# **The *Mahapakh*: It’s reasons and implication on current Israeli politics**

“Ladies and gentlemen, ‘*Mahapakh*!’” announced television anchor Haim Yavin, the moment he was informed of the Likud victory in the Israeli elections of May 1977. The exclamation ‘*Mahapakh*’ (political upheaval) expressed astonishment as well as anticipation of dramatic change in the political system: For the first time in the annals of Zionism and Israel, the *Likud,* the political incarnation of the Revisionist movement founded in 1925, had taken over the government, under the leadership of Menachem Begin.

Indeed, the *Mahapakh* deeply affected Israel’s political trajectory but it must not be understood as a surprising, unforeseen event. It was the outcome of historical, sociological and political developments that were consolidated over an extended time period.

The Yom Kippur war, which erupted in October 1973 and caught the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) unprepared for the Egyptian and Syrian assaults, led, for the first time in the history of the state, to widespread protest that crossed all sectors and parties against the failures of the leadership, headed by senior members of the Alignment [*HaMa'arakh].*

Even though the Alignment still won the elections that were held immediately after the war ended (in December 1973), it turned out that the trauma erupted belatedly, as traumas usually do according to Sigmund Freud. It took the public another four years to express their protests at the ballot-box.

The *Mahapakh* must also be understood against the background of the changes that were taking place in the political system. Begin came a long way between founding Herut in 1948 as a radical and secular party of activists who had belonged to the Irgun and the formation of the Likud[[1]](#footnote-1) in 1973.

In Israel’s first elections, held in 1949, Herut focused on calling for the enlargement of the state’s borders even at the price of another war, and it failed to achieve its goal of becoming the country’s main opposition party, winning only 14 seats and in 1951 the party fell to just eight seats.

Against this background, since the mid 1950s Begin played a key role in crystallizing the center-right and broadening his electoral base[[2]](#footnote-3):

In order to pave the way for an alliance with the religious parties, Begin abandoned previous efforts to create a constitution, even though such a goal had originally appeared in the Herut political platform; In 1965 Herut merged with the Liberal party; In June 1967, on the eve of the Six Day War, Herut joined the unity government of Levi Eshkol, (who was appointed Prime Minster after  Ben-Gurion resigned in 1963) who presented a more inclusive approach with respect to the Revisionists.

Ideological changes also influenced the *Mahapakh*. Before 1967, Begin’s maximalist attitude toward the Land of Israel was viewed as radical and almost irrelevant. But the conquest of territories in 1967 turned Begin’s position into one that was almost a consensus. The “Movement for Greater Israel” – which was founded in November 1967 and included personalities from the Labor movement, the Revisionist, and Religious Zionist – is a prominent example of the change.

Yet among the variety of factors which led to the Likud’s victory, that of ethnicity is most important. Sociologist Yonathan Shapiro found that “starting from 1955, Mizrahi Jews [i.e. Jews originally from Islamic countries] constituted about 55 to 60 percent of all Herut voters, but . . . Until 1973, most Mizrahi Jews, about 55-60 percent, voted for Mapai.”[[3]](#footnote-4) However, in 1977 more than half of the Jews from Islamic countries and their second-generation descendants voted for Likud.[[4]](#footnote-5)

How can we explain the support of Mizrahim for the Likud, a phenomenon that is still relevant today?[[5]](#footnote-6)

A conventional explanation argues for an “alliance of the downtrodden.” Just as the Revisionists faced political discrimination on an ideological basis by the Mapai establishment since the Yishuv era, Mizrahim faced economic and cultural discrimination for ethnic reasons.

The problem with this theory is that it is difficult to prove empirically, and smacks of psychologism. Perhaps, in the spirit of theories that hold that “class-based approaches are the most fruitful way to investigate issues of ethnicity and race,”[[6]](#footnote-7) we ought to direct our gaze at the socio-economic class angle. The dichotomy between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi populations is congruent with low socioeconomic status, and middle- and upper-class status, respectively. New studies regarding Mapai policy in Israel’s formative years show that until the early 1960s, Mapai worked to narrow wage gaps in the public sector – in stark contrast to its perceived image. [[7]](#footnote-8) However, in doing so the Mapai created dependence on the “establishment,” in particular the *Histadrut* (the General Organization of Workers in Israel), which was dominated by Mapai. Mizrahi Jews of low socio-economic status thus had a rational interest in voting Mapai until the 1960s. After that point, when the party no longer served their economic interests, Mizrahi Jews began to distance themselves from it and to protest the dependence that it had fostered.

What is missing from the economic, class-based explanation for the affinity of Mizrahim toward the Likud, as is often the case in materialistic theories, is the ideological dimension. Shapiro raised the claim that Mizrahim were captivated by Begin’s rhetorical manipulation, which incited them against the Mapai.[[8]](#footnote-11) (A similar claim is prevalent in the media today with respect to Mizrahi affinity for Benjamin Netanyahu) According to this theory, Mizrahim adopted hawkish stances similar to those of the Likud only as a result of these manipulations. However, this argument is a problematic one that smacks of the patronizing attitude. Emotional manipulation is not necessarily effective against people of one particular background, and in any case politicians employ manipulation in order to influence public opinion. Nevertheless, the claim that Mizrahim adopted hawkish positions because of their support for the Likud, and not the other way around, is worthy of attention.

When one examines the cases in which *Likud* leaders chose to withdraw from territories despite their avowed policy, one finds that most of the opponents of these moves were not Mizrahim, but rather Religious-Zionist Jews of Ashkenazi extraction. Such was the case with respect to the withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for peace with Egypt in 1979 (during the Begin administration), and the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, when Ariel Sharon led the *Likud*. Therefore, even though Mizrahim votes strengthen the right, this is not necessarily a consequence of a shared ideology regarding hawkish positions.

In my view, Mizrahi affinity for the Likud since the days of Begin should be understood against the backdrop of a shared approach regarding the place of Jewish tradition within the Zionist project. When Jews from Islamic countries were exposed to the concept of Zionism, they tended to see it as a natural extension of their traditional way of life, as a modern embodiment of the national dimension of Jewish religious texts, and not as a revolutionary concept inspired by the nationalisms that had stirred the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe. In Israel they continued to view tradition as a tool for expressing continuity with their national and familial heritage. This was in contrast to the original aspirations of the founding fathers of the Labor movement, who aimed to create a shared Zionist-Hebrew culture disconnected from the traditional Judaism of the Diaspora. Begin not only shared the same attitude toward Jewish religion with Mizrhahim, but also presented the religious tradition as a common denominator that could unite the different ethnic groups. This, in turn, infused a sense of equality among Mizrahi Jews. Begin’s Likud was, as Dani Filc called it, “an inclusive populist movement.”[[9]](#footnote-12)

In fact, Mizrahi Jews and Begin also shared a similar stance regarding the form that religiosity should take. Mizrahi Jews espoused a moderate religious approach: they did not rebel against Orthodox Judaism, but many were not scrupulous in the fine details of observance. This approach can be called simply “traditional.”[[10]](#footnote-14) Begin himself wasn’t observant but practiced certain traditions in the Orthodox style, especially the nationalistic expressions of religion.[[11]](#footnote-15) Therefore, although Begin was of Polish-Ashkenazi origin, his stance toward religion resonated with many Mizrahim.

But Begin’s empathetic attitude toward religion extended beyond his connection to Mizrahim. His governments (1977-1983) created a series of political precedents in the religious context which shaped the face of the political system for the following decades, and even affected how Judaism in Israel is viewed and defined. The first precedent was with regard to the ultra-Orthodox *Agudath Israel*, which left the coalition in 1952 when Ben-Gurion’s government mandated the drafting of women to the IDF. *Agudath Israel* only joined another coalition when the Likud rose to power. Since then, the ultra-Orthodox parties have traditionally joined secular coalitions where they benefit from huge budgets and can influence the political agenda. The *Shas* party, founded in 1984, that represented Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox Jews with a Zionist orientation,

heads the list; although it defines itself as ultra-Orthodox, many of its constituents come from the traditional public or are *“Chozerim b'teshuvah”* (a Jew from a secular background who becomes religiously observant*).*arena which merges Orthodox values with Mizrahi and right-wing Zionist orientation alike.

The second precedent relates to the bestowal of the Education Ministry on a minister from the National Religious Party (NRP), and not to a member of ruling party itself. From 1977 until these very days, NRP ministers have received that portfolio almost every time the Likud headed a coalition that was not a ‘national unity government. (A religious education minister serves under Netanyahu’s current government – Naftali Bennett from *the Jewish Home* party, which is the current incarnation of the NRP.)

One might wonder about the fact that a religious agenda has reigned at the Education Ministry for almost half of the period since 1977, and its impact on generations of pupils. It is no coincidence that surveys conducted since the 1990s on the subject show that most Israelis view the Jewish- traditional component of their identity as more significant than the civic-Israeli element.[[12]](#footnote-16)

In fact, since 1977 the division between the political right and left in Israel largely corresponds to other divisions: Mizrahi/Ashkenazi, traditional/secular, low/high socio-economic status while the concept of Greater Israel has been made into a defining criterion for a pro-traditional outlook.[[13]](#footnote-17)

The paradox is that while a pro-traditional outlook and Mizrahi identity are usually associated in Israel with the more hawkish parties, Mizrahi Jewry was originally characterized by moderation – with regard to relations with the Arabs, as well as to religion – which could have made it a potential match for the left.

When Avi Gabbay, who has Moroccan roots, was elected to head the Labor party in 2017, he claimed that Netanyahu was correct when he stated in the past that “the left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish.” Gabbay wanted to revive a discussion on why a pro-traditional orientation is identified with hawkish politics in Israel. However, his words were interpreted as criticism of his own camp, and the discussion was thus nipped in the bud.

But as long as the accepted equation still ties traditionalists and Mizrahim to the right, and Ashkenazim and secular Jews to the left, the Israeli political system will continue to be shaped by the influence of the *Mahapakh*.

1. (The Likud included Herut members, the Liberal party, and small satellite parties that supported the idea of Greater Israel.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amir Goldstein, “Half-heartedly: Menachem Begin and the Establishment of the Likud Party,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 536 (2017): 915–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Yonathan Shapiro, *Chosen to Command: The Road to Power of the Herut Party — A Sociopolitical Interpretation*, (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1989), 176-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Asher Arian, “The Israeli Electorate, 1977,” in *The Election in Israel - 1977*, ed. A. Arian (Jerusalem, 1981), 253-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Space and context prevent me from an extensive analysis of Mizrahi support for the *Likud* in all Israeli elections since 1977. However, the following is worth noting: According to Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) publications on vote distribution in the last national elections (held in 2015), the Zionist Union (the current incarnation of the Labor party) earned a majority of votes in 28 out of 33 of Israel’s most well-established population centers, in which most of the residents are Ashkenazi. On the other hand, in development towns, where most of the population is of Mizrahi origin, the Likud was the largest party, with average voting rates of almost 35%, higher than all other parties. See Or Kashti, "Analysis of the election [*Nituah Ha-bebhirut]*," *Haaretz*. March 19, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Edna Bonacich, “Class Approaches to Ethnicity and Race,” *Insurgent Sociologist* 10 (1980): 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Avi Bareli and Uri Cohen, *The Academic Middle-Class Rebellion: Socio-Political Conflict over Wage-Gaps in Israel, 1954-1956* (Leiden, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Yonathan Shapiro, *The Road to Power: Herut Party in Israel*, trans. R. Mandel *(*Albany, New York, 1991), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
9. Dani Filc, “We are the People (you are not!): Inclusive and Exclusive Populism in Israel" (Hebrew), *Iyunim Bitkumat Yisrael* 23 (2010): 28-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
10. Moshe Shokeid, “The Religiosity of Middle Eastern Jews,” in *Israeli Judaism: The Sociology of Religion in Israel,* eds. S. Deshen, C.S. Liebman and M. Shoked (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995), 255–284. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
11. Avi Shilon, “Menachem Begin's Attitude Toward the Jewish Religion,***”*** *The Middle East Journal* 70:2 (Spring 2016): 249-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
12. This conjecture is based in part on research and surveys conducted by the Guttman Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research (at the Israel Democracy Institute), attesting that since the 1990s, if not earlier, most Israeli Jews have considered it highly important to maintain a Jewish identity in keeping with Orthodox religious tradition. See Tamar Hermann, ed., *The Israeli Democracy Index 2013* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2013), 84–106. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
13. Kalman Neuman, *Territorial Concessions as an Issue of Religion and State* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)