



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Meaning of “Mamlachtiut”

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,183, May 26, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For David Ben-Gurion, the concept of *mamlachtiut* captured the perennial tension between the establishment of the state of Israel as an orderly and delimited institutional project and the view of the state as a means in an exalted process of redemption. Hence, even after its establishment, Israel would continue – as an instrument through which to fulfill an infinite vision – to be “a state in the making.”

During and after the recent election campaign, Israeli political discourse was replete with calls for the need for “*mamlachtiut*” in the conduct of political affairs, though the current meaning of this concept differs drastically from its original idea, as conceived by PM David Ben-Gurion.

While present day politicians view *mamlachtiut*, which cannot be translated directly into English, as subordinating political and sectoral interests to the general good (or “Israel before everything,” to use the election slogan of the newly formed Blue and White party), Ben-Gurion did not confine the concept to proper administration and the rule of law, to avoiding conflicts of interest and ensuring integrity. Nor does it seek, as the conceptual foundation for running the affairs of the state, an ostensible unifying basis of commonality representing clear-cut, shared interests that are beyond dispute. According to Ben-Gurion’s creed, *mamlachtiut* is the compass that should guide leaders even when they come into conflict with the law and with the political opposition.

Mamlachtiut was behind Ben-Gurion’s injunctions to dismantle the Palmah and close down the separate Labor Zionist school system. He likewise demanded an uncompromising effort, transcending administrative and rational considerations, to fulfill the Jewish state’s commitment to the ingathering of the exiles. Accordingly, he insisted that all immigrants be brought to the country

without delay despite a severe shortage of resources and the lack of any comprehensive solution for housing and employing them.

It was also on the basis of *mamlachtiut* that Ben-Gurion rejected the demand for a constitution. He rightly maintained that the part of the Jewish people then living in Israel was not entitled to lay down a constitution that would prevent future immigrants from exerting their own influence and effecting their own changes. In this regard, Ben-Gurion's *mamlachtiut* constitutes a demand for loyalty to the meta-story of the Jewish nation as it renews itself in the homeland.

Ben-Gurion understood that a state is a dynamic entity, and that the Jewish state would always have to cope with crises and stresses. With the concept of *mamlachtiut* he sought to create an escape hatch from the fixation with laws and regulations. From public servants as well, he demanded a loyalty that was not merely formal: "The workers of the state will indeed shape the image of the government. Not the law but the performance is what counts...The special historical mission of the state of Israel cannot be fulfilled merely in proper laws and faithful clerical work." Tensions arising from basic contradictions cannot easily be contained by laws and a constitution. *Mamlachtiut* means choosing a different way of running things. In a way, it is comparable to choosing a homeopathic medical treatment over a conventional one.

Only by using a holistic thought model is it possible to contain the contradiction entailed by Ben-Gurion's use of the concept of *mamlachtiut*. On the one hand, it means abandoning the Jewish People's millenarian exilic legacy of surviving as small minorities in hostile environments by circumventing the policies and legislation of repressive regimes. On the other, it requires that public servants interpret the law flexibly and non-bureaucratically so as to remain loyal to their mission.

In using *mamlachtiut* as a kind of compass, Ben-Gurion sought to enhance loyalty to an exalted vision that is beyond the here and now. As he explained: "The resurrection of the Jewish state does not mean the fulfillment of the vision of redemption. Since the overwhelming majority of the Jewish People are still dispersed among the nations, the Jewish state is not yet the actualization of the Jewish redemption; it is only the main instrument and means of our redemption."

Thus, Israeli *mamlachtiut* entails a sense of moving in perpetual tension between, on the one hand, the establishment of the state as an orderly and delimited institutional project, and on the other, its establishment as a means in an exalted process of redemption that extends into eternity. It is in this light that, in Ben-Gurion's view, even after its establishment Israel will continue – as an instrument to fulfill an infinite vision – to be "a state in the making."

This is an edited version of an article published in the April issue of Liberal.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.