



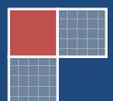
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Shas and the Peace Process: Leadership, Society and Politics

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The position of Shas toward the Arab-Israeli peace process is based on the moderate approach of its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, but is also influenced by the Israeli political reality. This attitude is used strategically by the party to position itself within Israel's governing bodies, which serves Shas in its desire to achieve independence and political influence, as well as to establish an religious infrastructure within Mizrachi (stemming primarily from the Middle East and North Africa) Jewish communities and create a "society of learners".

Shas represents one of the great achievements of the haredi leadership in their attempts to gain influence over Jews who observe Jewish religious law

Shas is the political party of Mizrachi haredi (often called "ultra-Orthodox") Jews. It was founded in 1984 with the goal of being the political base for Mizrachi yeshiva students, and to produce what its leadership refers to as a "spiritual revolution" in the religious life of Jews who came from Arab and North African countries. Shas represents one of the great achievements of haredi rabbis in their attempts throughout the 20th century to gain influence over the community of Jews who observe Jewish religious law, even if their observance is far less strict than the Shas leadership would prefer.

This process peaked in Israel, where many Mizrachi Jews found themselves living on the periphery of the country, in areas of low socioeconomic status, and with few opportunities for social mobility. These circumstances fashioned Shas's social agenda and message to its political and religious base – the Mizrachi religious community. Similar to Islamist political groups, Shas's leaders assert that "religion is the answer", i.e., it is the solution to the continuing economic hardships suffered by Mizrachi Jews, that it was the solution to the identity crisis of the second generation, and is also the solution to the political problems dogging Israel since the Six Day War in June 1967.

Through the years, Shas has grown from a small sectarian party to one of significant political influence, inseparable from power and governance. Even though its electoral power has weakened over the last decade, it is still the largest religious party in Israel. Its representatives in the Knesset still play a crucial role in determining the balance of power in coalition politics. Senior members still hold important ministerial posts.

Over the years, Shas has also developed a system of strong institutional structure that includes an educational and welfare system – formal and informal – which acts as an alternative welfare state for Shas supporters. The party has established print and broadcast media outlets as a counterweight to what its leaders defined as the “old elites”. It has created an active grassroots leadership that helps the party preserve day-to-day contact with its voters and with the Mizrahi-haredi communities it has helped foster throughout its existence. Shas has also developed, over time, a group of spiritual leaders – yeshiva heads, neighborhood and municipal rabbis, lecturers, and proselytizers – who are loyal to Shas’s spiritual leader and who regard the party as their political home.

In the first decade of its existence, Shas was under the influence of the Ashkenazi Lithuanian community. This was for historical reasons. One of the most important factors in the development of the Mizrahi haredi communities was the involvement of Lithuanian Ashkenazi Jews in the traditional educational system of immigrants from Moroccan, which began while they still lived in Morocco. This involvement made Lithuanian Ashkenazi leaders the role models for the Mizrahi haredi rabbinic elite.

In fact, the establishment of Shas depended upon the leader of the Ashkenazi Lithuanian community in the 1980s - Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach. Without his approval, it is doubtful Shas could even have been created. Nevertheless, Shas has never been led by an Ashkenazi rabbi. From the start the Lithuanians drafted Ovadiah Yosef, a senior Mizrahi rabbi who had already served as chief Sephardi rabbi of Israel for a decade, to head Shas.

Yosef saw himself as part of the haredi community. His biography and his religious approach were marked by the growing influence of the haredim on the Mizrahi community. However, what the Ashkenazi leadership didn't take into account was Yosef's independent personal agenda. He did not view Shas as a Mizrahi satellite party, but rather as an independent Sephardi haredi party, representing the Sephardi religious tradition followed by Mizrachim. In his view, Shas was intended to bring about a new Jewish social and economic agenda that would include a leadership role for leading Sephardi rabbis in both the haredi and general societies.

When Shas joined Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's government in 1992, it began distancing itself from control of the Lithuanians, which eventually led to its independence. It was not a simple decision. Nevertheless, Rabbi Yosef, as the party’s spiritual leader, ignored both Ashkenazi Lithuanians and religious Zionists who criticized him for joining a leftwing government for two distinct reasons. In the first place, a leftwing government fit with his political views regarding the issues of territories and peace. Second, because being the only religious party in the coalition increased Shas’s prominence.

In its first decade of its existence, Shas was under the influence of the Ashkenazi Lithuanian community, but Rabbi Ovadia Yosef succeeded in making it an independent Mizrahi party

In general, since its founding, Shas has been split between a leadership with a dovish outlook toward the peace process, and its more rightward leaning voters. In 1988 a large number of Shas voters even planned to support Meir Kahane's ultra-rightwing party which, on the eve of the election, was banned from running because of its racist platform. It is true that many statements made by Shas officials regarding Israel's relations with the Arabs have not been moderate; however, both the Lithuanian leader, Rabbi Schach, who controlled the

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party in its first decade, and Rabbi Yosef, who wanted to break away from Schach to become the party's sole decision-maker, adopted moderate stances toward the peace process.

The difference between them was that Schach refused to join a coalition with the Israeli left wing because he saw it as historically anti-religious, while Yosef not only agreed to join such a coalition but prepared the party apparatus for this from the beginning of the 1990s. Moreover, if Schach's moderate views stemmed from an ideological motivation of keeping the haredim away from the political decision making process, Yosef saw involvement in this process as one of the most important roles rabbinic authorities could take on. Schach regarded diplomacy as a question that was not a matter of Jewish religious law ("halachah") although influenced by Jewish principles, while Yosef saw it directly as a halachic matter.

Yosef's political approach was disseminated to the public in the 1970s through a series responsa (binding opinions) on halachah, in which Yosef ruled that if there is a danger of war with the Arab states, Israel may negotiate with them and even exchange territory for full peace, as long so this was done with the consent of military experts. One of the sources of Yosef's views on the Arab-Israel peace process was the consequences of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This war was one of the harshest that Israel has ever fought; its severity, including the deaths of hundreds of Israeli soldiers, surprised Israeli society. The war's consequences sharpened the political differences which had characterized Israel since 1967 and polarized the country into dovish and hawkish camps. The dovish approach was to advocate ending the conflict through territorial compromise. The hawks opposed territorial compromise, which they regarded as an invitation for another war.

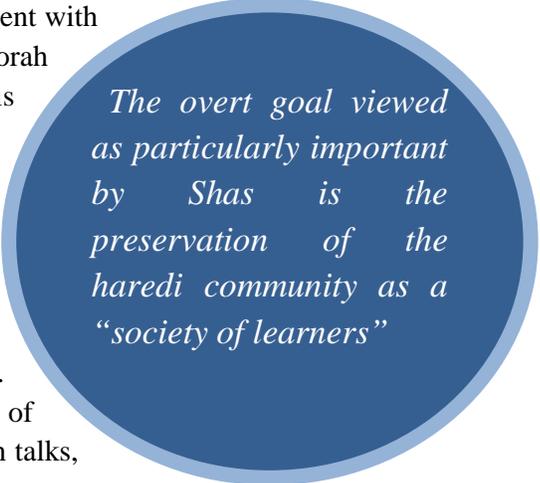
The Yom Kippur War took place during Yosef's first days as the Sephardi chief Rabbi, a position he had attained with the help of the haredi parties. Many women asked him to annul their marriages to soldiers who were missing in action but probably killed in battle. These requests are known in Judaism as "Hatarot agunot" - and without them these widows would be unable to remarry for the rest of their lives. They put Yosef in the thick of things, as he had to delve into the circumstances of each case to see if he could definitively determine that the husband had died.

As part of this delicate task, Yosef was exposed to dozens of cases, testimonies and personal stories that clarified the meaning of war to him. The effect of this on Yosef was clear, as shown by his response, about a year after the war, when he was questioned about his political opinions by a Jewish newspaper outside of Israel. While his colleague, Ashkenazi chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who strongly identified with the religious Zionist movement, spoke about the sanctity of the land of Israel, Yosef asserted that the real question was not about the sanctity of the land but, rather, about saving lives. Thus, he argued, we must do all we can, including returning land, to avoid war. However, Yosef conditioned this on the agreement of security experts. At first glance this condition may appear to make compromise more difficult but, in fact, it contrasts starkly with the radical religious Zionist view that the sanctity of the land overrules all other Jewish law or principles. This approach was restated by Yosef at various times over the following decades, including during his years as head of Shas.

Shas has never refused to join a leftwing coalition but neither did it decline, and has even preferred, joining a rightwing coalition. Those who have studied Shas believe that Yosef's position has helped it to present itself as a neutral party. Shas well understands how to use Yosef's moderate religious stand to advance its moderate political image, as well as to preserve its independence in the Israeli political system. This furthered the political goals set by the spiritual and political leadership –two of which are open and two hidden.

One overt goal, viewed as particularly important by Shas, is the preservation of the of haredi community as a “society of learners”. This is a term coined in the 1990s by the sociologist and leading scholar of the haredi community in Israel, Professor Menachem Friedman. According to Friedman, the revival of institutions of Jewish religious learning and fostering yeshiva students become the primary ideology of haredi society following the Holocaust. However, what was seen as an educational haredi ideal for select elite outside of Israel became unexpectedly the norm within Israel.

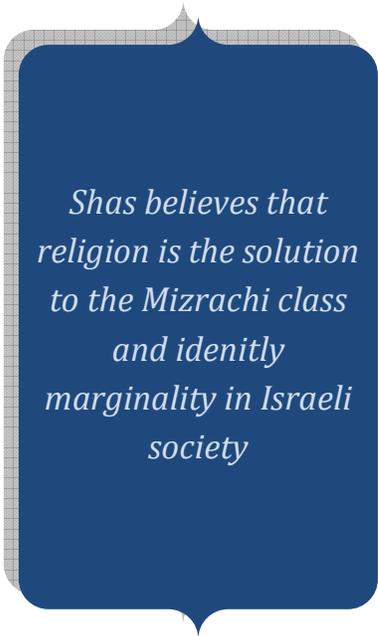
This occurred following the upheaval in the 1977 elections, when Menachem Begin and the Likud came to power and signed a coalition agreement with the haredi parties, which enabled thousands of men learn Torah for their entire lives at government expense. This arrangement turned the ideal of a society of learners into a reality and Shas, utilizing its ability to attract non-haredi Mizrachi voters, contributed greatly to preserving that social construct. In effect, Shas has served as the “Swiss Guard” for the “society of learners”. Interestingly, “society of learners”, once considered a critical term, turned out to be a central ideological tenet of the movement. This was openly expressed several years ago by the head of Shas, Eli Yishai, who was quoted as saying during coalition talks, “Our job is to protect the society of learners.”



The overt goal viewed as particularly important by Shas is the preservation of the haredi community as a “society of learners”

Another overt goal of Shas is to bring about what it terms in its publicity videos a “spiritual revolution”. Some have mistakenly understood this to mean that Shas sought to lead a widespread religious and political revolution. In actuality, this refers to much narrower ambitions involving the only public which Shas wants to represent, i.e., the Israeli Mizrahi population, which it seeks to rehabilitate. Shas argues that only by returning to religion can the solutions to the community’s class and identity problems can be found.

Indeed, since its founding, Shas has been involved with groups seeking to return Jews to the fold. These groups not only recruit new hardcore members into the party but also add to the haredim of the religious Mizrahi world through families, local synagogues and neighborhoods. Despite Shas’s revolutionary reputation, it does not see itself as advocating a social project. For example, when Shas talks about equal opportunity it does not mean equal opportunity to join the modern workforce but, rather, equal opportunity for a Torah education.



Shas believes that religion is the solution to the Mizrahi class and identity marginality in Israeli society

In addition to Shas’s two overt goals, there are two covert objectives which might be inferred from the party’s drive for political power over many years. One is to develop a leadership core from among the families of the new elite of Sephardi rabbis. During the years of Shas’s local and national activity it has trained leading rabbinical figures. They want to use the party’s political power to gain rabbinical jobs, many of them in the state system, for family members. These are positions as city and neighborhood rabbis and as judges in the state-funded rabbinical court system. It should be noted that Shas is not obligated to Mizrahi rabbinical figures from the religious Zionist stream. Nor is Shas obligated to rabbinical figures associated with the Lithuanian Sephardi world. It does, however, feel committed toward those who associate with the party and its

local activities, but even then the obligation depends upon how close one is to its spiritual and political elites.

Another veiled goal of Shas is the Sisyphean attempt to make the philosophy of its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, dominant, if not hegemonic, among religious Mizrahi Jews. This may be seen, for example, in its publication of siddurim (prayer books) based on Yosef’s version of the prayer service, and their distribution in localities where Shas holds power. Another example is support for Yosef’s certification of kosher food, and for educational systems advocating his religious philosophy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that over the years Shas has changed from a Mizrahi haredi party established to support Mizrahi yeshiva students in the haredi world, into a party whose agenda is focused on one person – Ovadia Yosef.

Why do I emphasize these goals and how are they connected to the political positions of the party on peace and territories issues?

Its own political agenda serves the party in coalition-building negotiations. A review of the coalition agreement with the Likud in 1996 shows that the peace process was not an issue then, nor was it in Shas's 1999 agreement with One Israel (formerly and subsequently the Labor Party) headed by Ehud Barak. What was discussed pertained to the other goals outlined above. Shas's pragmatic political stance was instrumental in allowing political players to ignore what seemed to Israeli voters an attempt by Shas to impose theocratic rule. Thus Shas, despite its reputation as a sectarian party with a clearly haredi position, was able to fit into almost every coalition, whether right or left. Prime Ministers from Yitzhak Rabin to Benjamin Netanyahu to Ehud Barak incorporated Shas in their governments despite the fact that the party was plagued by scandals that damaged their legitimacy with their own voters.

Shas's support of Yosef's moderate political line thus allowed it to play both right and left. This freedom, however, has been shrinking over the past decade, for three distinct reasons:

- A) The escalation in Palestinian-Israeli violence during the second Intifada which led to the growth of extremism in Israel, including among Shas's voters and leaders, regarding negotiations with the Palestinians.
- B) One of the most pressing problems facing Yeshiva students is finding housing for young couples. A solution was found in the border areas of the West Bank, where relatively inexpensive housing could be built close to the venues important to haredi yeshiva students. During the 1990s, a number of haredi cities and neighborhoods were built along these areas, conquered by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967, which are now a primary focus of dispute between Israel and the Palestinians.
- C) One cannot ignore the one area where Shas has taken a hawkish position – returning parts of Jerusalem to non-Jews. This issue seems to be a red line for Shas leaders and voters; Jerusalem, as opposed to other parts of the West Bank, is of special interest to them. This position is even part of Shas's constitution. A short chapter entitled "Peace Policies" includes this passage: "(Israel) wants and seeks to live in peace and security with our neighbors, the Arab nations, according to security arrangements designed to protect all Israelis. An arrangement based on dictates from other nations or on gambling with the fate of the people of Israel is unacceptable. Jerusalem is not up for negotiations or for division." This shows that Shas is prepared for the possibility of territorial compromise with the Arab nations and the Palestinians in exchange for security arrangements. Contrary to the approach of nationalist religious

parties which are influenced by radical elements, this section does not refer to the sanctity of the land. However, Jerusalem is singled out as non-negotiable.

Contrary to the approach of nationalist religious parties Shas does not refer in its platform to the sanctity of the land and is prepared for territorial compromise in exchange for security arrangements

What would Shas do if Kadima formed a government? In recent years Kadima has taken over Labor's historic role as the leading party of the center/left in Israel. We believe that Kadima could form a coalition including Shas and the parties on the left for several reasons. First, members of Shas know that Kadima's roots are not those of a dovish, leftwing party. Rather, dovish and hawkish Knesset members came together to form a new political power center whose character is still to be determined but which has so far proved to be stable. Among Kadima's leaders are figures whose security views are little different than dovish members of Likud or hawkish members of Labor; for example, Shaul Mofaz, former IDF Chief of Staff and a Mizrahi Jew. Shas would be able to rely on these figures to explain itself to its voters.

Shas believes that it can find in Kadima a partner which would allow it to continue implementing its haredi ideology and further its goal of establishing a Mizrahi rabbinic elite. It seems to me that it would join a political partnership with Kadima and even welcome it, as Kadima could thereby blunt some of the criticism from secularists against Shas and the haredim. However, a problem might arise in connection with Kadima's hopes to represent the secular middle class in Israel, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi alike. This goal might cause Kadima to come into conflict with the ideology of the "society of learners", which Shas aims to protect. However, this attitude already caused Kadima leader Tsipi Livni to lose an opportunity to establish a government with Shas in the fall of 2008, and most likely she will not repeat this political mistake.

It is likely that Shas will join a political partnership with Kadima, which could blunt some of the animus from secularists toward Shas and the haredi community

Another challenge which Shas might have to face in is the possibility that its former political leader in the 1990s, Ariele Deri, will establish a party to compete with Shas. On the one hand, polls indicate that a socially-oriented party with a traditional outlook under Deri's leadership would cut into Shas's support. Deri is one of Shas's mythic leaders and is

credited, to a large degree, with Shas's electoral success in the '90s. But Deri has a problem – i.e., Shas's spiritual leader, Ovadia Yosef.

As long as Yosef heads Shas, Deri will have trouble starting a new party, since he still sees himself as subordinate to Yosef. Nevertheless, Deri could probably get around the spiritual leadership of Shas by obtaining haredi legitimacy for such a party from Ashkenazi haredi rabbis. They might endorse such a party in order to regain some control in guiding the Mizrachi religious community, reminiscent of their more direct involvement in creating Shas. Hints of this possibility were published in Israeli papers in early 2011, reporting contacts between officials in the court of the Lithuanian Ashkenazi leader Rabbi Shalom Elyashiv and Deri. On the other hand, any return to politics by Deri would be strongly fought by the Israeli right. For example, when Israeli papers reported that Deri might stage a political comeback as head of a new party, newspapers associated with the religious right featured large announcements reminding the rightwing religious public that Deri had been associated with the Oslo accords. Posters with a similar message were put up very quickly and anonymously in areas heavily populated by Mizrachi haredi adherents.

It was unclear who funded this overnight campaign, or if members of Shas were involved. What is clear is that a few days later Deri announced that he had nothing to do with the stories about his forming a new party. The lesson of this episode is that if Deri does return to politics without Shas and its spiritual leader, the Mizrachi haredim will not hesitate to launch an indirect hawkish campaign in order to stop him. This is not to say that such a campaign would necessarily prevent Shas from once again playing a key role in the next government for the reasons outlined above.

For Further Reading...

Research on Mizrachi haredim and Shas:

Kimmy Caplan, "Studying Haredi Mizrachim in Israel: Trends, Achievements, and Challenges", *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* (2008) 22: 169-192.

Haredi society in Israel and the "society of learners":

Menachem Friedman, *Haredi Society: Sources Trends and Processes* (Jerusalem, The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991) (Hebrew).

Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Haredi Jewry* (New York, Schocken Books, 1992).

Nurit Stadler, *Yeshiva Fundamentalism: Piety, Gender and Resistance in Haredi World* (New York, New York University Press, 2010).

Shas's role in the Israeli political system:

David Lehmann and Batia Siebzehner, *Remaking Israeli Judaism: The Challenge of Shas* (London, Hurst, 2006).

Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef and his rabbinical approach:

Nissim Leon, "Zikui Harabim: Ovadia Yosef's Approach toward Religious Activism and his Place in the Haredi Movement within Mizrachi Jewry", *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* (2008) 22: 150-168.