



PERSPECTIVES

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Why the Israeli Left's Leadership Capacity Is Fading

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The early Zionist labor movement was keenly aware that "The Jewish religion is a national religion that has assimilated all the historical phenomena of the people of Israel from its beginnings up to the present" (to use David Ben-Gurion's words). The left's disavowal of this link is the main reason for its loss of a path to national leadership.

The renowned Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua posed the challenging question: "People of Israel, what do you live for?" He went on, "Survival is not a virtue, but how it is done, what is its content, what are its values, and most of all what is its price." The pioneering workers' parties had a big Jewish story with which to answer this question. The Israeli left of the twenty-first century, however, does not have a convincing Jewish story.

In his article "Donkeys Seek a Messiah" (*Liberal*, January), Yonatan Shem Ur offered a prescription for the errors of the Israeli left. "Zionism was founded by secular people," he said. "Whoever wants to lead the left must take a stance against both religion and religious people."

The Israeli right, in Shem Ur's view, depends on religious people and on their belief that "the land belongs to the Jews because it is written thus in the Torah." Yet it was none other than David Ben-Gurion who declared in his testimony to the British Peel Commission in January 1937 that "the Bible is our mandate... Our right is as old as the Jewish people. It was only the recognition of this right which was expressed in the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate."

The secular-liberal approach, which in recent decades has vied for dominance in the public square, argues that Zionism was essentially secular. True, by the standards of halakhic Bnei Brak, Ben-Gurion and Berl Katznelson were

thoroughly secular. A look at their writings, however, reveals that the Zionist revolution was less a transition from religious behavior to secular behavior than a change in how religion was conceptualized.

In his writings and speeches, Ben-Gurion made use of Jewish ideas fraught with religious content. During a discussion at the Histadrut Council in February 1937, for example, he asserted, “The definition of the ‘ultimate goal’ of Zionism is nothing other than the full and complete redemption of the Jewish people in its land. The ingathering of the exiles, national sovereignty.” And in the Declaration of Independence as well: “We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally around the Jews of Eretz Israel in the tasks of immigration and up-building and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream—the redemption of Israel.” There is a fundamental difference between aspiring to no more than a civil-law state that is pleasant to live in and aspiring to eternal redemption.

The supplication “Sound the great shofar for our freedom and lift up the banner to gather our exiles” is of course a religious text, but a political speech—even if entwined with the words “ingathering of the exiles” and “redemption”—is seen in its context as ostensibly not religious. It is thought to reflect the separation between the religious and the political and between the religious and the national espoused by the modern outlook.

According to this mindset, Zionism, which restored the Jews to national political life, was inherently secular. And yet, unlike secular circles that reject any definition of Jewish identity that does not distinguish between the religious and the national, Ben-Gurion insisted on the unique and indissoluble link between the two dimensions: “The Jewish religion is a national religion, which has assimilated all the historical phenomena of the people of Israel from its beginnings up to the present. It is not easy to separate the national aspect and the religious aspect.”

In the face of the Haredi opposition to Zionism, Ben-Gurion stressed that not only did he not turn his back on the age-old Jewish heritage but, in fact, the opposite: he sought to renew the connection with the Jewish legacy of “Rabbi Akiva, the Maccabees, Ezra and Nehemiah, Joshua Bin Nun, Moses our Teacher.” Disavowal of this connection is the main reason for the left’s loss of a path to the national leadership.

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