



ECPS
EUROPEAN CENTER for
POPULISM STUDIES

Populism & Politics
Article #11

Religious populism in Israel: The case of Shas

IHSAN YILMAZ
NICHOLAS MORIESON

MARCH 30, 2022

[DOI.ORG/10.55271/PP0011](https://doi.org/10.55271/PP0011)

BIOS

IHSAN YILMAZ is Research Professor and Chair of Islamic Studies and Inter-cultural Dialogue at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He has conducted research on nation-building; citizenship; ethnic-religious-political identities and their securitization (Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia); minority-majority relations (Australia, Turkey, the UK, and the USA); socio-legal affairs, identities, belonging and political participation of Muslim minorities in the West (the UK, Australia, and the USA); Islam-state-society relations in the majority and minority contexts; global Islamic movements; political Islam in a comparative perspective; Turkish politics; authoritarianization; Turkish diasporas (the UK, Australia, the USA); transnationalism; intergroup contact (Australia); and politics of victimhood (Australia, Turkey).

NICHOLAS MORIESON holds a Ph.D. in politics from the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, and a Masters in International Relations from Monash University. He is the author of *Religion and the Populist Radical Right: Christian Secularism and Populism in Western Europe*, and a casual Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation.

ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, populism has become increasingly prevalent in Israeli politics. While scholars and commentators have often focused on the populist rhetoric used by Benjamin Netanyahu, this is hardly the only manifestation of populism within Israel. For example, Shas, a right-wing populist party which seeks to represent Sephardic and Haredi interests within Israel, emerged in the 1980s and swiftly became the third largest party in the country, a position it has maintained since the mid 1990s. Shas is unique insofar as it merges religion, populism, and Sephardic and Haredi Jewish identity and culture. Indeed, Shas is not merely a political party, but a religious movement with its own schools and religious network, and it possesses both secular and religious leaders. In this article, we examine the religious populism of Shas and investigate both the manner in which the party constructs Israeli national identity and the rhetoric used by its secular and religious leadership to generate demand for the party's religious and populist solutions to Israel's social and economic problems. We show how the party instrumentalizes Sephardic ethnicity and culture and Haredi religious identity, belief, and practice, by first highlighting the relative disadvantages experienced by these communities and positing

that Israeli "elites" are the cause of this disadvantaged position. We also show how Shas elevates Sephardic and Haredi identity above all others and claims that the party will restore Sephardic culture to its rightful and privileged place in Israel.

INTRODUCTION

Populism, once rare in Israel, has become “central to Israeli politics” since the 1990s (Ben-Porat et al. 2021: 6). While Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu has been identified as a populist who uses religion to define Israeli identity (Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020; Ben-Porat et al. 2021), the emergence of Shas, a populist and ethno-religious movement, proved that religious populist parties could enjoy political success in the country. Shas possesses the typical features of a right-wing populist party: it is anti-elite, constructs an imagined community (“the people”) based on religious and ethnic identification, and consistently “others” and disparages those who fall outside this community. In this article we explore the religious populism of Shas, which rose from obscure beginnings in the mid-1980s, reached its zenith in the late 1990s and early 2000s—when its leader Aryeh Deri became known as the kingmaker of Israeli politics—and finally declined into a junior coalition partner of the dominant Likud party in the 2010s. We focus, in particular, on its ethno-religious cleaving of society and the manner in which the party generates public demand for its populist agenda. To do this we examine the political rhetoric of Shalom Cohen, a rabbi and spiritual leader of Shas, and party chairman Aryeh Deri and show how their emotional rhetoric plays an important role in creating the atmosphere required for their religious populism to succeed.



Campaign signs for the Israeli government "Shas" party head by Arye Deri, depicting Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, prior to the April 2019 elections in Safed, Israel on March 10, 2019. Photo: David Cohen.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ZIONISM, JUDAISM, AND POPULISM IN ISRAEL

The relationship between Judaism and populism is somewhat different than the relationship between other monotheisms and populism: "the link between the Jewish religion and populism in Israel does not require mediation between religion's universal and populism's particular claims, since for Jewish orthodoxy there is an absolute correspondence between Judaism as a religion and the Jewish people" (Filc, 2016: 167). Indeed, Israel is the only country in which a majority of citizens identify with Judaism. Moreover, within Israel, national identity is often intertwined with "Jewishness," a notion which played an important role in the country's creation and subsequent development.

Israel is a product of the 19th century Zionist movement, which removed itself somewhat from

Orthodox Judaism and, influenced by European nationalism, sought to create a nation for the Jewish people. Thus Zionism, and by extension Israel, has always possessed a "Romantic nationalist culture with a strong expressivist dimension; that is, a strong emphasis on self-expression and notions such as authenticity," at least compared to Orthodox Judaism where "the Torah and God's commandments are imposed externally on the Jew" (Fischern, 2014).

By the end of the 19th century, religion and a sense of Jewish spirituality played an important role in the Zionist movement, but the movement was always strongly and predominately nationalist (Hassan, 1988). The rise of Zionism was largely a response to growing anti-Semitism in Europe. Theodor Herzl, an Austrian Jewish journalist, responding to

the growing darkness in Europe, lobbied for a Jewish homeland in the hills of ancient Jerusalem (Zion), where settlers from Eastern Europe were already settling after feeling unwelcomed in their European homesteads (Berry & Philo, 2006; Hassan, 1988). Shumsky (2018) notes that Herzl's vision was a homeland with "cultural-national" aspects, or a kind of "non-Jewish" homeland "for Jews" in the ancient heartland. Prota & Filc (2020) admit that, to a degree, Herzl's dream remains alive in Israel in the form of the detachment between synagogue and state. However, the authors point out that "Zionism could not completely detach itself from its religious roots, as religion was indispensable as a marker of boundaries and a mobilizing force" (Prota & Filc, 2020). The turbulent events that followed the Ottoman Empire's collapse left a power vacuum in the Arab peninsula that allowed the Zionist movement to take a more aggressive nationalist stance and begin to create a Jewish state. The early political leadership of the Israeli Labour Party propagated a narrative of self-defence, legitimizing the idea that Zionism meant protecting the Jewish nation from hostile foreign forces (Prota & Filc, 2020). The importance of protecting the Jewish nation oriented early Israeli politics toward nationalism; however, Zionism remained attached to Judaism and "continued to be directed by powerful religious structures" (Prota & Filc, 2020; Raz-Krakotzkin, 2000; Ben-Porat, 2000).

Jewish nationalism in its religious forms has often been a powerful political force in Israel

(Pinson, 2021; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020). While Ashkenazi Zionism has proven the most potent religio-cultural political force in Israel, other forms of religious nationalism exist alongside it—and at times play an important role in Israeli political culture. For example, the Sephardim Shomrei Torah / Sephardi Torah Guardians (Shas), formed in 1984, rooted its populism in religious notions of Jewishness rather than in Zionist nationalism. Shas has consistently sought to represent the interests of Haredi and Sephardic Jews in Israel, relatively disadvantaged groups, and to give them a voice within the Knesset. While Shas has never been able to form a majority government, it became a major force within the Knesset in the 1990s, and although its popularity has since declined, it retains several seats in parliament and regularly forms governing coalitions with larger parties.



Dome of the rock, temple mount and wailing wall at sunset in Jerusalem, Israel in September 2019.

SHAS' RELIGIOUS POPULISM

Shas' core message—that the Sephardic community's poor economic and social position within Israel is not accidental but the result of Ashkenazi and secularist repression—is designed to encourage followers to perceive themselves as “victims” of economic injustice in the form of Ashkenazi economic monopolization and to thus evoke feelings of “resentment” within the Israeli Sephardic ultra-Orthodox community (Sarfati, 2009; Kimmerling, 1999). Thus, the Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews are portrayed by Shas' leaders as the authentic people of Israel but also as an “oppressed” people who must band together to restore Sephardic culture to “its former glory” (Shalev, 2019). Increasingly Shas' leaders have encouraged their followers to express resentment toward Arabs, Muslims, and Christians in Israel. Shas' leadership has often used negative emotions to legitimize its construction

of outgroups and to demonize internal and external enemies. At the same time, it has instrumentalized positive emotions—sometimes connected to religion and the divine—to justify its construction of an ingroup (“the people”).

Ovadia Yosef, who founded Shas in 1984, acted as the party's spiritual leader until his death in 2013. As Shas embraced anti-Arab Muslim and anti-African discourses and policies, Yosef's rhetoric toward Shas' designated Israeli outgroups hardened. For example, by 2001 Yosef no longer expressed any sympathy for the plight of Palestinians but instead labelled them “evil, bitter enemies of Israel” and preached that “it is forbidden to be merciful to them. You must send missiles to them and annihilate them. They are evil and damnable” (BBC, 2001). In this sermon, Yosef claimed that Arabs are



Israeli minister of Internal Affairs, Arye Deri, attends the "Yosef Daat School Dinner" in Safed, Israel on October 19, 2017.
Photo: David Cohen.

"murderers" and terrorists and implied that they were the source of the ontological insecurity of the Jewish state (BBC, 2001). He relied on religion to justify his dehumanization of Arab Muslims by claiming that "God should strike them with a plague" and "The Lord shall return the Arabs' deeds on their own heads, waste their seed and exterminate them, devastate them and vanish them from this world" (Haaretz Service, 2010; BBC, 2001).

Later, the Rabbi backtracked from these statements and said these were only directed at terrorists and not all Arabs (Ettinger, 2010). However, his comments have almost certainly contributed to the legitimization of the use of state violence against Palestinians. The Rabbis in the party also use a news media network to spread the idea of an Arab threat to Israel to further instil fear in their followers. Shas' newspaper editor, Rabbi Moshe Shafir, for example, believes that the integration of Arabs into the Jewish homeland is "a threat to the institution of marriage, to the decent family" (Shafir, 2012). In making this somewhat strange claim, Shafir attempts to frighten his followers into believing that Arabs pose a threat to the Jewish family, increasing the feelings of ontological insecurity felt by many Israelis and legitimizing their anxieties.

Shlomo Benizri, another Shas politician, stated that "Israel is a nation only through the Torah" and a "sacred homeland" where all non-Jews are not welcome (Porat & Filc, 2020). Part of being Jewish, for Shas, though, is following a "correct" religious lifestyle. Thus, as part of their anti-secular stance, many Shas members have directed hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community. An example of this occurred when a gay youth centre in Tel Aviv was attacked by an orthodox mob, leading to the death of two people and injuries to ten others (Meranda, 2009). This incident took place after a Shas member, Nissim Ze'ev, blamed the gay community for "carrying out the self-destruction of Israeli society and the Jewish people" and went as far as labelling homosexuals "a plague as toxic as bird flu" (Meranda, 2009). Ze'ev distanced himself from the violence, saying he never called for "blood" to be spilled, but he also claimed it is Shas' "duty" to inform Jewish people about the dangers of homosexuality: "It is our duty in any case to warn against this lifestyle. As far as we are concerned, we must not authorize or recognize it, but this has nothing to do with murder. Murder is the most serious and shocking thing. It's madness, and the murderer must face trial. There are no doubts whatsoever" (Meranda, 2009).

ARYEH DERI

Aryeh Deri was an obscure Yeshiva student who rose to political prominence and ultimately became “the kingmaker” of Israeli politics in the 1990s, when his party was able to secure 17 seats in the Knesset (David & Robinson, 2009). Deri was born in a Sephardic community in Morocco but was by the age of five living in Israel. In 1984, he became a founding member of Shas and had a decisive impact on the party, ensuring that it remained grounded in Sephardic ethnicity. Howson (2014: 195), for example, notes that “Deri represented a new form of religious orthodoxy: neither the closed isolationism of the ultra-orthodox nor the religious Zionist/nationalist axis concerned with the territorial expansion of the state. Instead, he was a populist who mixed ethnic pride with a wider language of socioeconomic equality and consensus ‘one nation’ politics that resonated outside of the traditional Shas’s votership.” Deri framed the victimization of Shas’ members and followers as the production of the non-Sephardic domination of politics, religion, and the economy in Israel.

Secular Ashkenazi Jews have been targeted by Deri. It’s a group he perceives to be a liability to “Israeliness” due to their lack of religion. Deri appears to believe that secular Ashkenazi Jews have forgone the ways of the Torah and that their powerful position in society has led to the decline of Jewish culture in Israel. The Mizrahi, on the other hand, are portrayed by Deri as the “real” Jews, with an authentic culture and religious understanding of the Torah.

For example, in an interview Deri expressed these ideas, saying, “But why should I be ashamed of being Mizrahi? [...] Which tradition did they [Secular Ashkenazi] bring here, the ills of American culture?” (Porat & Filc, 2020).

Deri also embodied the idea that due to their authentic understanding of the Torah, Sephardic Jews have been side-lined in Israeli politics and civil society, thus generating a sense of victimhood and resentment in Sephardic Jews. In an interview, Deri claimed “[Secular Ashkenazis] claim that they are Israeliness. They took over Israeliness, they want to be the ones who determine the agenda for being Israeli. They want to decide what an Israeli has to look like, and anyone who does not adhere to their style and standards is not a ‘true’ Israeli; he is a fanatic, a Mizrahi, a fool” (Ben Hayyim, 2002). Deri, in making these statements, claims that the purity of Mizrahi Judaism is the cause of the oppression of Mizrahi people. Deri also claimed, during the peak of the COVID outbreak in Israel, that waywardness from true Jewish values was the cause of the virus and hinted that it was divine punishment: “God is telling us something.” At the time, 70 percent of the country’s cases were detected in Haredim communities (Times of Israel, 2020).

Adapting to the pressures caused by African immigration to Israel, Deri began to target African migrants in his rhetoric and in his support for anti-African legislation. Shas has supported Likud’s efforts

to deport African migrants, who are primarily Muslim and Christian rather than Jewish. Deri, as the country's Interior Minister, has given the group "two options only: voluntary deportation or sitting in prison" (Beaumont, 2018). Africans are thus framed as a security threat, and right-wing Israelis have at times chanted angry slogans toward Africans such as "Infiltrators, get out of our homes" and "Our streets are no longer safe for our children" (Sherwood, 2012). While Deri does not himself use hateful language toward Africans, he has provided channels to "legitimately" express anger towards the group. There are also reports that Deri lied to Israeli citizens, exaggerating the scale of immigration that was occurring (Eldar, 2018). In his defence, Deri claimed he has "compassion toward them [migrants], but I am responsible for the poor of my city. Little Israel can't include everyone" (Eldar, 2018). Thus, Deri has moved, when speaking of African immigrants, from a discourse emphasizing Sephardic victimhood, to one which calls for the defence of Israel from invaders. Defending his anti-immigrant stance, Deri remarked, "This is the right policy to ease the suffering of residents in south Tel Aviv and other neighbourhoods where the infiltrators reside [...] My duty is to return peace and quiet to south Tel Aviv and many neighbourhoods across the country" (Berger, 2017). This frames Tel Aviv as a capital for those who demonstrate "Israeliness" and where intruders are not welcome.

In line with Shas's softer stance on Arabs and Palestinians, Deri has shown sympathy toward Arabs. For example, in 2013 he visited Abu

Ghosh where a vandalized wall read "Arabs out," which Deri criticized by saying that it was morally equal to "Jews out" (Ynet, 2013). "This is not a phenomenon within religious Zionism or in the Haredi sector," Deri said of the vandalization, rather "the people at whom this was directed have lived with us for centuries. They even fought in our ranks" (Ynet, 2013). The presence of Palestinian workers has also been justified by Deri, who remarked that "they [the Palestinians] don't come to live here in Tel Aviv. Palestinians are the 'poor of your city'—when they have it better, we'll have it better" (Eldar, 2018). However, at the same time Shas has also expressed anti-Arab sentiments. In 2017, as Interior Minister, Deri made the decision to strip Alaa Raed Ahmad Zayoud, an Arab Israeli, of his citizenship after he went on a rampage with a knife injuring four people (Wilfor, 2018). Bennett (2017) notes that this step of taking away citizenship of non-Jews citizens is a highly problematic trend in Israel and is used by ultra-Zionists in order to "purify" the land of non-Jews.

Having risen to power, the charismatic Deri, once the "kingmaker" of Israeli politics, was embroiled in a corruption scandal for accepting bribes while he was the Interior Minister. After nearly two years in prison, he was released in 2002. Jail, however, did not end his political career. Deri's party rallied behind him and denied the bribery accusations and later claimed the conviction was part of an Ashkenazi conspiracy targeting Deri because he was a "rising Sephardic star" (Leon, 2011: 102). This victimhood narrative

was used to propagate the idea that secularists and Ashkenazis were again persecuting Shas and the Sephardic community. Deri made a comeback to politics in 2013 and, through Shas' coalition with Likud, secured significant positions in the government for members of his party. However, when the Likud government lost power in the 2021 elections, Deri and Shas elected to enter Knesset as part of the opposition. In 2022, Deri was forced to leave politics after being accused of tax fraud.

SHALOM COHEN

Rabbi Shalom Cohen assumed Shas' spiritual leadership in 2014 following Ovadia Yosef's death. Despite this, Ovadia Yosef remains a key figure whose image is often displayed by the party, and Rabbi Cohen does not enjoy the same esteem or popularity as his predecessor (Hoffman, 2022). Rabbi Cohen is known for his unapologetic stance on Modern Orthodox Judaism and secular Israeli Jews (Ettinger, 2014a; Ungar-Sargon, 2014). A Sephardi himself with links to the Iraqi Jewish community, Cohen is nearing his 90s but maintains a hold on the day-to-day running of the Sephardic community's religious schools and is involved in spiritually guiding Shas (Ettinger, 2014c). Cohen represents a side of Shas cruder in its religious populism, and less diplomatic and more dogmatic in nature. Unlike Deri, who is a seasoned and pragmatic politician, the rabbi is less accepting of deviations from Sephardic Orthodoxy and openly hostile toward certain

migrant groups and Arab Muslims.

The most prominent targets of Cohen's ire have been the Bayit Yehudi party and Naftali Bennett, the present Prime Minister of Israel. Before rising to power in the Knesset, Bennett was a member of the Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home Party) and the Yamina coalition of far-right parties, both rooted in Modern Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Cohen opposed Yamina and the Jewish Home, comparing the latter to the "tribe of Amalek," a people the Torah claims were wiped out by the Israelites (Ungar-Sargon, 2014). Rabbi Cohen's quarrel with Modern Orthodox Judaism, and the political parties associated with the movement, are the product of the movement's combining Judaism, Zionism, and a program of secular modernization (Eleff & Schacter, 2016; Singer, 1989). This movement is thus antithetical to Haredi Judaism and its rigid approach to the halakha (Jewish law) and culture. This has led Rabbi Cohen to condemn Modern Orthodox Judaism in extremely negative terms and to criticize the political parties with which it is associated. Soon after assuming the position of Shas' spiritual leader in 2014, Cohen told followers that the "Bayit Yehudi party is going to hell...God wants us to stay away from them. They will pursue their nonsense. We will pursue our holy Torah" (Ungar-Sargon, 2014). This defensive posture is a clear indication of their drawing a line between the culture and beliefs of the "others" and the correct beliefs of the "pure people."



Activists of different Israeli political parties agitating to vote for the their party by the elections polling station in Holon, Israel on March 23, 2021. Photo: Roman Yanushevsky.

The long-lasting period of Likud-led coalition governments came to an end in 2021. Having lost their position in a government coalition, Shas' spiritual leader warned all party members to maintain a distance from the government and urged them to believe in a God of "divine providence." After the 2021 elections the rabbi warned,

Someone who turns [to the government] to get assistance or [to advance] his interests desecrates God's name and no blessing will come to him [...] There is absolutely no need to turn to the government [for assistance], God will ensure that we

will not want from anything (Sharon, 2021).

Cohen further warned party members that the new government was anti-Judaic, claiming that it was "a government for uprooting religion and Judaism," and that Shas must be united to topple "this wicked government" and preserve Judaism and its traditions in the Land of Israel, "for the sake of the pure education of the children of Israel and to strengthen the yeshivas" (Sharon, 2021).

After the sermon the attending Shas MPs vowed that they would "not allow those who denounce us

to confuse and divide us with tricks, excuses and different explanations, as if their goal is really to take care of those who fear God” (Sharon, 2021).

In addition to defining Shas’s political direction, the rabbi has been quite active in defining for his followers what is and what is not permitted in Judaism. Cohen’s sermons have thus focused on demonizing the lifestyles and ideological approaches embraced by other orthodox Jewish communities, Zionists, and secularists. He has opposed many aspects of modernity, calling upon young men to avoid smartphone use and instead to use that time to study the Torah; he also warned women not to enter higher education because it is not the “way of the Torah” (The Economist, 2015; Ettinger, 2014b). Rabbi Cohen commanded “women students” to “not even think of enrolling in academic studies in any setting whatsoever” (Ettinger, 2014b). Because Shas adheres to an ultra-orthodox doctrine, their use of internet is presumably limited—nor are there any investigations into this aspect of their discourse (Fader, 2017; Campbell, 2011).

Campbell (2011) suggests that “Fears expressed, primarily by ultra-Orthodox groups, shows religious leaders often attempt to constrain Internet use to minimize its potential threat to religious social norms and the structure of authority,” and the author concludes that this area remains under-researched. An opponent of mainstream Israeli Zionism, Cohen questioned the need for an Israeli army, when it was obvious that “it is God almighty who protects Israel”

through the prayers of his supporters (Jerusalem Post, 2014).

In 2021, when over 200 Palestinians were killed in the escalating Gaza conflict, the rabbi met UAE’s ambassador to Israel (New Arab, 2021). During this meeting, in line with the orthodox school of Sephardi theology, Rabbi Cohen referred to the unrest around the Al-Aqsa Mosque by saying, “The issue of the Temple Mount isn’t for us. The Arabs are in charge there” (New Arab, 2021). This is an important point: anti-Arab rhetoric is never expressed by Cohen, suggesting his major enemies are within the Jewish faith and community itself. Thus, his populism is primarily concerned with creating a division not between Jewish people and Arabs, but between his Jews who follow the “correct” form of Judaism—a Judaism rooted in Shas’ understanding of Sephardic culture and its belief systems—and Jews who follow the incorrect form of Judaism. At the same time, Shas is a deeply pragmatic party, and has tempered its populism and challenge to Ashkenazi political and economic power by joining forces with Likud and other parties in coalition governments and supporting much of their legislation.

CONCLUSION

Shas' religious populism is based upon religious and ethnic classifications of groups, yet it contains strange tensions and contradictions. At times, Shas constructs an ingroup which includes the entire Jewish population of Israel, especially when the party's officials claim that African immigrants are a threat to Israeli society, or when Ovadia Yosef called upon Israel to destroy the Palestinians (Filc, 2016; BBC, 2001). Most often, however, the party is very specific about which peoples belong within its ingroup, and which must be excluded. The core members of Shas' ingroup are the Sephardic community, especially economically disadvantaged Sephardic Jews, and members of the Haredi community. Shas claims that this ingroup represents both the oppressed people of Israel, who suffer under the rule of religious and secular Ashkenazi elites, but also the people who practice Judaism in its pure and correct form. Thus, it is these non-Sephardic "elites" who represent, for Shas, the ultimate "other."

Arabs and Muslims, while not included within the core ingroup, are rarely—at least under the party's present leadership—demonized by Shas. Moreover, at times Aryeh Deri has expressed empathy for the Arabs, in whom he appears to see a reflection of the Sephardic people's weak social and economic position within Israel. In a similar way, Rabbi Shalom Cohen's major quarrel is not with Muslims or Palestinians but with forms of Judaism and Zionism he believes to be antithetical to the "true" Judaism

of his own Haredi community.

Shas' populism is therefore somewhat enigmatic but may be said to possess a vertical dimension in which an ethno-religious Ashkenazi "elite" is said to be economically and socially dominating "the people" (i.e. the Sephardic and Haredi communities), and a horizontal dimension in which misguided Jews who follow incorrect forms of Judaism, secularists, African immigrants, and sometimes Arab Muslims and Palestinians, are portrayed as threats to the "true" Judaism represented by the ultra-Orthodox Shas party.

For Shas, Israel is not merely a nation-state in which many Jewish people live. It is a sacred land which ought to be run according to authentic Jewish laws and customs. Secularism and modern Orthodox Judaism are antithetical, according to Shas, to the "true" Judaism which the party represents—and therefore must be opposed. Moreover, Shas "is not beholden to mainstream ideas of 'Israeliness' defined by 'secular European Zionism,' but is rather closer to the 'Sephardic ultra-Orthodox worldview'" (Filc, 2016: 176). Thus, the party's leaders sometimes express scepticism of national anthems, national armies, and anything which comes out of modern secular nationalism rather than Sephardic Jewish traditions. And Shas' goal of "Restoring the Crown—of the Torah—to its Ancient Glory" presupposes the destruction of secular nationalism in Israel and its replacement with (Sephardic) Jewish religious

nationalism. Ultimately, though, Shas is a pragmatic party happy to work with Likud and other Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist parties in the Knesset and to pass their legislation when in power.

Shas demonstrates a unique case of a well synchronized relationship between a political party and the synagogue, which together have constructed a religious populism. Religion, above all, gives Shas' leaders the power to evoke dangerous and powerful emotions in their followers. Shas' leaders attempt to evoke negative feelings in followers by using scriptural references to attack secularists and adherents of modern Orthodox Judaism, portraying them as impure followers of an incorrect religious doctrine antithetical to authentic Judaism. Deri and Cohen portray secular Ashkenazi "elites" as the enemies of the Sephardic community and tell their followers that they are oppressed and kept poor because these "elites" despise their religious views and identity. The Sephardic and Haredi communities are thus encouraged to feel a sense of victimhood and to believe that their enemies are conspiring to keep them impoverished. This sense of victimhood is then further used to legitimize Shas' rhetoric and policies. Ashkenazi secularists, in particular, are held to be a danger to not merely the Sephardic community but to Israel itself because they do not trust in God; instead, they put their faith in armies and weapons.

Modern Orthodox Judaism, too, according to Rabbi Cohen, is a danger to Israeli society. He claims

that the new Naftali Bennett-led Israeli government is attacking Judaism, and that therefore Shas must oppose his evil government at every turn. At the same time, Deri portrays African immigrants—most of whom are Christian or Muslim—as a threat to Israeli society as a whole and demands their eviction from the country. In exaggerating the threat posed by Africans, Deri seeks to create a sense of fear in his followers and to convince them that they face an immigration crisis which has the potential to destroy Israel's economy. It is important to note that while there is an ethno-religious aspect to Deri's call for the expulsion of (non-Jewish) Africans from Israel, his primary justification for his anti-immigrant policies is that African immigrants are bad for the Israeli economy and a major source of violent crime. In other words, being non-Jewish is not the primary reason Deri calls for Africans' expulsion from Israel.

While Shas' present leadership choose not to demonize Palestinians in their respective discourses, the party's alliance with Likud and past comments by Rabbi Yosef indicate an underlying hostility to the Palestinian people. Yosef sought to encourage feelings of hate toward Palestinians among his followers in order to justify Israeli military action in Gaza and the West Bank. Rabbi Moshe Shafi, editor of Shas' newspaper, even claimed that Arab Israelis were somehow a threat to the Jewish family, an attempt to create a sense of fear and panic in supporters which might justify his exclusionary rhetoric. Shas, therefore, at times supports and at other times demonizes Arabs. When demonizing

them as intruders or terrorists, Shas' leaders seek to use the Arab "threat" to create a sense of fear and crisis in their followers; conversely, when showing sympathy for Arabs they seek to use them as yet another example of Ashkenazi secular-nationalist oppression.

Equally, LGBTQ+ Israelis are portrayed by Shas' leaders as deviants who pose a threat to Israel and the Jewish way of life and must therefore be feared and despised. This language has led indirectly to violence and murder, which demonstrates the power and significance of Shas' emotional rhetoric and the party's ability to evoke feelings of fear and rage in their supporters. While Shas demonizes its enemies, it portrays its supporters as a virtuous community that represents the true Judaism and seeks to restore Sephardic pride and power within Israel. In doing so, it attempts to evoke feelings of pride and self-righteousness within its key constituencies, which can be instrumentalized when Shas seeks to mobilize its supporters.

Since its high point in 1999, Shas has consistently failed to increase its share of the vote and struggles to win more than eight or nine seats in the Knesset. Unable to appeal beyond the Sephardic and Haredi communities, it has largely accepted its role as a junior partner in Likud-dominated coalitions or in opposition. Despite this, the party continues to rely on a populist appeal to its key religio-ethnic constituency to galvanize support and maintain its position in the Knesset. And despite another scandal engulfing Deri, it is likely that

a large number of his supporters will interpret Deri's removal from parliament as further proof that Israel's "elites" are all too eager to persecute Haredi and Sephardic Jews.

REFERENCES

- (2001). “Rabbi calls for annihilation of Arabs.” BBC. April 10, 2001. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1270038.stm (accessed on March 22, 2022).
- (2010). “Shas Spiritual Leader: Abbas and Palestinians Should Perish.” Haaretz (Haaretz Service). August 29, 2010. <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5106595> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2013). “Deri: ‘Arabs out’ is the same as ‘Jews out’.” YNews. June 18, 2013. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4393944,00.html> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2013). “Shas.” Encyclopedia Britannica. September 13, 2013. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shas> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2014). “Shasleader: Israel doesn’t need army since ultra ultraOrthodoxprayersprotectit.” The Jerusalem Post. July 24, 2014. <http://www.jpost.com/Operation-Protective-Edge/Shas-leader-Israel-doesnt-need-army-since-ultra-Orthodox-prayers-protect-it-368728> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2018). “Jewish nation state: Israel approves controversial bill.” BBC News. July 19, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44881554> (accessed on March 22, 2022).
- (2020). “‘God is telling us something’: Deri says 70% of Israel’s virus cases are Haredim (Orthodox Jews).” Times of Israel. May 10, 2020 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/deri-calls-for-ultra-orthodox-soul-searching-amid-high-virus-infection-rate/> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2021). “UAE ambassador to Israel outrages Arab world with remarks on Jerusalem ‘madness’ following rabbi meeting.” New Arab. June 1, 2021. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/uae-ambassador-wishes-israel-strength-after-rabbi-meeting> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2021). “Israel’s sidelined ultra-Orthodox parties fear new coalition gov’t.” France24. June 17, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210617-israel-s-sidelined-ultra-orthodox-parties-fear-new-coalition-govt> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- (2022) “Israel.” ECPS. Last updated February 6, 2022. <https://www.populismstudies.org/tag/israel/> (accessed on March 23, 2022).
- Beaumont, Peter. (2018). “Israel to tell African migrants: leave or face indefinite imprisonment.” The Guardian. January 2, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/02/israel-to-tell-african-migrants-leave-or-face-indefinite-imprisonment> (accessed on March 22, 2022).
- Ben Hayyim, Avishai. (2002). “Interview with Aryeh Deri.” Ynet. www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2099674,00.html (accessed on March 22, 2022).
- Ben-Porat, Guy 2000. “In a State of Holiness.” *Alternatives*. 25, 223- 246. DOI:10.1177/030437540002500203
- Bennett, M. Andrew. (2017). “Why

Stripping Non-Jews of Their Israeli Citizenship Threatens Zionism." *Forward*. September 14, 2017. <https://forward.com/opinion/382754/why-stripping-non-jews-of-their-israeli-citizenship-threatens-zionism/> (accessed on March 22, 2022).

Berger, Robert. (2017). "Israel Moves to Deport 40,000 African Migrants." *Voice of America*. November 20, 2017. <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/israel-moves-deport-40000-african-migrants> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Berry, Mike and Greg Philo. (2006). *Israel and Palestine: Competing Histories*. Pluto Press. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18fsc8f

Campbell, Heidi. (2011). "Religion and the Internet in the Israeli Orthodox context." *Israel Affairs*. 17, no. 3, 364-383, DOI: 10.1080/13537121.2011.584664

DellaPergola, Sergio. (2019). "World Jewish Population, 2019." In: *The American Jewish Year Book*. Editors Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin, Volume 119. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Davis, N. J., & Robinson, R. V. (2012). *Claiming Society for God: Religious movements and social welfare in Egypt, Israel, Italy, and the United States*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Davis, N. J., and Robinson, R. V. 2009. "Overcoming Movement Obstacles by the Religiously Orthodox: The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Shas in Israel, Comunione e Liberazione in Italy, and the SalvationArmy in the

United States." *American Journal of Sociology*, 114, no.5, 1302-1349.

Eldar, Shlomi. (2018). "Is interior minister deceiving Israelis about deportation of migrants?" *Al-Monitor*. February 9, 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/02/israel-africa-eritrea-south-sudan-palestinians-aryeh-deri.html#ixzz72aIQTqIZ> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Eleff, Zev, and Schacter, J. Jacob. (2016). *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History*. University of Nebraska Press. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d4v0sk

Ettinger, Yair. (2014a). "Ultra-Orthodox Shas Party Gets a New Spiritual Leader." *Haaretz*. April 8, 2014. <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-shas-gets-a-new-spiritual-leader-1.5244493> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Ettinger, Yair. (2014b). "Shas Spiritual Leader: Women Mustn't Even Think of Higher Education." *Haaretz*. June 23, 2014. <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-shas-spiritual-leader-decries-women-s-higher-education-1.5253042> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Ettinger, Yair. (2014c). "Shas party's new spiritual leader: Deputy religious services minister is 'crazy'." *Haaretz*. April 19, 2014. <https://www.haaretz.com/news/national/.premium-1.586340> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Ettinger, Yair. (2010). "Ovadia Yosef Atones to Mubarak After Declaring Palestinians Should Die." *Haaretz*. 16 September 16, 2010. <https://www.haaretz.com>

haaretz.com/1.5114146 (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Fader, Ayala. (2017). "Ultra-Orthodox Jewish interiority, the Internet, and the crisis of faith." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. 7, no. 1, 185-206. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.14318/hau7.1.016> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Feldman, Anat. (2013). "The establishment of a political-educational network in the State of Israel: Maayan Hahinuch Hatorani." *Israel Affairs*. 19, no. 3, 526-541, DOI: 10.1080/13537121.2013.799863

Fischer, Sholom. (2014). "Two Orthodox Cultures: 'Centrist' Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism." In: *Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004277076_00

Filc, Dani. (2013). *The political Right in Israel. Different faces of Jewish populism*. Routledge.

Filc, Dani. (2009). "Radicalization of inclusion, radicalization of exclusion: The Shas party." In: *The Political Right in Israel*. London: Routledge.

Ghanem, As'ad, and Khatib, Ibrahim. (2017). "The Nationalisation of the Israeli Ethnocratic Regime and the Palestinian Minority's Shrinking Citizenship." *Citizenship Studies*. 21, no. 8, 89-902.

Halbfinger, M. David and Kershner, Isabel. (2018). "Israeli Law Declares the Country the 'Nation-State of the Jewish People'." *The New York Times*. July 19, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/world/middleeast/israel-law-jews-arabic.html> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

com/2018/07/19/world/middleeast/israel-law-jews-arabic.html (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Hassan, S. Shamir. (1998). "DEVELOPMENT OF ZIONIST IDEOLOGY." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 59, 924-933. www.jstor.org/stable/44147065

Hoffman, Gil. (2022). "Kanievsky's generation of leaders is dying out – analysis." *The Jerusalem Post*. March 20, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-701819> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Howson, Luke. (2015). "Lessons from Shas about Israel." *Middle East Journal*. 69, no. 3, 397-412. www.jstor.org/stable/43698260

Howson, Luke. (2014). *The Role of Ultra-Orthodox Political Parties in Israeli Democracy*. PhD Thesis submitted at University of Liverpool. https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/2006321/1/HowsonLuk_July2014_2002641.pdf

Leon, Nissim. (2015). "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the Shas Party, and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process." *Middle East Journal*. 69, no. 3, 379-395. www.jstor.org/stable/43698259

Leon, N. (2011). "The Political Use of the Teshuva Cassette Culture in Israel." *Contemporary Jewry* 31, no. 2, 91-106.

Levi, Yonatan, and Shai Agmon. (2020). "Beyond culture and economy: Israel's security-driven populism." *Contemporary Politics* 26.

Lintl, Peter. (2016). "The dynamics of a right-wing coalition: How the failure of the peace process encourages domestic populism in Israel.". Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik – SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/48905#> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Meranda, Amnon. (2009). "Shas condemns attack on gay center." Ynet News. February 8, 2009. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3755455,00.html> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Nathan, Emmanuel and Topolski, Anya eds. (2016). *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*. Berlin and Boston: DeGruyter.

Peled, Yoav. (1998). "Towards a redefinition of Jewish nationalism in Israel? The enigma of Shas." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4, 703-727. DOI: 10.1080/014198798329838

Porat, B. Guy, & Filc, Dani. (2020). "Remember to be Jewish: Religious Populism in Israel." *Politics and Religion*. 1-24. doi:10.1017/S1755048320000681

Pinson, Halleli. (2021). "Neo Zionist right-wing populist discourse and activism in the Israel education system." *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2021.1872372

Rogenhofer, Julius Maximilian, and Ayala Panievsky. (2020). "Antidemocratic populism in power: Comparing Erdoğan's Turkey with Modi's India and Netanyahu's Israel."

Democratization. 27: 1394–412.

Shafir, Moshe. (2012). "Open Letter." Yom le Yom. <http://www.yomleyom.co.il/BRPortal/br/P103.jsp?cat=217358> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Shalev, Shivanne. (2019). "Israel's Ultra-orthodox Parties Explained." *Israel Policy Forum*. February 21, 2019. <https://israelpolicyforum.org/2019/02/21/israels-ultra-orthodox-parties-explained/> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Sharon, Jeremy. (2021). "Shas spiritual leader: Boycott Israel's government." *The Jerusalem Post*. June 15, 2021. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/shas-spiritual-leader-boycott-israels-government-671084> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Sherwood, Harriet. (2012). "Israelis attack African migrants during protest against refugees." *The Guardian*. May 24, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/24/israelis-attack-african-migrants-protest> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Shumsky, Dmitry. (2018). "Theodor Herzl: A Non-Jewish State of Jews." In *Beyond the Nation-State*. New Haven: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300241099-004>

Singer, David. (1989). "The New Orthodox Theology." *Modern Judaism*. 9, no. 1, 35–54. www.jstor.org/stable/1396432

Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon. (2000). "Rabin's Legacy: On Secularism, Nationalism and Orientalism." In: *Contested Memory: Myth, Nationalism*

and Democracy. Editors: Grinberg, L. Beersheba. Humphrey Institute: Ben-Curion University.

Ungar-Sargon, Batya. (2014). "Israel's shas party gets controversial new leader." Tablet. April 18, 2014. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/israels-shas-party-gets-controversial-new-leader> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Usher, Graham. (1998). "The Enigmas of Shas." Middle East Report. No. 207. pp. 34-36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3013167>.

Wilford, Greg. (2017). "Israel has stripped citizenship from an Arab Israeli for the first time ever." The Independent. August 6, 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-revokes-citizenship-stripped-arab-israeli-alaa-raed-ahmad-zayoud-haifa-kibbutz-gan-shmuel-hadera-interior-minister-aryeh-deri-avraham-elya-kim-human-rights-watch-a7879771.html> (accessed on March 23, 2022).

Yadgar, Yaakov. (2003). "Shas as A Struggle to Create a New Field: A Bourdiean Perspective of an Israeli Phenomenon." Sociology of Religion. 64, no.2. 223-246.

Yilmaz, Ihsan; Morieson, Nicholas and Demir, Mustafa. (2021). "Exploring Religions in Relation to Populism: A Tour around the World." Religions. 12, 301. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050301/>

Zúquete, P. Jose. (2017). "Populism and Religion." In: The Oxford Handbook of Populism. Edited by

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. Oxford University Press. DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.22



THIS ARTICLE IS AVAILABLE FOR FREE DOWNLOADING AT
[HTTPS://WWW.POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG/RELIGIOUS-
POPULISM-IN-ISRAEL-THE-CASE-OF-SHAS/](https://www.populismstudies.org/religious-populism-in-israel-the-case-of-shas/)

©ECPS 2022

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

POPULISM & POLITICS ARTICLES ARE SUBJECT TO INTERNAL PEER REVIEW,
FACT-CHECKING AND COPY-EDITING. FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE
VISIT: WWW.POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG/JOURNALS/PP-PERIODICALS/

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR POPULISM STUDIES (ECPS)

ADRESS: 155 WETSTRAAT / RUE DE LA LOI 1040 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

EMAIL: ECPS@POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG

PHONE: +32 24658318

WWW.POPULISMSTUDIES.ORG