



The Roles and Significance of “Shas” and “UTJ”

On the most important political issues, “Shas” and “United Torah Judaism (UTJ)” are pulling in the same direction as the two parties “Agudat Yisrael” and “Degel HaTorah.” All three defend rabbinic authority, an autonomous Haredi education system, public funding for religious schools (yeshivas) and religious projects, Orthodox control over marriage and conversion to Judaism, and the exemption of yeshiva students from military service. They view these positions as essential for preserving Torah life. Their opponents criticize the fact that “Shas” and “UTJ,” which together represent only about 14% of the Israeli population, claim a disproportionate share of resources and exemptions for their electorate, thereby placing a disproportionate burden on other segments of Israeli society.

The influence of these three parties dates back to the founding of the State of Israel. In 1947, when the Zionist leadership applied to the UN for approval to establish the state, David Ben-Gurion sought the cooperation of “Agudat Yisrael” and feared that internal religious divisions could weaken the campaign for the new Jewish state. He therefore assured the party leadership at the time that Shabbat would be the official day of rest, that state institutions would observe kosher laws, that religious authority over marriage and divorce would be preserved, and that religious schools would retain considerable autonomy. The compromise was intended to unite religious and secular Jews at the birth of the state.

This arrangement continues to shape daily life to this day: Halakha, Jewish religious law, governs important matters of personal status; Israel does not recognize civil marriage; and most regular public transportation comes to a standstill on Shabbat. Yet the status quo has never been static. Through legislation, government decisions, and coalition agreements, Haredi parties have not only defended the original compromise but have also significantly expanded Orthodox authority.

The exemption of the Haredim from military service shows just how far the original compromise has been extended. In 1948, Ben-Gurion deferred the service of about 400 yeshiva students, fearing that Torah scholarship—which had been severely weakened by the Holocaust—might otherwise disappear entirely. The arrangement was limited to a small scholarly elite, and Ben-Gurion later expressed concern as the number grew and some men enrolled in yeshivas primarily to avoid conscription.

In 1977, Menachem Begin’s government lifted the numerical cap on the exemption, transforming what was originally a narrowly defined concession for only a few Haredim into a far-reaching exemption that today benefits tens of thousands of



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Haredi men. This situation not only outrages secular Israelis and religious Zionists, who are required to perform military service, but is also strongly criticized by the army leadership—especially since the Supreme Court has ruled that this exemption for ultra-Orthodox men is unlawful.

Internally, neither “Shas” nor “UTJ” adheres to liberal-democratic standards. Candidates are selected under rabbinical authority, women are excluded from their candidate lists, and important decisions are referred to unelected councils of chief rabbis.

Both “Shas” and “United Torah Judaism” reject civil marriage, non-Orthodox conversion, recognition of Reform and Conservative Judaism, and pluralistic prayer movements at the Western Wall. They also reject official recognition of same-sex relationships and Pride marches. Such positions alienate many Jews in the Diaspora, particularly in North America. Haredi politicians demand that the global Jewish community defend Israel, while failing to recognize the religious legitimacy of millions of those Jews. They describe this monopoly as preserving Jewish unity, yet it often has the opposite effect. Economic dependence reinforces this political power. Poverty is widespread in Haredi families, partly because many men do not work full-time and their schools often offer little instruction in math, English, or science. Instead of pushing for reforms that would improve employment opportunities, Shas and United Torah Judaism protect publicly funded institutions that perpetuate this system. Critics argue that their leaders maintain poverty in order to preserve the basis for their demands for subsidies.

About the Profile:

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