

Half of Shas

Uri Avnery

January 10, 2015

THE SHAS PARTY has split into two. Opinion polls show that both parts are hovering around the 3.12% threshold which is now necessary for entering the Knesset, after the minimum was raised by the last Knesset.

Many people in Israel would be glad if both parts do not make it, and Shas would disappear once and for all from our political landscape.

Not I.

SHAS IS the party of oriental orthodox Jewish Israelis. It is debatable whether it is foremost orthodox or foremost oriental. I believe that the oriental part of its outlook is far more important.¹

Oriental are now about half the Jewish population of Israel. The rift between them and the Jews of European origin, which was expected to disappear over time, is growing. Orientals feel discriminated against, despised by the Ashkenazi “elite” and generally mistreated. They bear a deep grudge. (Ashkenaz is the old Hebrew name for Germany, but applies now to all Europe.)

HERE I must explain my special relationship with the oriental problem. Don't stop me if you have heard it before.

In the middle of the 1948 war I was promoted from private to squad leader and was allowed to choose between Polish and Moroccan recruits. I chose the Moroccans, sprinkled with Libyans and Turks. Without a common language, I trained them and led them into the fighting. I tried very hard to treat them fairly. They thanked me by risking their own lives to save mine when I was severely wounded.

Already during that war, I realized that something was going very wrong. My soldiers, volunteers who had come to Israel to fight without their families, felt that the old-timers—and especially the girls—saw them as knife-wielding savages.

The interaction between these immigrants and the “old” inhabitants was based on mutual misunderstandings. The old-timers who were born and grew up in the country felt vastly superior, and sincerely wanted to help the “primitive” newcomers to become like us. The newcomers, who met prejudice everywhere, naturally resented this attitude. This generally happens in immigration countries.

Fresh from my army experience, I saw from early on that a tragedy was brewing. Already in January 1954 I published in my magazine an investigation entitled “Screwing the Blacks” which caused a nation-wide scandal. We were accused of inciting hatred, sowing division and what not. It took decades for the country to realize that they had a major problem on their hands. In the intervening years, my magazine generally supported the

Oriental.

THE RIFT between Ashkenazis and Orientals is only one of several in Israel. There is a profound rift between orthodox and secular, Jewish and Arab, old immigrants and new ones (from the former Soviet Union), leftists and rightists, inhabitants of Tel Aviv and its surroundings and the “periphery”, and, of course, between well-to-do and poor.

That, by itself, is not so tragic. Every country has internal rifts of diverse kinds.

What is so bad about our rifts is that they are really one and the same. The great majority of the Orientals are also religious, rightist, poor and living in the periphery. They dislike the Ashkenazis, the secular, the Arabs, the leftists, the Tel Avivis, the rich and the “elites” in general.

They are also the electoral basis of the Likud.

WHY, FOR God's sake?

Logic would dictate the very opposite. The Likud is neoliberal, an instrument of the super-rich, the proponent of policies that make the poor poorer, that divert huge funds from education, health and welfare to the settlements and the army. The great majority of the settlers are Ashkenazi.

When an Oriental votes for the Likud, he votes against his own interests. So why does he do it?

There are many explanations, all of them valid.

One of them is that, when the mass of Orientals came to Israel, they found a society that saw the Arabs not only as archenemies, but also as primitive and contemptible. But the Orientals spoke with the guttural sounds of the Arabs, their music was Arab, their culture and mentality was Arab. So the newcomers hastened to shed all these Arab attributes, though with little success. They professed an abiding hatred for everything Arab.

One curious aspect was the retroactive remaking of history. Muslim rulers had welcomed the Sepharadi refugees, who settled throughout their Empire. Jews in Islamic lands lived in peace, protected by Muslim rulers who were enjoined by the Koran to protect Jews (and Christians), the “peoples of the Book”. No pogroms (a Russian word), no expulsions, and, of course, no Holocaust. Anti-Jewish incidents were rare and local.

Yet in Israel, the immigrants from Morocco, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, and even more so their descendents, are convinced that their life in the Muslim world had been one long hell, even before the advent of Zionism started a real struggle.

Once, during a debate in the Knesset, Abba Eban said the same. I sent him a private note and protested furiously. He half-heartedly apologized (“There were lights and shadows. . .”) and sent me his large book on Jewish history, in which he made

¹The term “oriental” needs some explanation. Jews from Muslim countries used to be called “sepharadi”, but that is a misnomer. Sepharad is the Hebrew name of Spain, and the term applies properly only to the Jews who were expelled from Spain by the Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. They were welcomed by the Ottoman Muslim empire and spread from Morocco to Bulgaria and Iran. However, most Jews from Muslim countries are not Sepharadim. My magazine, Haolam Hazeh, started to call them Mizrahim, Orientals, and this term is now generally accepted.

no such claim.

Curiously enough, Palestinians believed for many years that the “Jewish Arabs” would bring about peace and reconciliation, unlike the Arab-hating Ashkenazi Zionist leadership. Arab citizens in Israel also believed that the Oriental Jews would become a “bridge”. They were bitterly disappointed.

Another reason for the attachment of Orientals to the Right in Israel is their socio-economic status. It is a world-wide phenomenon that in colonial countries, the lowest layer of the dominant nation (“white scum” in the US) is the most extreme enemy of the national minorities.

And there is the emotional factor. The Right generally speaks an emotional language, appealing to the heart, while the Left uses cold logic, appealing to the brain. Secular logic does not appeal to the masses of Orientals, who wear kippahs. However, the religion of the Orientals is generally far more moderate and tolerant than the fanatical religion of the Orthodox Ashkenazis.

THE SHAS party was founded in 1982, after several previous attempts to set up an Oriental political force had failed. Shas (the name means 360, the number of the books of the Talmud) was moderately orthodox. In general, Oriental Jews are far more easy-going and tolerant in their religious outlook than their orthodox Ashkenazi counterparts.

The outstanding religious guide and political leader of Shas was Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a charismatic Iraqi-born rabbi, considered a religious genius. It got 4 seats in 1984, rose to 17 in 1999 and settled at around 12 seats.

Its initial rise was due to the meteoric advent of a Morocco-born young man, Aryeh Deri, a very talented politician, who at the tender age of 28 had already attained the rank of Director General of the Interior Ministry.

Deri attracted my attention when he clearly advocated peace with the Arabs and saw his party as an instrument to this end. Rabbi Ovadia, too, advocated peace and unlike almost all other prominent rabbis declared that it was permissible to give the occupied territories back to the Arabs if it saves Jewish blood. He visited Egypt and there expressed similar views.

All this convinced me to support the party. I chose Deri as the Man of the Year of my magazine and wrote a lengthy article, in which I stressed the mission of the Orientals to make peace, based on the cultural symbiosis of Arabs and Jews since

medieval times. All the great personalities of the Oriental Jews, from the religious thinker Moshe Maimonides, who was the physician of Saladin, to the outstanding poet Yehuda Halevy, spoke and wrote Arabic and are also part of Arab culture.

However, throughout the years Shas moved further and further to the right, prompted by the masses of its voters. It was generally an ally of Likud. But during the Yitzhak Rabin interlude, it was Shas which enabled the left-wing government to achieve the Oslo agreement.

RABBI OVADIA died 15 months ago and was buried in the largest funeral Israel has ever seen. He left behind two heirs, who can't stand the sight of each other.

One is Deri, who had in the meantime been sentenced to 4 years in prison for bribery and fraud and was released after 2 years and 6 months.

The other is Eli Yishai, a humorless, fanatical politician. I once sat next to him on a bench in the Supreme Court. It was like sitting next to a nervous volcano. He did not sit quiet for a moment, moving his limbs all the time, and from time to time jumped up to say something. The judges ordered him again and again to sit down and be silent.

The enmity between the two is personal, but it has profound political implications. Shas has split into two almost equal parts.

The part led by Yishai has turned determinedly to the extreme right and is looking for allies among the far-out and even fascist elements. They lead furious attacks on Deri, whom they accuse of being an Arab-loving leftist. As proof they circulate an interview I gave years ago, in which I praised Deri's attitude towards peace. (When accused that I am his friend, he replied with dry humor that with friends like me, he doesn't need enemies.)

THE PRACTICAL implication of all this is that if Deri's Shas survives the election in March with 5–7 seats in the next Knesset. His party may be a possible candidate for a center-left coalition—if the numbers add up. This could be crucial.

For me, this would be the realization of a dream. It would mean that the Israeli peace movement would break out of its Ashkenazi, elitist ghetto, and meet with at least a part of the Oriental masses.

At the moment, this is only a possibility. If I were religious, I would pray for it.