

Shas, the political party and movement of Sephardi religious and ethnic renewal, is recognized even by its opponents to raise central questions for Israeli society: in Shas's methods and its demands social problems are interwoven with religious-secular conflict and ethnic deprivation, Israel's political structure is exposed in all its volatile creativity, and a possible future Israeli Judaism is foreshadowed.

Shas first came to prominence in the early 1980s as a political faction born of internal fights among the ultra-Orthodox community and the resentments of young Sephardim against the discriminations inflicted upon them in the yeshiva world. Within no time they had gained seats in the Jerusalem municipality and then in the Knesset, joining the government in 1988 and occupying various high-spending Ministries almost uninterruptedly until 2003. Although they were removed from the government by Sharon in 2003, they remain a powerful force in local government. The magic formula of combining the call for *t'shuva*, a return to strict religious observance, with social protest against the inequalities and indignities suffered by the country's vast Sephardi population – some 45 per cent of Israel's Jews have a Sephardi parent – paid off handsomely, enabling Shas to break out of the haredi world and gain a predominantly non-orthodox, but traditionally-minded, electorate. Today Shas is the fourth largest party with 11 seats in the Knesset and the polls predict that in the forthcoming elections it will hold on to that number.

Shas's leaders have understood that the children and grandchildren of the people who came to Israel from North Africa in particular, were the victims of Israel's ferociously competitive modernity: they lost out economically, but they were also shocked by the disobedient youth, and the excesses of a permissive society. For the immigrants from North Africa, forced to leave tradition-bound communities in which the difference between Orthodox and secular was unknown, and capitalism barely developed, emigration was traumatic. The Ashkenazim rebuilt their institutions after the war, but for the Jews who came to Israel from North Africa, whose leading elites tended to leave for Europe and the Americas, they were lost for ever. Shas today thrives on a black legend of their arrival in Israel: evocations of absorption camps, of having their *peyoth* cut off, and of DDT sprayings encapsulate their recollections of reception by an arrogant secular Zionist bureaucracy, and underpin frequent expressions of their attitudes to an elite identified as inseparably Ashkenazi and secular.

Although there do not lack Israelis for whom Shas is a party characterized by religious intolerance, fundamentalism, and – to be polite – political opportunism, we have been forcefully struck by its vitality, its diversity, and its pervasive presence in corners of Israeli society which other parties and movements do not reach, especially in so-called development towns, which have high levels of unemployment and low levels of education as well as a disproportionate Sephardi population. For Shas is driven by energetic, decentralized political entrepreneurship: activists arrive in a neighbourhood, take over a couple of trailers on a former building site, or one of the country's ubiquitous bomb shelters, set up a kindergarten or *kollel* (adult Torah study centre) and bring the local youth in. The head of the vast (state-funded and Shas-affiliated) Or HaChayyim network of yeshivas for returnees (*ba'alei t'shuva*), Reuven Elbaz, started out preaching Chabad-style in the billiard halls of Jerusalem. The disaffected or dissolute youth were his target candidates for *t'shuva*.

Shas is thus a leading force in the vast movement of return or reconversion which pervades and polarizes Israel's Jewish population. It finds expression on the airwaves in numerous pirate radio stations and dedicated yeshivas like Or HaChayyim where adult *ba'alei t'shuva*, not infrequently subsidized by the government, pore over texts which others would have learnt as young boys.

For many years Shas was led by the charismatic Ariele Deri in partnership with the revered and imposing former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, but since Deri's imprisonment on corruption charges in 2000, Yosef has been in command, and the emphasis has shifted away from ethnic empowerment to providing religious premises, facilities and schools. The party's political leader, Eli Yishay, formerly Minister of the Interior, is not a very charismatic figure and hopes to gain votes in the forthcoming elections by insisting on the social divide which is becoming ever deeper in Israel's Jewish population. But as a party driven mainly by religious feelings, Shas does not offer a coherent alternative to Netanyahu's welfare cuts.

Shas follows the longstanding Israeli strategy of using one's coalition-based bargaining power to carve out an enclave within the state. The settler movement did it, and Shas has done it by convincing Labour in the late 1980s to allow the establishment of a separate fully state-funded education network (*HaMa'ayan* – the source). This has been enshrined in law and has some 40,000 children, and although they are mostly kindergarten and primary schools, the schools are a formidable force for bringing families to strict, or stricter, observance. The network promotes religious observance and study, but also aims to attract low-income working families who take advantage of its extended school day and are attracted by the strict discipline which the teachers try to enforce. We have observed the commitment and energy of teachers in Shas schools, as compared with those in the state secular system, but we are not blind to its role as an employer of the Shas faithful and as a vehicle for tacit propaganda – even though there is no explicit political activity in the schools or in the innumerable NGOs and adult education activities which Shas has spawned while in office.

Shas's relationship with Ashkenazi haredi society is hard to grasp for those accustomed to diaspora Judaism. The term Sephardi has come to designate principally Middle Eastern and North African Jewry and, in place of the innumerable variations from Baghdad to Fez, Shas is building a homogenized Israeli version which invokes the 'Crown of Old' but in fact departs from those traditions in many ways: the learning system in Shas institutions is based entirely on the Lithuanian tradition in which its leaders were trained; in contrast to Jewish tradition, Shas has centralized Rabbinic authority in the figure of Ovadia Yosef; the movement's institutions are heavily dependent on the state; the practice of full-time learning for adult males – heavily dependent on state subsidies – is highly valued; and the dress code for Shas men is a slightly modified version of the Lithuanian code (Borsalino hats and Armani-style jackets). Shas women, in contrast, dress differently from their Ashkenazi cousins: no wigs, only hairnets, and less resistance to bright colours – but of course they too observe the practice of monthly attendance at the *mikveh*, as was the universal custom in North Africa, and their fertility matches that of haredim generally.

Evidently, the relationships of Shas's leadership with both the Ashkenazi haredi world and with secular Israel are extremely fraught. Deri and his associates vented their

resentment against the leaders of prestige institutions which impose a *numerus clausus* on Sephardim, exclude them from positions of influence, and – though this goes unmentioned – do not allow them to marry their daughters. This is complemented by a rhetoric of hostility to Zionist, Ashkenazi, and above all secular, Israel. Yet at the same time Shas has tried to develop a modern vision in which its constituency takes its place in a modern society, and side by side with a deeply observant Judaism they also aspire to promote a modern Sephardi leadership able to take positions of responsibility in government and society. Even though Shasniks are hostile to the secularism of Zionism itself, they exhibit not a hint of hostility to the idea or the fact of the State of Israel. There is however much tension in their attitude to the role of the courts in regulating the state-religion boundary in Israel, and Ovadia Yosef, unhappily notorious for his *ex abrupto* pronouncements, has said some unprintable (at least in the *JC*) things about Supreme Court judges.

In the 1990s the Israeli political establishment was frightened by Shas, and Shasniks often say that Deri was prosecuted because his charismatic appeal threatened their position: he was no doubt guilty of the offence of corruption, but was he more guilty than others, like former President Weizman or the Sharon family, who have so far escaped prosecution? The phenomenon of Sephardi solidarity allied to social protest and religious renewal is certainly a potent mixture, yet it has been tamed for the time being. Rabin and Peres' move, in the early 1990s, to allow Shas to build its own enclave through the schools and NGOs, can now be seen in retrospect as a deft tactic of co-optation.

Nevertheless, Shas is a classic social movement, which thrives in Israel's culture of hyper-mobilization. It fought its way into the political system by playing on the themes of ethnicity, family disintegration and religious renewal. Despite the political opportunity offered by the growing crisis of poverty in the country, it is likely to continue along the path of Sephardi identity and *t'shuva* which has proved so fruitful in the past.

David Lehmann and Batia Siebzehner's book *Remaking Israeli Judaism: the challenge of Shas*, published by Hurst, will be launched at the Jewish Book Week on 26 February.