Democratic and Anti-democratic Roots of the Israeli Political System

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the ideological underpinnings of the major Jewish political camps in Israel and the Yishuv—the left, the Orthodox, the national right, the bourgeois center—and evaluates the extent to which they are compatible with liberal democracy as commonly understood in the West. It also analyzes quasi-democratic and non-democratic aspects of older Jewish traditions based on the Torah, the Talmud, and the Halakhah. While the history of Zionism and the Zionist movement contained definite democratic components, Israel's political system was shaped by a range of anti-democratic traditions whose resonance is still felt today.

KEYWORDS: democracy, Knesset, liberalism, nationalism, political culture, political parties, totalitarianism

> Some see the world in the rosiest of lights
> That's not good people say, it's not right
> Some see the world in the gloomiest of shades
> It's the same illness, but a different shape
>
> You should not put on glasses
> Not gloomy not rosy
> You should gaze through your eyes
> And keep them open wide
>
> — Nathan Alterman, "Finale"

Israeli political culture stems from a blend of democratic and non-democratic traditions. It includes elements that have their roots in the Jewish religion, the customs of Diasporic Jewish communities (*kehilot*, sing.

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kehila), modern Zionism, and the major secular ideologies of the nineteenth century—liberalism, socialism, and nationalism. This article explores the democratic and anti-democratic sources of Israeli political culture.

In its early days, Israel's party system comprised four main camps: the national right, the liberal bourgeois right, the socialist left, and the Orthodox. The history, tradition, and values of each of these camps included both democratic and non-democratic elements, albeit in different proportions. The parties within each camp also demonstrated varying degrees of commitment to liberal democracy. Among the left-wing parties, the more moderate Mapai tended toward a social-democratic approach along the lines of Britain's Labour Party, whereas until the mid-1950s, Mapam was closer in outlook to a Soviet-style 'people's democracy'. Within the Orthodox camp, the Mizrahi and HaPo'el HaMizrahi parties (from which Mafdal, the National Religious Party, emerged) were more compromising and pragmatic than the theocratic, dogmatic, and 'ultra-Orthodox' Agudat Yisrael and Po'alei Agudat Yisrael (now Yahadut HaTorah).

The attitude toward democracy among the national right was polarized and ambivalent. Some, such as Ze'ev Jabotinsky, admired American and British democracy, while 'maximalists' like Abba Ahimeir viewed Napoleon's France and Mussolini's Italy as working models for a Jewish state. The bourgeois liberal-conservative right was very similar in outlook to those elements of the democratic West that expressed anti-egalitarian materialistic tendencies. It contained elements that placed greater emphasis on political liberalism (the General Zionists A, HaOved HaTzioni [the Zionist Worker], Aliyah Hadasha [the New Aliyah Party], and later HaMiflaga HaProgressivit [the Progressive Party]), while others adhered primarily to liberal economic capitalism (the General Zionists B and other civic groups, and, after 1948, the General Zionists). Allon Gal (2012: 237) takes a different approach to the classification of parties, distinguishing between "realistic democratic" parties (Mapai, the General Zionists in their various forms, and Religious Zionists) and radical anti-democratic parties on both left and right.

The Orthodox Camp

The link between religion and a democratic political culture is not clear-cut. It is a matter of dispute not only in Israel regarding Judaism, but across other countries and religions as well. One school of thought holds that religion might in fact reinforce the foundations of democracy by challenging governments and leaders and questioning the human ability to comprehend everything and attain perfection, thus holding earthly leaders

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accountable to higher authorities and principles. The opposing school of thought, developed in parallel, holds that religious distinctions between impure and pure, prohibition and permission, and absolute good and absolute evil are, in their very essence, anti-democratic, leaving no room for differing opinions and perspectives, compromise, or tolerance.

Western liberal democracy preserved the early Christian 'two swords' doctrine, distinguishing political from religious authority, as expressed in the statement Matthew attributed to Jesus: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). This principle, by which the state does not impose religious laws, simultaneously protects both freedom of religion and freedom from religion. Because neither Islam nor Judaism traditionally differentiates the secular political sphere from the spiritual and religious sphere, liberal democracy conflicts with their worldviews. Halakhah, like the Islamic Shari'a, sets out a body of law that governs social organization and individual conduct in all areas. This is the basis of the view that there exists "an unbridgeable contradiction between liberalism and revelatory religions that aim to actualize themselves on earth" (Porath 1986: 61). Accordingly, some streams of Orthodox Judaism recognize neither the autonomy of governments (constitutions and laws of liberal democracy), nor their supremacy. This explains why some religious parties believe that a government is fully entitled to impose religious laws on the nation as a whole. That outlook is, of course, completely at odds with the values and customs of liberal democracy.

In many areas, the Orthodox (not only the ultra-Orthodox) Jewish worldview cannot, by its very nature, reconcile with the principles of liberal democracy. Even though the structure of the traditional *kehila* had some underpinnings of popular democracy, it did not recognize individual liberties. Indeed, under widespread interpretations of Halakhic law, the *kehila* had the right to impose its rules of morality on every individual without distinguishing public from private affairs, for it applies to all aspects of human existence, leaving no areas of life in which individual decision-making is allowed. Rabbi Aharon Halevy explains this as follows: "The Halakhah does not offer itself as a choice or non-binding invitation, for each person to consider whether to accept or reject it" (cited in Levontin 1983: 39). For these reasons, Heyd (1986: 60) believes that the concept of individual rights, which emerged in seventeenth-century Europe, "is not a basic and integral part of Jewish tradition."

The view that a community is entitled to impose its rules of morality and conduct on all its members was also ingrained in the early American Calvinist and Puritan traditions. Gradually, however, proponents of these beliefs began to recognize that, in a heterogeneous society with a

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variety of religions and approaches to religious issues, the laws of the state should not be used to impose religious values and norms of conduct. The Orthodox parties in Israel, by contrast, insist to this day on the imposition of religious laws, arguing that every state dictates 'do and don't' rules, and that religious laws are preferable to laws rooted in secular ideologies. In the strictly Orthodox worldview, genuine freedom comes from worshiping God and obeying the *mitzvot*: "None is a free man but he who is occupied with the study of the Torah" (*Sayings of the Fathers*, VI:2), or, in the words of the eleventh-twelfth century Spanish poet Rabbi Yehuda HaLevy, "Only the servant of God is free." Rabbi Avraham Grodzinski (1884–1944) argued that anyone seeking freedom in the liberal sense was actually perpetuating the possibility of evil (cited in Brown 2012: 52, 54).

As a matter of doctrine, Orthodox Judaism does not distinguish between religious and secular Jews. In principle, a party such as Agudat Yisrael would hence, were it possible, impose Halakhah on all Jewish citizens of Israel in all spheres of life. Indeed, as early as the 1920s, Agudat Yisrael demanded that the laws of the Torah be applied to the Yishuv and its institutions, and that life in the Yishuv be conducted in accordance with the Halakhah.[1] Notably, the Orthodox parties managed to secure a majority of supporters in the Knesset for legislation that conflicts fundamentally with liberal-democratic principles, including laws that do not permit official marriage to anyone disqualified from marriage by the Halakhah. This includes civil marriages for non-observant Jews and intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews, or between different groups of non-Jews (e.g., between Muslims and Christians).

The Orthodox worldview conflicts with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy in other ways as well. It holds that the law of the Torah is the supreme legal and moral authority, superseding any human law or constitution, for "God is the sovereign of the Jewish people and His authority is absolute and unchallengeable" (Elazar 1983a: 44). Although the concept of supreme law has a democratic aspect, as it limits the authority of political rule, it nevertheless cannot be reconciled with the principle of sovereignty of the people, on which every liberal democracy is based. As such, the Orthodox position has been termed "absolutism of the law" (Susser and Don-Yehiya 1983: 100) or, alternatively, "democracy bound by divine law" (Goitein 1983: 171). In this spirit, Israel's former Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren stated that the principles of democracy cannot apply to "the sacred fundamental laws of the Torah of Israel, which constitute the roots of the soul of the people" (cited in Ra'anan 1980: 113).

Even the more moderate leaders of Religious Zionism have been torn between their loyalty to the Halakhah and acceptance of the principles of democracy, at least on a *de facto* basis. Rabbi Yoel Ben-Nun, regarded as

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a moderate Religious Zionist, has also opposed any legislation conflicting with the Halakhah and rejected any intervention by the High Court of Justice in matters of religious law, such as matrimonial laws (cited in Moutner 2007: 577).

The rejection of democracy on the basis of religious tradition has at times been even harsher and more blatant. Rabbi Goren, for example, asserted, "I have reviewed the entire Torah, the Talmud, the Shulchan Aruch [compilation of Jewish law], and [the writings of] Maimonides, and I found no mention of this *mitzvah* called 'democracy'" (cited in Ra'anan 1980: 113). According to ultra-Orthodox leader Rabbi Elazar Shach, "Democracy is *treif* [unkosher, impure] and [its] purpose is to uproot and destroy the people of Israel … It is actually democracy that abolishes boundaries and destroys humanity" (cited in Kremnitzer 2007: 410).

All Orthodox parties in Israel oppose the adoption of a state-drafted liberal constitution because, in their view, the Torah is the sole constitution of the Jewish people and must under no circumstances be exchanged for a secular one. The Constituent Assembly, elected in 1949 to draft a constitution for the newly founded state, essentially turned into a regular parliament (the Knesset)—among other reasons, or perhaps primarily, because of the religious parties' opposition to a liberal-democratic constitution. They were fully aware, as they are today, that a constitution based on the liberal-democratic principles of the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence would challenge the legality of religious matrimonial law and other religious laws that became laws of the state and would upset the delicate balance of relations between religion and state.

In principle, the Orthodox parties thus regard the Halakhah as superseding the secular laws of the state. In this context, Agudat Yisrael openly asserted that it would encourage its supporters to violate any law requiring *yeshiva* students or Orthodox girls to serve in the army. In the same spirit, the Orthodox movement Gush Emunim declared that under divine law the West Bank and Gaza Strip are an inseparable part of Israel, and because no one has the right to violate the word of God, it would not accept the decision of any elected government to withdraw from these territories. An official publication of the movement explicitly stated: "We are commanded by the Torah in accordance with the will of God, and therefore we cannot be subject to the customary rules of democracy" (cited in Ra'anan 1980: 45).

The spiritual leader of Gush Emunim, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, went even further, saying, "We are commanded by the Torah, and the Torah is eternal and the government is irrelevant" (*Ma'ariv*, 19 July 1974). Because of these and similar views, Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983: 135–136) call Gush Emunim and Agudat Yisrael a "potential threat to Israel's democratic

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order," arguing that, regardless of their differences in terms of political style and goals, both deny that society is the ultimate source of authority and that the voting public has the right to set social policies.

During inter-party debates in the 1990s over the proposed legislation, Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, Mafdal insisted that it not apply in the following areas: laws prohibiting or permitting marriage and divorce; laws governing religious conversion; laws aimed at preserving religious values and Jewish tradition; laws related to the Jewish character of the state, the authority and status of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate, religious courts and councils, and observance of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays; kosher dietary laws in the Israel Defense Forces and other public institutions; laws related to the sale of lands to non-Jews; laws related to the nature of religious education; and laws establishing the authority of the minister of defense to waive or postpone military service. It goes without saying that adoption of Mafdal's position would have led to legislation that undermines many human and civil rights, in complete contravention of what is considered acceptable in liberal democracies.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762–1839), a highly influential teacher and commentator, pronounced that "the new is forbidden by the Torah." His decree, accepted in principle but not necessarily in practice by much of ultra-Orthodox Jewry, is fundamentally undemocratic. If everything new is forbidden, then there is no point in having elections, a parliament, legislation, or policy reform.

The Halakhah does not recognize equality between men and women, nor between Jews and non-Jews, and numerous surveys and salient political views throughout the Orthodox population have shown that attitudes of the ultra-Orthodox population reflect these views. In the Yishuv era, for example, the ultra-Orthodox community (including Agudat Yisrael and Po'alei Agudat Yisrael) refused to participate in elections to the representative assembly because its demand that women not be granted voting rights was rejected. In 1955, Mafdal refused to form a municipal coalition in Tel Aviv with Mapai because the latter's list of city council candidates was headed by a woman—Golda Meir (Aloni 2008: 126).

Regarding the political rights of non-Jews, according to Liebman (1986: 66), "the ultra-Orthodox community was even less inclined than the national-religious parties to grant political rights to non-Jews." The non-egalitarian (and therefore undemocratic) approach of the ultra-Orthodox perspective was starkly evident in Rabbi Shach's stated opposition to the principle of 'one person, one vote' in the Knesset: "We pray to the Master of the Universe to release us from the curse of this new democracy that has been sent to the world, which is just like the disease of cancer that has been sent to the world" (cited in Kremnitzer 2007: 411).

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The Leftist Camp

For many years, Labor Party's positions on liberal democracy remained ambiguous. Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983: 25–28) argue that the fundamental principles of the left during the Yishuv era were *halutziyut* (pioneering spirit), labor, redemption of the land, equality, modesty, military courage, nationalism, class awareness, rejection of the Diaspora, and the creation of a 'New Jew'. Liberal democracy, in their view, was not one of the core values of socialist Zionism. Nor was parliamentary democracy, says Josef Gorni (1973), who researched the history of Israel's Labor movement. Asher Meniv (1977: 50), a leading intellectual of the United Kibbutz Movement, admits that there was a "vast gap between the views [of the left] regarding public affairs and the Western democratic approach."

Apparently, the early socialist Zionists viewed the establishment of a democracy as secondary in importance to the realization of national rebirth and the creation of a new and just society. Berl Katznelson shared the view of many in the Labor movement when he asserted: "There are objectives, goals, and values that, in order to actualize them, it is permissible to undermine [formal democracy]" (cited in Shapiro 1975: 106). Remarks by leaders of the movement Ahdut HaAvoda, who strongly opposed a competitive party system and pluralism of unions, indicate that they, too, did not view multi-party democracy as a 'natural' or obvious necessity.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Katznelson, Ben-Gurion, and other leaders of the Labor movement accepted the basic principles of parliamentary democracy at the theoretical level, but their actual words reveal doubts about the effectiveness of a democratic government. At times they openly questioned whether the pursuit of democracy was consistent with the goals of efficiency and productivity, seen as supreme values in the Yishuv. Katznelson, for example, distinguished between "material democracy," which serves the goals of Zionism, and "formal democracy," which wastes valuable time and energy on "those intellectual details and rules of procedure known as *Geschäftsordnung*" (cited in Gorni 1973: 172). Avi Bareli (2007: 285–294), a historian of Mapai, describes the party during the early days of statehood as favoring "top-down democracy" based on an "institutionalized hierarchy" that opposes "hyper-democracy," maintains a powerful party apparatus, and does not hold timely elections to party bodies.

Gradually, Mapai, the leading party in the Labor movement, came to accept the rules and principles of parliamentary democracy. In contrast, the dominant voices in HaShomer HaTza'ir (from which Mapam eventually emerged) continued for many years to place the "dictatorship of the proletariat" above the "fake" and "bourgeois" liberal democracy that exploited the working class (Margalit 1970–1971: 128). At the same time, like the

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Religious Zionist parties, HaShomer HaTza'ir was a minority party with an interest in preserving the democratic procedures of the Zionist movement, given that minorities are the first to be hurt by a dictatorship. In both Mapai and Mapam, therefore, there existed a gap between ideology, which conflicted somewhat with the democratic perspective, and political activity, which implied a pragmatic acceptance of the democratic process.

The collectivism of socialist Zionist parties was also inconsistent with liberal-democratic concepts. The Zionist left viewed the collective—that is, the whole people (by which it meant what it defined as 'the working class')—as its main stronghold, whose value far outweighed the notion of individual rights. In practical terms, HaShomer HaTza'ir and Mapam even implemented the illiberal principles of collectivism and democratic centralism.[2] These principles dictated a policy that prohibited ideological minorities—in the kibbutzim, for instance—from engaging in oppositional political activity outside of the kibbutz, and even from convening oppositional political gatherings on its territory. In those days, kibbutz members were also prohibited from joining any party other than the "mother party" (Galnoor 1985: 323). Actually, up to the mid-1950s anyone who disputed the Zionist movement's stated ideology was pressured into leaving the kibbutz. Kibbutzim in which minority opinions were able to gain ground usually splintered. The collective in a typical HaShomer HaTza'ir kibbutz would decide matters like the 'appropriate' clothing for members to wear, 'proper' kinds of dances, opinions befitting a 'good' socialist, and what should be denounced as 'bourgeois' or 'reactionary'. The kibbutz general assembly often discussed the most private and intimate affairs of kibbutz members—all of which constituted an invasion of privacy that conflicted fundamentally with the saliency that liberalism in all its forms ascribes to individual liberties, including the right of self-fulfillment and privacy.

During the Yishuv era there was much discourse within the left about the notion of *volonté générale* (general will)—presumably represented by the Histadrut (the association of trade unions), the Labor movement, Ahdut HaAvoda, or Mapai. Indeed, Ben-Gurion deliberately—and successfully—drew a direct link between majority opinion and the *volonté générale*, thereby challenging the validity of any opinions that questioned the supposedly exclusive dominance of the *volonté générale* and the legitimacy of minority parties in the Labor movement that did not accept the authority of Mapai's leadership. Accordingly, former Speaker of the Knesset Yisrael Yeshayahu, a loyal member of Mapai, felt no sense of discomfort in describing democracy as a "dictatorship of the majority" (cited in Shapiro 1977: 35).

The words and deeds of members of the Zionist left also revealed a strong aversion to what they perceived as "egoistic individualism" (Gorni 1973: 169–181). Such individualism was seen as a betrayal of the *volonté*

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générale, the common good, the movement, and the Zionist revolution. In retrospect, it is evident that the influence of Jacobin elements in socialist Zionism, which exalted the value of unity and the popular will, and of Bolshevik traditions that stressed party hierarchy and discipline was in opposition to liberal individual rights. Mapam leader Meir Ya'ari openly admitted later on that in the past his party had been intolerant, suppressing freedom of thought and expression (Margalit 1970–1971: 108). Golda Meir, for example, believed that "all this 'business' of individual rights, 'the person and the citizen,' is bourgeois liberal egoism" (Aloni 2008: 27).

Socialist Zionism's elitist self-perception was also at odds with the principles of liberal democracy. In this regard, the socialist Zionists were undoubtedly influenced by the revolutionary socialism of Russia, first and foremost by Leninism, from which they borrowed the concept of a revolutionary avant-garde. The ideal of the Zionist pioneer (*halutz*, pl. *halutzim*) returning to the homeland, engaging in manual labor, and living in a cooperative agricultural settlement founded on equality led to a sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis the urban proletarian class and the bourgeois middle class. The notion that the *halutzim* should lead the nation as a whole, even if they were not a majority, was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Zionist movement. Paradoxically, although they believed in the concept of a pioneering avant-garde, these socialists were hostile to liberal individualism and the value it placed on individual liberties, viewing it as a form of elitism directed against the collective—the kibbutz, the working class, the party, the people (Ezrahi 2003).

Mapai, which adopted a generally pragmatic approach for electoral reasons, gradually moderated its references to the avant-garde, unlike HaShomer HaTza'ir of the early 1920s, which jealously guarded its self-image as a select Jewish vanguard based on the Leninist model. Perhaps surprisingly, the heroic elitism of the left coincided somewhat with the elitist, heroic ideologies of the right. Indeed, books highlighting the role of the hero in history—by Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henrik Ibsen—were popular at the time among both right-wing movements and the left wing of socialist Zionism (Margalit 1970–1971: 27, 33, 37).

The influence of Russia's revolutionary socialism was also evident in attitudes toward the Soviet Union. The October Revolution had a powerful impact on Ahdut HaAvoda during the 1920s, when it even considered joining the Third International under Soviet leadership. Ben-Gurion was impressed by what he saw when he visited the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, finding much encouragement in Russian communism and even comparing it to the Zionist enterprise in Palestine: "We are on a new path, unlike the rest of the world except for Russia" (cited in Shapiro 1975: 51–53). At the same time, Ben-Gurion did not ignore the human toll of the

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revolution and the denial of Soviet citizens' human rights, allegedly in the name of revolution.

By the 1930s, Mapai (formed by the merger of Ahdut HaAvoda and HaPo'el HaTza'ir) had abandoned slogans such as 'class struggle', 'revolution', and 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and ceased to admire the Stalinist Soviet Union. Mapai, in fact, never saw itself as a strictly socialist party, but rather as a Western-style social-democratic party, whereas HaShomer HaTza'ir maintained close ties with the Soviet Union for some time. Until the mid-1950s, Mapam referred to the Soviet Union as a 'second homeland', and only severed relations with it following the revelations about Stalin's reign of terror.

Throughout the 1920s there was still talk in the Labor camp of the need for a "Labor army" whose recruits, according to Ben-Gurion, would be "unquestioningly committed to following the directives of the Labor army command regarding the location, nature, and order of their duties" (cited in Gorni 1973: 173). The militaristic revolutionary lexicon of the Labor camp (Labor army, Labor brigade, party headquarters, recruitment of members) was borrowed directly from Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and other revolutionary socialists, although in time it became the language of the entire Yishuv, regardless of party affiliation. The socialist Zionist leaders at the time expressed views that bordered on totalitarianism. They spoke, for example, of "an organization whose members are totally committed to the leadership and its goals" (Ben-Gurion), or demanded that Ahdut HaAvoda members "devote all their time to the organization and accept its complete authority in all aspects of their lives" (cited in Shapiro 1975: 54).

Nevertheless, this leftist ideology was not consciously oligarchic or anti-democratic. This would have been superfluous because of the general consensus that existed among the members and leaders of Ahdut HaAvoda, Mapai, and Mapam, and between the members of each party and its own leadership. In fact, some view the leftist tradition of *halutziyut* as "grassroots democracy" (Susser 1989: 2). The labor parties, however, were highly centralized, bureaucratic, and indeed oligarchic. The parties' oligarchies often took measures to consolidate their positions. These included not holding timely elections within the party, using ad hoc 'appointment committees',[3] conducting indirect elections to party bodies, installing members of the party apparatus in the elected body, using straight-ticket voting for the approval of candidates, instructing party members on how to vote for public office positions, having the political leadership take charge of industry and economic organizations, and ensuring strict discipline and organizational compliance.

There were also periods during which Mapam's leader would be elected by applause rather than votes. Similarly, for many years Mapai

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did not hold elections to determine key governmental and party positions. The first race for the premiership in the Labor Party took place between Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres in 1974. Until then, leaders were selected on the basis of informal consultations among senior party members, then officially approved—or essentially rubberstamped—by the appropriate bodies. These 'elections' were standard practice in trade unions, party chapters, and the kibbutzim. Until 1984, Labor Party candidates to the Knesset were selected by appointment committees rather than elections in broader party institutions or primaries. In 1988, in preparation for elections to the 12th Knesset, the party instituted democratic procedures for selecting candidates, which altered the composition of the list significantly, and held primaries in 1992 with some 150,000 members participating.

The National Right

Authoritarianism played a significant part in the political tradition of the national right, whose main proponents during the Yishuv era were the Revisionist party and the Irgun Tzva'i Leumi (National Military Organization). After 1948 they merged to form the Herut movement, the core of today's Likud party.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky, regarded as the father of the Revisionist movement, exemplifies the ambivalent, double-sided approach to liberal democracy characteristic of the nationalist camp. On the one hand, he repeatedly voiced support for democracy, liberalism, British parliamentarianism, and individual liberties, as well as opposition to fascist dictatorships and personality cults. On the other hand, his theory of *had nes* (one banner),[4] ascribing supremacy to the concept of the nation, clashed with liberal democracy and its focus on individual liberties.

Jabotinsky was also prepared to break the democratic rules of the game. In 1925 and 1927, he opposed having the Revisionists participate in elections to the Zionist Congress, although most Revisionists rejected his position at the time. Then in 1935, he, along with most of the Revisionists, resigned from the Zionist movement's institutions after his position on the movement's immediate goal (a Jewish state) failed to secure a majority. "If not victory—then resignation," Jabotinsky declared (Weitz 2012: 503). Because the Zionist and Yishuv institutions were essentially a 'state in the making', this resignation was perceived as a challenge to its democratic legitimacy.

In the tradition of the national right, the state is of supreme and sacred value, and the nation is an organic whole, rather than an agglomeration of independent individuals whose relations with each other and with the

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government are based on a social contract, as perceived in the liberal tradition. The organic theory of state naturally generated deep suspicions of pluralism, inter-party competition, and individual rights. Rightist figures did not hesitate to label their political rivals as traitors, collaborators, or foreign agents.

The Revisionists highlighted military values: courage, order, discipline, and strength. The radicals among them supported a distinctly anti-democratic ideology, not too far removed from fascism. A recently published work even speaks of 'Hebrew fascism' in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s (Tamir 2018). Scholars have explicitly argued that in Revisionism one can find "anti-democratic tones comparable to those of the radical right in inter-war Europe" (Horowitz and Lissak 1977: 209). Most of the elements of fascism—radical nationalism, militarism, aggression, hatred of socialism, aversion to liberalism, scorn for democracy, and the cult of the leader—had their supporters in the radical wing of the nationalist right, mainly among members of the fascist faction Brit HaBiryonim (Alliance of Thugs) and the movement's extremists in Palestine, whose prominent representatives served on the editorial boards of the newspapers *HaYarden* and *Beitar* (Shavit 1978: 233–235).

One of the leading intellectuals of the national right, Abba Ahimeir, author of a regular column titled "MiPinkaso Shel Fascistan [Notes of a Fascist]," admired Mussolini, and even Hitler was not off limits in the early 1930s: "The socialists and democrats believe that Hitler's movement is all show—while we believe it has a shell as well as content. The anti-Semitic shell should be tossed out, but not the anti-Marxist content" (cited in Teveth 1982: 38). Typical of Ahimeir's overall approach was his view that "Judaism did not stand for freedom of speech but for discipline" (cited in Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983: 64). He believed that under conditions of siege in a war for independence, there was no room for leniency or indulgences such as 'liberalismoos' and 'socialismoos' (the so-called -moos suffixes are used to denigrate liberalism and socialism). Ahimeir and fellow members of Brit HaBiryonim saw democracy as a system in decay, whereas fascism represented vitality, courage, rootedness, youthfulness, authority, leadership, and common, as opposed to individual, interests (Shavit 1978: 232–233).

Another prominent Revisionist radical who was distinctly anti-democratic was the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg, a member of Brit HaBiryonim. A supporter of fascism and 'revolution', he saw everything in black-and-white terms and regarded all rivals as enemies, whom he abused verbally. In addition to Christian Europe and the Arab East, he also despised the Jewish bourgeoisie worldwide and the Labor left in Palestine (Weitz 2012: 498). He supported political terrorism against political enemies, as

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evidenced by his identification with the Sicarii.[5] He also believed in active minority rule: "There is value only in the minority, only in activists, only in the young" (ibid.: 500).

Although not as extremist as Brit HaBiryonim, the Irgun and Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) also rejected the authority of the Yishuv's elected bodies, claiming that the Labor parties in charge were British collaborators and traitors to the Zionist cause. Both denied the democratic legitimacy of the national institutions and refused to participate in elections or abide by their outcome (and were therefore known as *haporshim*, the secessionists). During the Yishuv era, there was also talk among Revisionists about legislation to prohibit strikes and make arbitration compulsory in cases of labor disputes—proposals in the spirit of anti-democratic authoritarianism. Lehi leader Israel Eldad (né Scheib) later admitted that, in contrast to Jabotinsky, "we were not a generation that struggled for civil freedom, liberalism, and democracy" (Weitz 2012: 498).

Irgun commander Menachem Begin, the head of Herut (1948–1973) and its alliances (Gahal [Herut-Liberals Bloc] in 1965–1973 and the Likud since 1973), was, like Ben-Gurion and Jabotinsky, far from perfect on the scale of democratic leaders. However, unlike the extremist wing of his movement, Begin accepted as a matter of principle that statehood would mean disbanding the Irgun's underground military, becoming a legitimate party, integrating into state institutions, and participating in elections. At the third Herut conference in April 1954, Begin settled the dispute between the democratic majority and extremist minority in Herut by declaring that "there is only one way to government: the voter's ticket, only the voter's ticket" (Weitz 2012: 523). And Begin did, with democratic patience, wait in the opposition (1948–1967, 1970–1977), and as a minor coalition partner in the National Unity government (1967–1970), before being elected prime minister in 1977 through the 'voter's ticket'.

Nevertheless, some aspects of his conduct after the Irgun disbanded also fell short of democratic ideals. For decades Herut operated under the leadership of an indisputable leader: Begin was the party's leader from its founding in 1948 until he resigned from political life altogether in 1983. Former Irgun members in Herut referred to him as 'Commander', and any challenge to his authority was instantly rejected by 'the fighting family' (as the Herut leadership, composed of former Irgun members, was labeled). Yohanan Bader (1979: 21) describes how Herut compiled its first list of Knesset candidates: "Begin did the work, and the Central Committee affirmed his proposal."[6] It was only after Begin resigned as prime minister and leader of the Likud that a democratic contest for leadership became legitimate in the party.

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Begin's management of crises, such as the Altalena affair and reparations from Germany, was also problematic. Weitz (2012: 518) disputes claims by Ben-Gurion and the left that the Altalena affair marked an attempt to launch a violent coup and an undemocratic takeover of the government. Nevertheless, it was evident that Begin could not control his movement's extremist wing and its blatantly undemocratic activities. During the Altalena affair, Irgun members refused to turn their arms over to the IDF and called on all Irgun soldiers to desert their army units. During the crisis over reparations from Germany, which Begin and his party fiercely opposed, the movement organized a violent demonstration on 7 January 1952, at which members threw stones at the Knesset and tried to break in by force. Begin delivered a fiery speech: "This will be a war to the death … When you shelled us [on the Altalena] I gave the order, 'No!' [to civil war]. Today I give the order 'Yes' … If it is my fate to die and not to see my son—I prefer death to shame … You will not defeat us, there is no power in the world that will force former Irgun fighters into surrender … This war will be neither short nor cold. We may go hungry, we may have to part from our families, we may go to the gallows" (ibid.: 521–522).

At the same time, Weitz (2012: 522) disputes Ben-Gurion's claim that this was an attempt by "political thugs and killers" to topple Israeli democracy. In Weitz's view, Begin was swept up by emotional fervor and lost control over his words and deeds, and did not give the order to throw stones at the Knesset (ibid.). Yet some of Begin's speeches in later years also clashed with his overall democratic perspective. For example, in a campaign speech leading up to the June 1981 elections, he said, referring to his rivals in the Ma'arach (Alignment of the Labor Party with Mapam and some minor allies): "They wave a red flag, they lend a hand to Israel's haters, Israel's persecutors, Israel's destroyers, they are the Communist Soviets. A red flag they raised! This is not for us!" (Aloni 2008: 241).

The Bourgeois Center: Liberals and Conservatives

From its inception until the 1930s, the Zionist movement was dominated not by distinct ideological camps—socialists across the spectrum, Religious Zionists, and nationalist Revisionists—but by members of the center, split into various groups that included distinct liberals or conservatives, such as Theodor Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Sokolov, and Menachem Ussishkin. Herzl, indisputably a liberal, rejected any form of autocracy and, like other liberals at the time, also had an aversion to democracy, which he identified as rule by the masses.[7] The liberals and conservatives

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were less ideological, less collectivist, less extreme, more pragmatic, and more tolerant than the ideological camps—and were opposed to both the ideological right and left. The conservative mainstream in the Yishuv did, however, tend toward a form of non-egalitarian democracy with preference granted to land and property holders.

Concluding Remarks

This article clearly shows that the political tradition as regards democracy in Israel includes a mixture of democratic, non-democratic, and even anti-democratic components. The religious and historical heritage of Judaism had democratic facets, such as self-government, autonomy, equality, pluralism, popular influence, consensus, elections, majority rule, as well as opposition to the tyranny of the majority and to a permanent ruling elite. The dispersion of Jews in exile also brought about institutional decentralization and the lack of a single leader. The history of Zionism and the Zionist movement also contained definite democratic components. Indeed, Zionism was profoundly influenced by Western (British and American) democratic ideas and practice. It included federal organizational principles, elected leaders, and multi-partyism. The major Zionist parties were influenced by Western democracy, either profoundly (e.g., the social-democratic Mapai and the centrist General Zionists) or to some extent (e.g., the left-socialist Hashomer Hatzair/Mapam, the Orthodox Mizrahi/Hapoel Hamizrahi/Mafdal, and the nationalist Revisionists/Herut).

However, it is clear from the discussion above that "there was no shortage of parties with undemocratic tendencies and undertones, both in and outside of the country" in the Zionist movement (Galnoor 1985: 66). At times, the guiding ideologies of the Yishuv's architects clashed directly with the liberal-democratic perspective. Although a multi-party system is a necessary condition for liberal democracy, many in the Yishuv saw it as a form of sectarian party politics, generating blind hatred and unnecessarily fomenting 'Jewish wars'. The democratic outlook—which holds that a heterogeneous society should have political organizations representing special interests (class, geographical, and others) and differing perspectives on the economy, society, and foreign policy—was not the mainstream approach.

We find evidence of this, for example, in the aversion to the word 'party'—from the early days of the Yishuv up to present—because of its negative, divisive connotations. Alternatives have included terms like *hit'ahdut*, or unity (e.g., Ahdut HaAvoda); *brit*, or alliance (e.g., the

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General Zionists); *tnu'a*, or movement (e.g., Herut, HaTehiya, Tzomet, Kach, and HaTnu'a); *reshima*, or list (e.g., Reshima Komunistit Hadasha, or New Communist List); *mahane*, or camp (e.g., Mahane Zioni, or Zionist Camp); *hazit*, or front (e.g., Hazit Datit Toratit, or Religious Torah Front); and even *merkaz*, or center (e.g., HaMerkaz HaLiberali, or the Liberal Center). The Labor Party tended to speak of the 'labor movement' (which included all the Zionist labor parties), and the Likud likewise spoke of the 'Likud movement'.

The problems with Israeli democracy are not purely semantic, of course. Ehud Sprinzak (1986) ascribes the weakness of the rule of law in Israel to the ghetto culture and the East European Jewish township or village (*shtetl*) mentality, as well as the Middle Eastern culture of bribery (*bakshish*). In the *shtetl*, law took the form of antagonistic, unstable, non-Jewish foreign rule, thus leading to a custom of circumventing it by using intercessors (*shtadlanim*), who provided various forms of assistance to Jews living in hostile surroundings through informal arrangements and bribery of corrupt officials. Existential needs made this custom a legitimate practice.

Similarly, *bakshish* culture was prevalent throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Jews living in the Ottoman Empire and in Mandatory Palestine were a minority under a foreign and non-representative government, and therefore continued practicing the customs they had brought with them from their original countries. The difficulties Israeli citizens encountered when adapting to Western democratic rule of law were due to the abrupt severance from the past, which according to Sprinzak (1986), was, and still is, the reason for the frequent violations of law in the country. Examples include ultra-Orthodox violence, underground terrorism and the support it draws, illegal confiscation of land, building code violations, tax evasion, resort to violence in employment disputes, widespread high-level bureaucratic and political corruption, the practice in public administration of 'raiding the state's coffers', and even the lack of willingness to draft a constitution. From this, it would follow, argues Sprinzak, that the Zionist vision of creating a new society marked by a way of life fundamentally different from Diaspora life was only partially successful. Of course, many of these factors are by no means absent in European and American democracies as well.

Long-standing stable democracies are founded on deeply rooted liberal-democratic traditions. History has demonstrated that they can usually withstand authoritarian and totalitarian assaults, although they are not completely immune to this danger at times of external threat, economic crisis, or ethnic conflict. Israel belongs to the category of young democracies that are less stable and more vulnerable, and whose social

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conditions, historical experience, and political culture are not of the type required for stable democracy. This distinction helps us better understand the crisis afflicting Israeli democracy today.

For a democratic regime to exist without relinquishing differences of opinion, competition, struggles, and conflicting interests—which are its lifeblood and the guarantee of its civil liberties—it must base itself on a broad consensus regarding matters of principle. In Israel, certain fundamental issues lack the broad consensus necessary for stable democracy. In this sense, as noted, Israel resembles other young, vulnerable democracies (Spain, Italy, India) more than it does Britain, the United States (until Donald Trump's election), or the Netherlands.

At the time of this writing, the greatest threat to the integrity of Israeli democracy is its continued rule over the West Bank. It is doubtful that Israeli democracy is strong enough to withstand the repercussions of the dispute over this issue, since both hawks and doves view it as a matter of life and death. The disagreement between these two camps is not strictly territorial, nor is it merely a question of delineating the state's borders. Rather, it reflects fundamentally divergent perspectives regarding the desired character of the state.

The hopes that various sectors of society pin on the emergence of a 'strong leader' who will be able to 'establish order' in the overall chaos, without taking into consideration political parties, the Knesset, and accepted democratic procedures, lead to the sobering thought that perhaps the image of a strong and rooted Israeli democracy is not, in fact, firmly grounded in history, traditions, and reality.

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NOTES

1. Charles (Yeshayahu) Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya (1983: 100, 135) do not rule out the possibility that if Mafdal (today's Jewish Home party) were to attain a majority in the Knesset, it too would severely undermine individual liberties.
2. Democratic centralism is a Leninist organizing principle that necessitates strict compliance with the majority, the imposition of the majority opinion over any minority opinion, and the absolute supremacy of higher-ranking bodies over subordinate bodies and all party members.
3. An ad hoc appointment committee was a committee comprising senior party members, whose function was to determine the party's list of candidates to the Knesset. Although the committee would submit its list of candidates to the representative body—the party's central or executive committee—for approval, this was largely a formality. In many cases, an appointment committee would decide on the candidates without taking into account how much support they enjoyed among the party's rank-and-file members, thus undermining intra-party democracy.
4. Under Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionism, the *had nes* (single banner) theory demanded loyalty to one hegemonic ideal: the founding of a sovereign Jewish state with a majority in Eretz Yisrael on both sides of the Jordan River. All other ideals, however important, were subordinate to this as they would entail competing efforts and divided energy, resulting in deferral of the primary mission.
5. The Sicarii were a violent splinter group of Jewish zealots during the revolt against the Romans in the first century CE. Their name derives from the Latin *sica*, meaning dagger, because members were said to carry a dagger under their clothing. They were known for their readiness to use any means toward their end—Jewish independence from Rome.
6. Yohanan Bader (1901–1994) was a journalist, public figure, and Knesset member for Herut from the 1st Knesset through the 7th Knesset.
7. The rise of fascist regimes with the support of the masses throughout the 1920s and 1930s confirms in hindsight that Herzl's concerns about the possibility of a 'totalitarian democracy' were not unfounded.

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