# **The *Mahapakh*: Short and to the Point**

“Ladies and gentlemen, a ‘*Mahapakh*!’ (political upheaval)” announced television presenter Haim Yavin, the moment he was informed of the Likud victory in the Israeli elections of May 1977. The exclamation ‘*Mahapakh*’ 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.

From our perspective of 40 years, we know that 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, mainly in the preceding decade, and erupted on of the day of elections for the Ninth Knesset. I will attempt to briefly address the ramifications of the *Mahapakh* for contemporary politics, but first I will deal with the main reasons for its emergence.

The Yom Kippur war erupted in October 1973 and caught the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) unprepared for the Egyptian and Syrian assaults; these exacted the heavy price of thousands of slain and wounded Israeli soldiers. For the first time in the history of the state, a war led to widespread, grass-roots demonstrations that crossed all sectors and parties in a protest against the failures of the leadership, headed by senior members of the Alignment (today’s Israeli Labor Party). 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 the 1948 founding of Herut – then a radical party of activists who had belonged to the Etzel underground organization or were members of the Revisionist movement – and the formation of the Likud in 1973. (The Likud party included Herut members, the Liberal party, and small satellite parties that supported the idea of Greater Israel.) 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. (In 1951 the party fell to just eight seats.) Meanwhile the policy of David Ben-Gurion, prime minister and chairman of Mapai (the ruling party which later constituted part of the Alignment), was to negate the very legitimacy of Herut and to exclude it, along with the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) from any coalition he formed.

Therefore, in the 1950s[[1]](#footnote-1) Begin began to work on broadening his electoral base and Herut merged with the Liberal party in 1965. 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 June 1967, on the eve of the Six Day War, Herut joined the unity government of Levi Eshkol, who had replaced Ben-Gurion after the latter resigned in 1963, and who presented a more open ideological approach with respect to the Revisionists.

Ideological changes also influenced the *Mahapakh*. In order to understand these, one needs to consider the Six Day War, which erupted a decade earlier.

Before 1967, Begin’s maximalist attitude toward the Land of Israel was viewed as radical and almost irrelevant. Indeed, one of the conditions stipulated by the Liberal party for uniting with Herut was removal of the call for the ‘conquest of Greater Israel’ from the party platform. But the conquest of territories in 1967 turned this previously marginal 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 movement, and the Religious Zionist movement – 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 among all voters of Mizrahi origin, only 25-30 percent voted for Herut or Gahal . . . Until 1973, most Mizrahi Jews, about 55-60 percent, voted for Mapai.”[[2]](#footnote-2) However, in 1977 more than half of the Jews from Islamic countries and their second-generation descendants voted for Likud.[[3]](#footnote-3)

How can we explain the support of Mizrahi Jews for the Likud, a phenomenon that is still relevant today?[[4]](#footnote-4)

A conventional explanation argues for an “alliance of the underprivileged.” Just as the Revisionists faced political discrimination on an ideological basis by the Mapai establishment even in the pre-State era, Mizrahi Jews 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,”[[5]](#footnote-5) 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. However, in doing so the Mapai created dependence on the “establishment,” in particular the Histadrut labor union.[[6]](#footnote-6) 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. (Simultaneously, many Mizrahi Jews turned to ‘independent’ occupations from the 1970s, thus negating their dependence on the Histadrut.)[[7]](#footnote-7)

What is missing from the economic, class-based explanation for the affinity of Mizrahi Jews toward the Likud, as is often the case in materialistic theories, is the ideological dimension. Shapiro raised the claim that Mizrahi Jews were captivated by Begin’s rhetorical manipulation, which incited them against the Mapai.[[8]](#footnote-8) (A similar claim is prevalent in the media today with respect to Mizrahi affinity for Benjamin Netanyahu and today’s Likud.) 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 that still prevails in the media and academia vis-à-vis Mizrahi Jews. 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 across sectors. 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 Mizrahi Jews, 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 Mizrahi ethnic-based votes strengthen the right, this is not necessarily a consequence of a shared ideology regarding the Land of Israel or hawkish positions regarding foreign and defense-related affairs.

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. This approach treats Mizrahi Jews as independent subjects. When Jews from Islamic countries were exposed to the concept of Zionism, they tended to see it as a natural extension of their moderate, traditional way of life – as did Begin. They saw it 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, too, they continued to view tradition as a tool for expressing continuity with their national and familial legacy, without having to renounce a modern lifestyle. 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 rabbinic Judaism of the Diaspora. Begin, the founding father of the Likud, presented the religious tradition as a bridge and 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 populistic movement.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Begin’s ideology expanded the boundaries of affiliation, offering Mizrahi Jews traditionalism as an entry ticket to the society of immigrants that was forming in Israel.

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

Begin’s empathetic attitude toward religion extended beyond his connection to Mizrahi Jews and their support in bringing him to power. His governments (1977-1982) 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 quit the governing coalition in 1952 when Ben-Gurion’s government mandated the drafting of women to the IDF. Agudath Israel only joined another secular 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 heads the list; although it defines itself as ultra-Orthodox, many of its constituents come from the traditional public or are newly religious. There were many reasons for the emergence of Shas and I will not address them here, except to note that the party was founded in 1984, only a year after Begin resigned. Perhaps that is because the *Mahapakh* had strengthened Mizrahi politics and Begin’s departure left a gap in the political world, to be filled by a party that represented Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox Jews with a Zionist orientation.

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 then until these very days, NRP ministers have received that portfolio almost every time the Likud ruled alone. (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 the fact that a religious agenda has reigned at the Education Ministry for almost half of the period since 1977, and the impact on generations of students. 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-12)

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. The concept of Greater Israel has been made into a defining criterion for a pro-traditional outlook.[[13]](#footnote-13) This identity politics, along with the connection between Judaism and one’s stance regarding the territories, is the key to understanding events in the political field.

The paradox is that a pro-traditional outlook and Mizrahi identity are usually associated with the more hawkish parties, despite the fact that 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.” With these words, Gabbay wanted to revive a discussion on the variety of ways that a connection with Judaism could strengthen the left, and 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.

So 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. Amir Goldstein, “Menachem Begin and the Establishment of the Likud Party,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 536 (2017): 915–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yonathan Shapiro, *Chosen to Command: The Road to Power of the Herut Party — A Sociopolitical Interpretation*, (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1989), 176-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Asher Arian, “The Israeli Electorate, 1977,” in *The Election in Israel - 1977*, ed. A. Arian (Jerusalem, 1981), 253-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not the place for 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, "Nitua@h Ha-be@hirut," *Haaretz*. March 19, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Edna Bonacich, “Class Approaches to Ethnicity and Race,” *Insurgent Sociologist* 10 (1980): 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Avi Bareli and Uri Cohen, *The Academic Middle-Class Rebellion: Socio-Political Conflict over Wage-Gaps in Israel, 1954-1956* (Leiden, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Danny Gutwein, ”The Socio-Economic Logic of the 1977 Regime Change in Israel” (Hebrew), *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel,* 11.44 (2017). <Query: Is this article in Hebrew? Also: The 2017 volume of this journal is volume 27 according to their website, so something here seems to be incorrect in your reference details > [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yonathan Shapiro, *The Road to Power: Herut Party in Israel*, trans. R. Mandel *(*Albany, New York, 1991), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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-9)
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-10)
11. Avi Shilon, “Menachem Begin's Attitude Toward the Jewish Religion,***”*** *The Middle East Journal* 70:2 (Spring 2016): 249-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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. <Note: The name of the Guttman Center has been changed based on their website.> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kalman Neuman, *Territorial Concessions as an Issue of Religion and State* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)