus, for the groups at the bottom of the ladder, a reassertion of their own cultural identity may serve as a counter-ideology, a vehicle for 'socialization, as well as political mobilization, contrary to state ends' (Hechter 1975, p. 37; 1978).

Hechter's theory was designed to account for the persistence of ethnic boundaries between the core English region of Great Britain and its Celtic periphery. While it has since been applied in a number of different case-studies (*ERS* 1979), these have been mostly cases where ethnic marginalization resulted in separatist ethnic organizing. In the case of *mizrahim*, as I shall show in this article, their structural marginalization did not result in heightened ethnic, that is, separatist consciousness, nor in the development of class consciousness. Rather, it resulted in a resurgence of integrative, politicized religious consciousness, that expresses itself, electorally, in voting for *Shas*.

The reason for this divergence from the model, I shall argue, is that the *mizrahim* in Israel are not a peripheral, but a *semi-peripheral* group, located between the *ashkenazi* (European) Jews on top, and the Palestinians, both citizens and non-citizens, at the bottom.[5] Being in this intermediary position, the *mizrahim* have sought to ally themselves with the Jewish state and with the *ashkenazim* who control it, rather than with the

Palestinians. As a result, *mizrahi* protest has rarely taken an unambiguously conflictual stand in relation to the dominant Zionist ideology (cf. Yiftachel, forthcoming). It has assumed, rather, the form of integral Jewish nationalism and, in the case of *Shas*, of politicized Jewish religiosity. In both cases, the *mizrahim*'s oppositional consciousness has espoused the integrative aspects of the dominant ideology, while negating its (inter-Jewish) discriminatory elements.

As formulated by Hechter, the CDL model does not include a notion of semi-peripheriality, nor does it allow for cases where ethnic consciousness takes an integrative, rather than a separatist form. It also ignores the possibility of the formation of ethnic class fractions, that is, the evolution of different kinds of reaction to peripherialization in the different strata within the peripheral ethnic group (see Ayalon, Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1988, pp. 307–8; Peled 1989, pp. 7–9, 135–36). The latter possibility is also relevant for the case under study here, since it is primarily *mizrahim* of the lower socio-economic strata that have been voting for Shas. These lacunae, however, do not make the model irrelevant for these types of cases, or diminish its general usefulness. What they do call for is a refinement of the model in ways that would make it sensitive to a wider range of ethnic phenomena. This, as I shall show in the Conclusion, can be done without in any way harming the overall logical thrust of the model, or its internal coherence.

To explain the electoral success of *Shas* in terms of the CDL model, I shall (1) show that a CDL indeed exists among Jews in Israel, with *mizrahim* overrepresented, as against *ashkenazim*, in low-income, low-status occupations; and (2) explain why, of all the ideological 'tool kits' currently available to Israeli Jewish voters, *Shas*'s definition of Jewish collective identity, which stresses Jewish unity and solidarity, is preferred by an increasing number of poor, working-class *mizrahim*.

My key argument will be that the roots of *mizrahi* discontent do not lie primarily in cultural maladjustment but, rather, in their economic and social peripheralization within Israeli society. Their vote for *Shas*, as for Likud, does not therefore signify a yearning to recapture a lost, primordial past. It constitutes, rather, a rejection of Labour Zionist ideology which has been utilized to legitimate their deprivation in the present (cf. Deshen 1994).

Ashkenazim and *mizrahim* in the cultural division of labour

The Israeli control system (Kimmerling 1989), which until recently included Israel and the occupied territories, was characterized by a fourfold CDL. Each of the four segmentally and hierarchically placed groups – *ashkenazim*, *mizrahim*, citizen Palestinians and non-citizen Palestinians – had its own socio-economic as well as political-cultural profile. Since my concern in this article is to explain the political behaviour of

mizrahim, I shall focus on their particular location within this system of stratification. However, the broader division of labour must be kept in mind as the general context which made, and continues to make, the location of *mizrahim* meaningful (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 1987; Shavit 1990; Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov 1993).

The only social mobility study ever conducted in Israel, in 1974, found that

> almost 70 percent of [*mizrahi* males are] concentrated in the areas of skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled labor, as well as in service occupations and agriculture. By ... comparison, only about 45 percent of [*ashkenazi*] males are engaged in these occupational areas. Nearly one-third of the [*ashkenazim*] are found in the upper nonmanual occupations ... whereas only one-tenth of [*mizrahi*] males hold positions of this kind. ... These basic differences between the two ethnic groups are replicated in each of the age cohorts. The greatest dissimilarity in occupational distribution is found among the *youngest* cohort (Kraus and Hodge 1990, p. 66; emphasis added).

Generally, the authors of this study found that,

> although [*mizrahim*] raised their educational levels, the average educational gap between this group and [the *ashkenazim*] decreased only very slightly. In fact, the difference between ethnic groups with regard to postsecondary schooling actually increased steeply. At the same time, the occupational prestige gap between the two ethnic groups widened, attended by growing disparities between the groups in regard to their concentrations in particular occupational categories (Kraus and Hodge 1990, p. 68; cf. p. 172).

During the following decade-and-a-half (until the onset of massive immigration from the USSR in the late 1980s),[6] all ethnic groups within Israel's 1967 border improved their socio-economic status. This improvement, however, did not significantly change the relative standing of the two Jewish ethnic groups (Wolffsohn 1987, pp. 138–55; Shavit 1990; Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991, pp. 32–3; Schmelz *et al.* 1991, pp. 109–112; Nahon 1993a, 1993b; Smooha 1993a, 1993b; Kashti 1997;[7] Cohen and Haberfeld, forthcoming). Most of the gains made by *mizrahim* in this period have been either outstripped by the gains made by *ashkenazim*, such as in the areas of education, occupational status or income, or else have been in fields that have declined in their social significance.

Two examples of the latter kind are the earning of high school matriculation certificates and of officer ranks in the military. Matriculation certificates were held by 28 per cent of *mizrahi* 18-year olds in 1995, compared

to 17 per cent in 1987 (the corresponding figures for *ashkenazim* were 38.7 per cent and 31.6 per cent, respectively). During this period, however, these certificates had lost their status as guarantors of automatic university admission. Thus, of the 1986–87 cohort of matriculation certificate earners, 45 per cent of *ashkenazim* but only 30 per cent of *mizrahim* had gone on to post-secondary education by 1995 (Adler and Balas 1997, pp. 136–37, 153n11; Kashti 1997d).[8] Similarly, the inroads apparently made by *mizrahim* into the higher military[9] ranks have paralleled the decline in the status of the military due to the liberalization of Israeli society (Smooha 1984b; Erez, Shavit and Tsur 1993; Peled 1993, pp. 259–91; Kashti 1997b; Shafir and Peled 1998).

In only two social fields – self-employment/small business ownership and politics – can the *mizrahim* be said to have improved their standing in relation to *ashkenazim*. The rate of the self-employed (including employers of others) in the two groups was equalized by 1983, at about 17 per cent. *Ashkenazim*, however, still predominated among large business owners, and the income gap between the two groups, while smaller than among wage earners, was still meaningful and was larger among members of the second than of the first generation (Nahon 1993c, pp. 80–81; see also Yaar 1986). In politics, both local and national, *mizrahi* representation has increased, in both absolute and relative terms. Nevertheless, *mizrahim* have not yet captured the mayorship of any of Israel's three largest cities, and their enhanced presence in the Knesset and in the Cabinet since the 1970s has been coterminous with a sustained decline in government social services and in economic equality (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991, p. 35; Grinberg 1993a, 1993b; Peled and Shafir 1996; Kashti 1997c; Shafir and Peled 1998).

Table 1 presents a few characteristic indicators of the relative socio-economic standing of *ashkenazim* and *mizrahim* at the present time. In 1988 close to 40 per cent of the foreign-born *ashkenazim* were in the three top occupational categories (professionals, managers and technicians) compared to 20 per cent of the foreign-born *mizrahim*. The gap between the Israel-born members of the two groups was even wider: 50 to 21 per cent. In 1995 72 per cent of second-generation *ashkenazim* worked in white-collar occupations, and 28 per cent were blue-collar workers; among second-generation *mizrahim* the figures were 46 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively. Unemployment among second-generation *ashkenazim* in 1993 was 4.9 per cent, and among *mizrahim* 13.2 per cent. In 1988 the average *mizrahi* head of household earned 80 per cent of the income of an *ashkenazi* one, but only 64 per cent per capita. And at least among wage-earners the income gap has been widening: an Israel-born *mizrahi* wage-earner earned 79 per cent of the income of an *ashkenazi* wage-earner in 1975, 70 per cent in 1982 and 68 per cent in 1992 (Smooha 1993a, p. 317; Swirski 1995; Kashti 1997a, 1997e, 1997f, p. 25; Cohen and Haberfeld, forthcoming). This earning gap continued

Table 1. *Selected socio-economic characteristics by ethnic origin*

		Ashkenazim	*Mizrahim*
Occupational status (3 top categories), 1988			
Foreign-born		40%	20%
Israel-born (IB)		50	21
Income,	1988	100	80
Income per capita,	1988	100	64
Employee income,	1975	100	79
Employee income,	1982	100	70
Employee income,	1992	100	68
Housing (<1 p/r),	1988		
Foreign-born		60	32
Israel-born		40	23
Education –			
Years of schooling,	1991	+ 2.8	
% College graduates (IB)			
	1975	25	6
	1992	41	11

Sources: Smooha 1993a, 1993b; Cohen and Haberfeld, forthcoming.

to increase between 1992 and 1996, reflecting the growing inequality of income distribution in the society (CBS 1997, p. 44).

Housing density of less than one person per room was enjoyed in 1988 by 60 per cent of the foreign-born *ashkenazim* and only 32 per cent of *mizrahim*, whereas the figures for the Israel-born were 40 and 23 per cent, respectively (reflecting, obviously, the older age, rather than the greater affluence, of the foreign-born) (Smooha 1993a, p. 317; for comparable figures for 1991 see Smooha 1993b). Educationally, in 1991 *ashkenazim* had an average of 2.8 more years of schooling than *mizrahim* (Smooha 1993b, p. 178; cf., however, Cohen and Haberfeld, forthcoming, for an argument that the trend is for the gap in years of schooling to narrow). In 1975, 25 per cent of Israel-born *ashkenazim* were college graduates, compared to 6 per cent of *mizrahim*, and in 1992 the ratio was almost the same, although at a higher level: 41 to 11 per cent, respectively (Cohen and Haberfeld, forthcoming).

Development towns

The persistent gap between *ashkenazim* and *mizrahim* in general masks a growing socio-economic disparity among the *mizrahim* themselves. About one third of *mizrahim* can now be classified as belonging to the middle class, and they have been more or less integrated into the *ashkenazi* mainstream of society (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991; Benski 1993). This class

differentiation corresponds, to some degree, to people's continent of origin, whether they hailed from Asia, primarily Iraq, or from North Africa, primarily Morocco. The key intervening variable connecting continent of origin with current socio-economic status is time of arrival in Israel. Asians arrived mostly in the early 1950s and settled primarily in central areas of the country. North Africans arrived in the late 1950s and early 1960s and many of them were settled in 'development towns' located in outlying areas (Benski 1993; Lewin-Epstein, Elmelech and Semyonov 1997). This partial correspondence between time of arrival and extent of integration in the society lends credence to Hechter's argument that the position of different groups in the CDL is determined largely by the timing of their encounter with modern industrial society.

Shas draws most of its electoral support from development towns [DTs] and from the socio-demographically similar poor city neighbourhoods. DTs are small urban settlements, located mostly in the outlying regions of the country. They were established between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s and were settled, primarily, by North African immigrants who were arriving in Israel during that time (Berler 1970, pp. 58–185; Goldberg 1984, pp. 1–12; Swirski and Shoushan 1986; Efrat 1987; Ben-Zadok 1993; Yiftachel, forthcoming). Until the massive immigration of Soviet Jews in the early 1990s, between 15 and 20 per cent of Israel's population lived in DTs (DTs have been defined differently for different official purposes), where the population was, on average, 75 per cent *mizrahi*. This made DTs home to between one quarter and one third of the country's *mizrahi* Jews (Ben-Zadok 1993). Since the early 1990s the demographic composition of DTs has changed. Their population has been augmented by 20 per cent, on average, due to the settling of about 200,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This has brought the ratio of *mizrahim* in DTs to 61 per cent only (CBS 1994; 1996b, p. 112; Carmon and Yiftachel 1994; Yiftachel, forthcoming).

Socially, as well as geographically, DTs form a peripheral 'spatial sector' within Jewish Israeli society (Don-Yehiya 1990, p. 25; Ben-Zadok 1993; Yiftachel and Meir, forthcoming). In 1987 the Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS] computed the socio-economic status [SES] of every urban locality in the country (not including the occupied territories), based on data from the 1983 national census. On a scale of standardized scores combining sixteen different socio-economic variables and running from –2 (lowest SES) to +2 (highest SES), the average score for all development towns was –0.40. This score placed development towns between the fifth and sixth SES clusters, out of twenty, or below 70 per cent of the entire population (CBS 1987; cf. Heimberg (Shitrit) and Dor 1994; CBS 1995; Yiftachel, forthcoming).[10]

In 1983, 53 per cent of the DT workforce was employed in laggard, low-paying industries, compared to 43 per cent in the country as a whole (including both Jewish and citizen-Palestinian workers) (Borukhov 1988,

pp. 9–10). Over 27 per cent of the DT labour force was employed in the textile industry, the lowest paying of all, compared to only 15 per cent of the entire Jewish labour force. As a result, the average wage in DTs was (in 1992) only 75 per cent of the national average (*Yediot aharonot*, 22 September 1993). Widespread unemployment has been endemic in DTs since the early 1970s, with rates sometimes as high as twice the national average. Moreover, many more people in DTs than in the rest of the country have left the labour force permanently so that they are no longer counted among the unemployed (Lavy 1988, pp. 4, 20; Peled 1990; Ben-Zadok 1993; CBS 1996a).

While DTs constitute distinct social and administrative units, they share many of their social and economic characteristics with the other major concentration of working-class *mizrahim* – the poor neighbour-hoods of large and medium-sized cities. Thus, the claims made in this article about *mizrahim* in DTs can be seen as applying, in a general way, to the working-class *mizrahi* population as a whole.

Mizrahim and the dominant ideology

In Israel, 'the task of perpetuating the structure of inequality' between *ashkenazim* and *mizrahim* has indeed fallen 'to ideas about cultural . . . differences' (see p. 706, above). The roots of these ideas can be found in the *yishuv* (pre-state Jewish community of Palestine). As early as the period of the second *aliya* (1904–1914), *ashkenazi* agricultural workers in Palestine were already distinguishing themselves, as 'idealistic' and 'civil-ized', from the 'natural', Palestinian and *mizrahi* (in this early period pri-marily Yemenite) workers. 'Idealistic workers' were those who had forfeited the comforts of European urban life and the possibility of immi-grating to America, and chose instead to participate in the project of national redemption in Palestine. 'Natural workers', on the other hand, were not necessarily *experienced* agricultural workers, which Yemenite Jews were not. The term referred, rather, to natives of the Middle East who, because they hailed from non-industrial societies, were thought of as 'capable of performing hard work [while] living in uncomfortable cir-cumstances, . . . obedient . . . and above all – content with little' (Druyan 1981, p. 134, cited in Shafir 1989, p. 107; Shafir 1990).

The implication of this distinction between idealistic and natural workers was that, whereas the former may have had to learn how to work the land, the latter had to learn how to be modern human beings and ideologically committed Zionists. This categorization was used both to demand and to justify the preferential treatment accorded by *ashkenazi*-dominated Zionist settlement organizations to *ashkenazi* immigrants. Thus, *mizrahi* immigrant workers not only received lower wages than European workers in Jewish-owned plantations, they were also given smaller and cheaper houses and supplementary plots of land. And while the *ashkenazi* workers, having been allotted land by the

Zionist organizations, went on to establish *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* and become the pioneering founding fathers of Israel, the Yemenites, no less pioneering in actual fact, were left out of both the collective settlements and Zionist collective memory (Druyan 1981; Shafir 1989, pp. 91–122; 1990; Eraqi-Klorman 1997).

Mainstream Israeli sociology adopted the distinction between idealistic and natural workers and elevated it to a theory of the cultural superiority of *ashkenazim*. In seeking to explain the failure of *mizrahi* immigrants to be successfully integrated into Israeli society, S. N. Eisenstadt, followed by an entire generation of Israeli sociologists, distinguished between 'olim' (literally 'pilgrims') and 'immigrants'. The former, Eisenstadt argued, were ideologically motivated settlers, whose physical migration involved a cultural and spiritual transformation, a conscious break with traditional Jewish values. This enabled them to embrace more easily the pioneering values of the *yishuv*. 'Immigrants', on the other hand, were refugees fleeing their home countries without any cultural or spiritual preparation. They were, therefore, less able to adopt the values of their new homeland and, as a result, had greater difficulty integrating into its institutions. Before 1948, Eisenstadt argued, most Jews who had come to Palestine, were *olim*; after 1948, they would be immigrants. *Mizrahim*, however, were mostly immigrants, whether they migrated before or after 1948 (Eisenstadt 1947; 1950).

The idea that the problems of *mizrahim* stem from their failure to adapt to modern values and institutions, led to the definition of the task facing them in Israel as 'absorption through modernization'. This was reflected, among other things, in the designation of *mizrahim*, but not of *ashkenazim*, as '*edot*' ('communities' or 'ethnic groups') (see Krausz 1986). The *ashkenazim*, by implication, constitute the normative Israeli society. This designation still persists, despite the fact that, once in Israel, immigrants from the different Muslim countries have in many ways crystallized into one group, both socio-demographically and in the consciousness of the *ashkenazim* (Benski 1993; Nahon 1993a, 1993b; Levy 1995). Moreover, between the mid-1970s and early 1990s *mizrahim* had constituted the majority among Jews in Israel. Nevertheless, social movements and political parties initiated by *mizrahim* have been consistently stigmatized as 'ethnic', hence separatist, regardless of their declared goals and ideologies. No such designation has ever been applied to organizations dominated by *ashkenazim* (Herzog 1985, 1986). This, I shall argue below, has been an important factor in channelling *mizrahi* discontent in the direction of *Shas*.

Mizrahi political reaction

Generally speaking, *mizrahim* have not reacted to their marginalization by trying to engage in political mobilization on the basis of either class or ethnicity. This divergence from the expectations of both modernization

theory and the CDL model can be explained by two factors: (1) as a semi-peripheral group, *mizrahim* have been inclined to emphasize their similarity to the dominant *ashkenazi* group rather than to the subordinate Palestinians, with whom they share many socio-economic and cultural attributes; (2) Zionist ideology has always stressed the value of unity among Jews, and has militated against autonomous ethnic political (as opposed to cultural) organizations.

Already in the Ottoman (pre-1917) period, Yemenite workers were complaining bitterly about being treated by *ashkenazi* employers and workers as if they were Arabs. Their solution, however, was not to organize themselves separately (let alone together with the Arabs), but to demand equality and integration with the *ashkenazim* (Shafir 1989, pp. 118–22). During the British Mandate (1922–1948) several *mizrahi* and *sephardi*[11] parties participated in elections to the institutions of the *yishuv*, and had some electoral success. This was tolerated, even encouraged, by the Zionist leadership, because under mandatory law, membership in the *yishuv* was voluntary, and disgruntled groups could simply opt out. The Zionist movement had an obvious interest in having the *yishuv* encompass all Jews in Palestine, and they were willing to make concessions not only to *mizrahi* groups but to anti-Zionist *haredi* groups as well. Furthermore, since *mizrahim* constituted a relatively small and *declining* portion of the Jews in Palestine (from 40 to 20 per cent in 1918–1948), ethnically-based political parties were not seen by the dominant Labour Zionist movement as a political threat (Herzog 1984; Horowitz and Lissak 1989).

Things changed dramatically, however, with the massive influx of *mizrahi* immigrants in the 1950s. With the *mizrahi* portion of the population reaching and then exceeding 50 per cent, the spectre of their coming to dominate the society, either politically or culturally, became a matter of serious concern. Major efforts at delegitimizing 'ethnic' political organizations were undertaken by the dominant *ashkenazi* institutions and, indeed, political parties catering to *mizrahim* had almost disappeared from Israel's political scene (Smooha 1978, pp. 86–94; Herzog 1985, 1986, 1990; Lewis 1985).

The few 'ethnic' political parties that did exist after 1948 failed to draw significant electoral support (Herzog 1986, 1990). Rather, until 1973, over 50 per cent of *mizrahi* voters had been voting for the Labour Party, in its various manifestations. This reflected both their desire to identify with the dominant political force in the society, and the virtual stranglehold the Labour movement had, through its various social and economic institutions, on employment opportunities and the provision of social services to the immigrants (Shapiro 1989; Shalev 1990).

Since 1973, however, over 50 per cent of *mizrahi* voters had been voting Likud (Shapiro 1989, p. 178). This shift, which was largely responsible for Likud's victory in 1977 and its return to power in 1996, was caused

by a combination of structural and ideological factors too complicated and well-known to be recounted here (see Shalev 1990, 1992). But while Likud has succeeded in mobilizing the majority of *mizrahi* voters since 1973, by the mid-1980s it began to feel the effects of having been in power for ten years. Despite some highly publicized anti-poverty programmes, during the time in which Likud was the main governing party, the (mostly *ashkenazi*) rich in Israel grew richer and the (mostly *mizrahi*) poor grew poorer. (This trend continued during Labour's tenure in 1992–96) (Bank Hapoalim 1996). And while the unemployment rates had been fluctuating, their overall tendency, until the early 1990s, was upwards. Furthermore, labour market friction between low-paid Palestinian and Jewish workers, that had begun in the late 1960s, had not subsided under Likud governments, until well into the *intifada* (Palestinian uprising that broke out in December 1987). And *mizrahi* workers, especially in DTs, felt seriously threatened by Palestinian competition (Peled 1990).

Most importantly, perhaps, the mid-1980s witnessed the beginning of a profound restructuring process in the Israeli economy. When Likud came to power in 1977 it embarked on an ambitious programme of economic liberalization that was designed to do away with the corporatist political-economic structures on which Labour had based its power for the previous half-century. The only tangible result of these efforts, by the mid-1980s, was an annual inflation rate that reached 445 per cent in 1984 (Shalev 1992, p. 240). In 1985, the national unity government in which both Likud and Labour shared power, instituted a harsh anti-inflationary programme known as the Emergency Economic Stabilization Plan. The plan not only brought inflation to a halt, at the price of economic slowdown, lower wages and increased unemployment, but prepared the ground for the liberalization process that has since reshaped the Israeli economy (Shalev 1992; Shafir and Peled 1998).

The primary goal of the 1985 economic plan, beyond stopping inflation, was to smooth the way for Israel's integration into the process of economic globalization (Shafir and Peled 1998). As Peter Beyer has argued, globalization can have adverse economic and cultural effects on the weaker sectors of society, who often react by reasserting their particularistic socio-cultural identities through nationalist or sub-nationalist movements. Furthermore,

> In some circumstances, religion has been, and continues to be, an important resource for such movements, yielding religio-political movements in places as diverse as Ireland, Israel, Iran, India and Japan. Because of their emphasis on socio-cultural particularisms, such religious movements often display the conservative option [of opposing globalization] with its typical stress on the relativizing forces of globalization as prime manifestations of evil in the world (Beyer 1994, p. 108).[12]

The earliest appearance of such religio-political movements in Israel, catering specifically to poor *mizrahim* and enjoying meaningful support in DTs, was in 1984. In that year both *Shas* and Meir Kahane's *Kach* movement made their debut on the national political scene. *Shas* won four Knesset seats in the general elections of 1984, while Kahane's 1.2 per cent of the national vote entitled him to one seat only. In DTs, however, *Shas* and Kahane had an almost equal share of the vote, around 3.5 per cent each (Shafir and Peled 1986). In 1988, based on my own pre-election survey, 8.5 per cent of the voters in DTs were planning to vote for Kahane (making his party the third-largest party there, after Likud and Labour) while *Shas* was expected only to retain its 3 per cent of the vote (Peled 1990).

Kahane's appeal for his voters, almost universally *mizrahim* of low socio-economic status, was based on his calling for the 'transfer' of all Palestinians, citizens and non-citizens alike, out of *Eretz yisrael* (Land of Israel, encompassing both Israel and the occupied territories). The idea of total transfer was attractive to Kahane's potential voters for two reasons. First, if carried out, it would have removed Palestinian workers as competitors in the labour market (Peled 1990). Second, and more importantly perhaps, by calling for the transfer of all Palestinians, citizens and non-citizens alike, Kahane articulated a notion of Palestinian (or 'Arab') identity that transcended the question of citizenship. By doing this he also articulated, as in a mirror image, a notion of *Jewish* identity that transcended the question of citizenship as well (cf. Roediger 1991).

As Erik Cohen has argued, the *mizrahim* had always claimed, as against official Zionist ideology, that 'mere Jewishness, rather than the internalization of any particular Zionist or "Israeli" values, attitudes and patterns of behavior, [should be] sufficient for participation [in the centre of Israeli society]' (Cohen 1983, p. 121). In Beyer's terms, this was a reassertion of particularistic, traditional Jewish identity, as against the modernizing, universalizing elements in the dominant, Labour Zionist definition of Israeli citizenship. It is precisely this reassertion that was echoed in Kahane's rhetoric.

In the actual elections of 1988, from which Kahane had been barred (Peled 1992), the *haredi* parties, primarily *Shas* and the *ashkenazi Agudat yisrael*, had more than *tripled* their strength in DTs, from 5 per cent in 1984 to 18 per cent in 1988, as against a doubling of their strength nationally. *Shas* itself received 8.7 per cent of the vote in DTs, while both Likud and Labour lost support there and the extreme right-wing parties, espousing the territorially expansionist ideology of *Gush Emunim*, retained their relatively low levels of support (Don-Yehiya 1990; Ben-Zadok 1993; the figures here and elsewhere may vary slightly due to the different definitions of DTs used by different authors). The *haredi* parties were not calling for 'transfer', but the notion of Jewish identity that transcends the issue of citizenship is central to their world-view. Thus, it was

they, rather than the extreme right-wing parties, who were able to benefit from Kahane's removal from the race.

By 1992 the demographic composition of development towns had undergone drastic change by the settlement of immigrants from the former USSR (p. 711, above). Support for religious parties was virtually non-existent among these new voters (Fein 1995), and indeed the religious parties' share of the vote declined in DTs by close to 30 per cent (from 21 per cent in 1988 to 15 in 1992) (CBS 1993). This would seem to indicate, however, that the level of support for religious parties among *veteran* voters in DTs remained more or less constant. Unlike 1988, however, of the *haredi* parties only *Shas* had a significant showing in DTs and among *mizrahim* in general in 1992.

Several reasons have been adduced for the virtual disappearance of support for *Agudat yisrael* among poor and working-class *mizrahim* in 1992. But no knowledgeable observer has suggested that one of these reasons was *Agudat yisrael*'s neglect of its *mizrahi* voters' ethnic concerns. (In this respect these voters should be distinguished from the *haredi-mizrahi* core of *Shas* activists who had seceded from *Agudat yisrael* precisely for this reason) (Don-Yehiya 1990; Heilman 1990, pp. 149–50; Horkin 1993; Deshen 1994; Willis 1995, pp. 130–31). Be that as it may, the significant point is that, at least once, voters who are usually identified as belonging to *Shas*'s constituency were willing to support a strictly *ashkenazi haredi* political party. This would seem to indicate that the appeal *Shas* has had for this type of voter is based on something that it shares with other *haredi* parties, rather than on something that distinguishes it from them.

What *Shas* shares with other *haredi* parties is a concern for the enhancement of the role of Jewish religion in the public and private lives of Jews in Israel. The concrete meaning of its slogan, '*le-hahazir atara le-yoshna*' ('restore the crown to its glorious past') is 'synagogues, ritual baths, keeping the Sabbath, yeshivot, torah schools, and the Wellspring' (*El-ha-maayan*, *Shas*'s all-important elementary educational system) (Horkin 1993; Willis 1995, p. 123). The goals of *El-ha-maayan* , as stated in its incorporation by-laws, are: 'to promote the traditional and Jewish values of religious Jewry in Israel . . .; . . . to promote religious Jewish education in the educational system in Israel . . . ; . . . to improve religious services . . . ; to help improve the quality of religious life . . . ; . . . to supply the religious needs of *haredi* religious Jewry . . .' (Horkin 1993, pp. 82–83). It would be very difficult to find, in *Shas*'s official pronouncements, political demands that refer specifically to *mizrahi* culture. Students of *Shas* have even compared its political goals to those of the pre-1967 (mostly *ashkenazi*) National Religious Party, before the latter had turned into an ultra-nationalist party (Heilman 1990, pp. 146–47; Levy 1995, p. 129; Willis 1995, p. 134).

In making this point I am not trying to suggest that *Shas* does not have

its own unique characteristics or that it is not concerned with the plight of its *mizrahi* constituency. My argument, rather, is that *Shas* was able to define the concerns of its constituency in terms of general Jewish religious concerns, and in this way organize its constituency around an integrative, rather than a separatist message (cf. Herzog 1990, pp. 108–111; 1995, p. 88). Ezra Nissani, an important *Shas* operative, has described *Shas* as a movement that articulates the interests of the 'popular strata'. These strata have been excluded from the centre of Israeli society and seek to transform that society, in order to take their rightful place in it. They include '*mizrahim*, *haredim* and national minorities' (that is, citizen Palestinians) and the values of the Jews among them are 'traditional-religious Jewish' values. Thus, restoration of these values, rather than specifically *mizrahi* values, however defined, is presented as a remedy for both the cultural and the socio-economic plight of *mizrahim* (Nissani 1996).

In the 1996 elections *mizrahim* of low socio-economic status responded to the *Shas* formula in unprecedented numbers.[13] In most DTs *Shas* became the second largest party, after Likud, with between 10 and 20 per cent of the vote. In one DT, Ofakim, it received the largest share, 24 per cent, compared with 23.7 per cent for Likud. Not surprisingly, perhaps, in 1995 Ofakim had the lowest SES ranking and the highest unemployment rate of all Jewish localities in Israel (CBS 1995; Kashti 1997e, 1997g; Yiftachel, forthcoming).

Table 2 and Figure 1 show *Shas*'s average share of the vote in all Jewish localities (with the exception of those with fewer than 2,000 residents and the three largest cities) broken down into quartiles by the percentage of *ashkenazim* in the population and by average income per standard adult. (The latter is presented in quartiles only in the table.) What the table and the scattergram show is that in the 50 per cent most *mizrahi* localities, *Shas* everywhere exceeded its national share of the vote, of 8.5 per cent. In the most *mizrahi*, lowest income localities, its share of the vote was

Table 2. *Average vote for Shas in 1996 (%) and number of localities by quartiles of ethnicity and income*

Average vote for Shas (%)	(No. of localities)	% of *ashkenazim* in localities (quartiles)									
		1		2		3		4		Total	
Income quartiles	1	17.5%	(13)	18.4%	(7)			2.0%	(1)	17.1%	(21)
	2	15.8	(7)	10.8	(7)	11.6	(6)			12.8	(20)
	3	9.3	(1)	12.8	(5)	8.3	(7)	8.0	(7)	9.4	(20)
	4			11.4	(1)	7.5	(7)	3.9	(13)	5.5	(20)
	Total	16.5%	(21)	14.0%	(20)	9.0%	(20)	5.2%	(21)	11.2%	(82)

Note: Jewish localities (less than 5% non-Jewish) with more than 2,000 inhabitants, not including three largest cities. Data are based on 1983 Census.
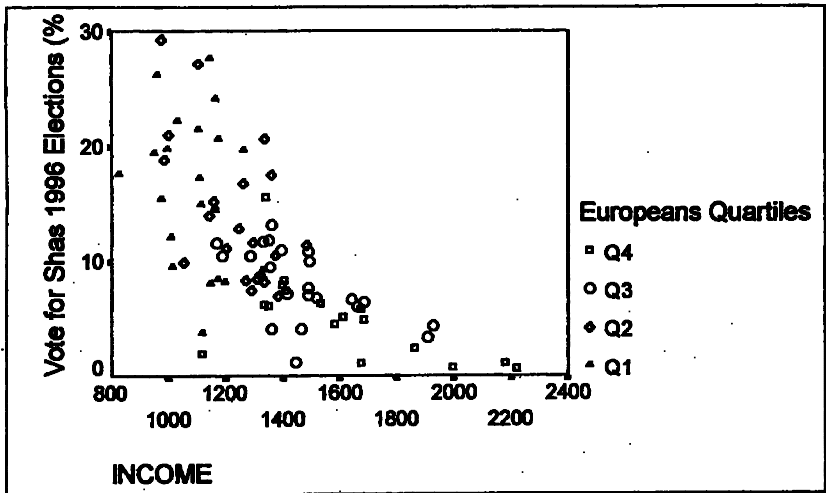
Figure 1. *Vote for Shas (1996) by income and ethnicity in localities*
1. See Note, Table 2.
2. Income – average monthly income per standard adult (NIS) – 1983 prices.
3. Europeans Quartiles – percentage of ashkenazim *in localities (from 1983 Census). Ranked by quartiles.*

around twice its national average. In an individual analysis of all eighty-two localities included in Table 2, high correlations were found between voting *Shas* and average income ($r = -0.69$, $p<<0.01$) and voting *Shas* and percentage of *ashkenazim* in the locality ($r = -.65$, $p<<0.01$). (Because of high multicolinearity between income and ethnicity ($r = 0.76$, $p<<0.01$) combining the two in a regression model could not be done.)

Conclusion

Shas's electoral success has been commonly interpreted as a separatist reaction against the denigration of traditional *mizrahi* culture by the *ashkenazi*-dominated institutions of Israeli society (Don-Yehiya, forth-coming; Deshen 1994, pp. 55–56). Thus, in concluding his anthropologi-cal study of *Shas*'s performance in the 1992 elections, Aaron Willis has observed that

> *Shas* has been innovative, forging a generic Sephardic identity, which even mixes Ashkenazi styles, rather than arguing for a return to par-ticularistic regional customs. The values and traditions that *Shas* has utilized to build a more general Sephardic identity play on the common experiences of these many constituent ethnicities vis-à-vis the domi-nant Ashkenazi "other" (Willis 1995, p. 136).

Willis is correct in pointing out that *Shas* is not a movement that looks back to some primordial past. Indeed, *mizrahim* (*sephardim* in his terms) as a group do not possess such a past; they crystallized into one collectivity only in Israel, out of many disparate Jewish groups originating in a number of different countries. Willis, however, misses the fact that the identity that *Shas* is seeking to forge is an integrative Jewish identity, rather than a particularistic, *mizrahi* identity.

Shas is, indeed, seeking to forge this identity against a dominant 'other'. That other, however, is not the *ashkenazim* in general but the Zionist, especially Labour Zionist establishment that has marginalized *mizrahim* since the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine. Being *ashkenazi* is only one, though crucially important, characteristic of this establishment. *Shas*'s political wisdom and the secret of its success lie precisely in its ability to direct the resentment of its constituency not against the *ashkenazi*, but against the secular, modernizing component of the dominant culture. In counterposing *Jewish*, rather than *mizrahi* identity to this dominant culture, *Shas* has provided its followers with an *integrative*, rather than a *separatist* principle of organizing 'contrary to state aims'. Rather than negating Israeli Jewish nationalism as defined by the Zionist establishment, *Shas* has sought to redefine it.

Since the message of *Shas* is not a particularistic, *mizrahi* message, and since the majority of *Shas* voters have not been religiously orthodox, the appeal that *Shas* has had for so many *mizrahi* voters cannot be explained at the level of culture alone. The explanation must be looked for at the level of the *socio-demographic* characteristics of *Shas* voters, hence at the level of the social structures that shape these characteristics. Drawing on the analytic insights of the CDL model, I have sought in this article to provide such an explanation.

The CDL model is designed to explain cultural, specifically political-cultural, outcomes in terms of structural social realities. In line with Anne Swidler's recommendation cited above, it regards culture as a weapon, or tool kit, utilized by peripheral ethnic groups in order to mobilize themselves politically against the state. It thus provides a crucial theoretical link between socio-economic deprivation and political mobilization based on shared cultural attributes. Since the marginalized groups with which the model is concerned are normally defined by their culture (sometimes with the help of physical markers as well), their natural inclination is to turn the situation around and use their culture as an organizational tool against their oppressors.

As I indicated at the outset, while I find the CDL model very helpful for understanding *mizrahi* political mobilization, there are two difficulties in applying it to the particular case of *Shas*: (1) The political-cultural formula espoused by *Shas* is not particularistic, but rather integrative with respect to the dominant 'other'; and (2) the constituency mobilized by *Shas* does not encompass the entire relevant ethnic group,

but only its lower socio-economic strata. Both of these difficulties can be overcome by making the CDL model a little bit more flexible. This can be done, I believe, without harming the internal coherence of the model in any way.

As originally formulated, the CDL model posits a two-sided inter-action, between a core and a peripheral group. In this situation, the greater the distance between the two groups, the more likely is the peripheral one to develop its own distinct culture. If another factor is added to this scheme, such that the group under discussion is faced not with one 'other', but with two — a dominant and a subordinate 'other' — the model should logically expect the group to develop a different kind of identity. Depending on the specific circumstances of the case, the group, that is now a *semi-peripheral* group, can ally itself either with the group above it or with the group below it. In Israel, where Jewishness is the most important attribute defining membership in the society, it is not surprising that *mizrahim* should opt to ally themselves with the dominant, *ashkenazi* group, with whom they share their Jewishness, rather than with the Palestinians, with whom they share elements of the Arab culture commonly associated with the enemy.

As to the issue of ethnic class fractions, this can also be added to the model without too much difficulty. If, as claimed by the CDL model, the extent of hierarchy and segmentation shapes the collective consciousness of ethnic groups, it stands to reason that strata within ethnic groups that are affected differentially by hierarchy and segmentation would develop different forms of group consciousness. Thus, in Israel, *mizrahim* who are relatively better off tend to join their *ashkenazi* counterparts in voting Labour, those in an intermediate position tend to vote for Likud, while, as I have shown, the ones placed at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder tend to vote for *Shas* (see Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991, p. 189; Schmeltz, Dellapergola and Avner 1991, p. 100).

wish to thank the three anonymous *ERS* referees for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

1.   The three major works written about *Shas* have been a doctoral dissertation (Willis 1993) and two master's theses (Horkin 1993; Levy 1995). None of them has been published so far.

2.   On the character of *mizrahi* religiosity, which may be defined as 'traditional', rather than 'orthodox', see Shokeid 1984, Deshen 1994, and the sources cited therein.

3.   Levy's master's thesis was written under the joint supervision of Dr. Gad Barzilai and myself and draws in part on an earlier, unpublished version of the present article.

4.   For surveys of theories of ethnicity and their application to the Israeli context, see Zureik 1979, pp. 8–30; Smooha 1984a; Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991, pp. 36–53.

5.   Non-citizen Palestinians were included in the Israeli control system until the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in the mid-1990s. Their current situation *vis-à-vis* Israeli society is both ambiguous and fluid. The most influential body of work utilizing the CDL model and treating *mizrahim* as a peripheral group was done by Shlomo Swirski and his associates. They predicted, indeed called for, separate *mizrahi* organizing in all facets of social life, a prediction that has not materialized. See, for example, Bernstein and Swirski 1982; Swirski 1984, 1989; Swirski and Shoushan 1986.

6.   These newly arriving immigrants, the vast majority of them *ashkenazim*, have joined the society close to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Since the early 1990s therefore the only comparison that is relevant for understanding the relative position of *mizrahim* is that between second-generation members of the two groups.

7.   Between April and October 1997 Ur Kashti, a sociology graduate student at Tel Aviv University, published a series of reports in the leading daily, *Ha'aretz*, covering many aspects of the 'ethnic gap' between *ashkenazim* and *mizrahim*. Three of the reports appeared in English as well (Kashti 1997f). Specific references will be made here only to articles actually cited.

8.   Due to the military service required of Israeli Jews, of two years for women and three years for men, there is normally a gap of a few years between graduating high school and starting post-secondary education.

9.   The Israeli military does not release the ethnic composition of its personnel, so that all observations in this matter are educated guesses only.

10.   The relative placing of development towns would have been much lower had the calculation been made for the Jewish population only; see Khalidi 1988, pp. 133–8. A few Palestinian communities indeed scored below –2, the lowest end of the scale. The 1983 Census is the latest from which the data have been released in full. Data from the 1995 census are only beginning to be released at the time of writing. Using the 1983 data is more appropriate for this study, however, because they were collected before the large-scale settling of formerly Soviet Jews in DTs.

11.   For the distinction between the terms '*sephardi*' and '*mizrahi*' see Swirski 1984; Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991, pp. 24–25.

12.   I think Beyer's characterization of these movements is correct, and applicable to Israel. The movement he chose to focus on in Israel, however, *Gush Emunim*, is not a case in point. One indication of this is that *Gush Emunim*, and the political parties that express its agenda, do not enjoy much support among the poorer strata of Israeli society. The Israeli religio-political movement that fits Beyer's analysis is *Shas*.

13.   The 1996 elections were the first in which the Prime Minister was elected directly by the electorate, so that voters could split their vote between their Knesset and Prime Minister ballots. This caused the major parties to decline and the parties representing minority sectors to grow significantly. Therefore, the results of the 1996 elections are not strictly comparable to the results of previous elections.

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