

Charles S. Liebman : DIASPORA INFLUENCE OVER RELIGIOUS
POLICY IN ISRAEL : THE IMMIGRANT
CAMP EDUCATION CONTROVERSY,
1949-1950

To what extent has Diaspora Jewry sought to influence and succeeded in influencing religious policy in Israel ? The following case study, from the early years of statehood, demonstrates some of the difficulty in answering this question. The case is also of intrinsic interest.

The controversy over immigrant education can only be understood against the background of the mass immigration to Israel in the early years of statehood and the highly politicized nature of Israeli society. Deep suspicions and ambitions divided the parties of the left, the right and the religious parties. The religious parties saw in the influx of new immigrants, many from traditional-religious cultures, the opportunity to gain new adherents and perhaps even become a majority within Israel. The dominant party of Israel, Mapai, sought to capitalize on the innocence, simplicity and sense of gratitude of these immigrants toward the State of Israel to turn them into adherents of their own ideology. Each side acted out of a combination of honest convictions that what they were doing was in the best interest of Israel and of the immigrants themselves, and also of partisan political motivations.

Israel was unable to provide housing for the masses who arrived immediately after the founding of the State. They were initially absorbed, therefore, in immigrant camps. Schools within the camps were placed under the control of the Cultural Department rather than the Educational Department of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Israeli parents, at that time, and until passage of the education law of 1953, could send their children to one of four types of school systems—the Labor school system, the General school system or one of two religious school systems under control of the Mizrachi, and Agudath Israel respectively. However, in the immigrant camps, there was only one “unified” school system which, under the Cultural Department, was controlled, in fact, by Mapai. By late 1949, stories of anti-religious coercion, of children having their ear-locks shaved, of being denied the use of religious articles or opportunity for prayer, and of greatest long-run significance, being denied religious education despite their own and their parents’ requests, began to spread. In late 1949, repre-

sentatives of the Religious Front¹ raised these issues in the Knesset. They demanded that education in the immigrant camps be placed under control of the Department of Education where the religious parties had far greater representation and where the principle of education according to the parents' ideological orientation was recognized. They also demanded the appointment of a committee to investigate the charges of religious coercion. What the religious parties were most anxious to secure was control over the education of the religious immigrants. This demand was far more difficult to explicate. Therefore, at the public level, the religious parties tended to phrase their demands in terms of more general charges of "religious coercion".

The religious parties engaged in an extensive public campaign to alert the Israeli public to these charges². The campaign was also carried on among Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora, especially in the United States. But the evidence suggests that Diaspora Jewry was not simply a tool which the Israeli parties manipulated. There is some evidence that Orthodox Jews abroad not only sought to assist the Religious Front in influencing the Government of Israel but to invigorate the campaign within Israel itself. For example, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in the U.S. cabled Israel's Chief Rabbi Herzog as well as other religious leaders asking what steps they had taken concerning the problem of coercion in the immigrant camps³.

Of course, one cannot dismiss the possibility that some Israeli organization or personage requested the cable from the Union of Orthodox Rabbis to increase the pressure on the Chief Rabbi, but there is no direct evidence in this regard. In general, the interplay of pressure is of interest. The membership of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis is made up of older European-trained rabbis, many of whom have personal friends in the senior Israeli rabbinate. Their leaders are held in high regard by Israeli rabbis. Organizationally, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis is inept, strife ridden and virtually without influence on the American scene. Nevertheless, its own ties to the Israeli rabbinate were such that it commanded respect and deference from

1. In 1949, there were four religious parties, Mizrahi, Hapoel Hamizrahi, Agudath Israel and Poalei Agudath Israel. The four parties offered a combined list of candidates in the first Knesset elections under the name of the Religious Front.

2. On the public effort by the Mizrahi, see Ha-Mercaz Ha-Olami shel Ha-Mizrahi, *Din ve-Cheshbon 1949-1955* (Jerusalem: Ha-Mercaz Ha-Olami, 1955), pp. 65-66.

3. *Ha-Tzofe* (January 10, 1950), p. 4.

them. Since they, in turn, were unquestionably influential in religious-political circles within Israel and these circles in turn, carried influence within the Government, we have the phenomenon of influence operating in quite the reverse direction from what might normally be expected.

Most of the Diaspora effort, however, was directed towards influencing Israeli policy makers directly. This was the first such effort since the creation of the State, and everyone was concerned about its legitimacy. For example, the Mizrachi Organization of England, at its national convention, demanded religious education in the immigrant camps. The President, Rabbi Kopul Rosen, stated that Jews must support Israel, and this obligation entitled them to involvement in what takes place in Israel. Jews, he observed, must not interfere in purely internal matters, but anything which occurs in Israel and affects Jewish life in general is a legitimate matter for their concern⁴. By implication, the religious education of children in Israel was a legitimate matter for Diaspora interference. Not only did Mapai leaders dissent from this interpretation of legitimacy, but at least one prominent religious political leader did as well. Rabbi Judah Leib Maimon, the Minister of Religion and leader of Mizrachi, declared his opposition to the interference by Diaspora rabbis in the internal affairs of Israel in the immigrant education controversy⁵. He also objected to the public demonstrations organized by Orthodox organizations in New York, to which we shall refer.

The Government itself was intensely sensitive to the efforts made by Diaspora Jewry to bring pressure upon it. In response to the demands of the Religious Front, the Government did appoint a Committee to investigate accusations respecting religious coercion in immigrant camps but added that the Committee was also to examine the manner in which parties outside Israel were mobilized to level these accusations⁶. The five member committee was chaired by a former Supreme Court Justice, Gad Frumkin, and included four Knesset members, two of whom were from the Religious Front and one of whom was the subsequent President of Israel, Yitzhak Ben Zvi.

The Committee was appointed by the Government (i.e., by a decision of the Cabinet), on January 17, 1950, a day after various cabinet members, including Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, had

4. *ibid.* (January 23, 1950), p. 1.

5. *ibid.* (February 7, 1950), p. 1.

6. *Din ve-Cheshbon shel Va'adat ha-Chakira be-Inyenei ha-Chinuch be-Machanot ha-Olim* (Jerusalem : n.p., May 9, 1950), p. 5.

received a cable signed by the United Religious Front, a-roof organization representing virtually all the Orthodox organizations in the United States. The cable requested that the Government "... examine anew the problem of integration of children in order to avoid the perversion of justice regarding the children and their parents and the foundations of religious Jewry, and in order to avoid a world-wide scandal..."⁷ The Cabinet was also informed of the fact that on January 13th, the executive director of the Zionist Federation of England had cabled Zalman Shazar, another future President of Israel, but at that time Minister of Education, informing him that news of the Orthodox charges of religious coercion, which had been aired in the *Jewish Chronicle* of London, were endangering the JPA (UJA) campaign, which was about to open.⁸

The Committee, whose appointment was probably a partial response to pressure from the Diaspora was, as we noted, charged with exploring who initiated the pressure. It found no evidence, after examining cables sent from Israel in December and January, that the initiative had come from Israel. It found, rather, that Diaspora Jewry had turned to religious leaders in Israel, demanding to know what steps Orthodox groups in Israel were taking to combat "the anti-religious inquisition in the immigrant camps"⁹. On the other hand, the Chairman of the Mercaz Olami (International Center) of Mizrachi had cabled the New York office on January 8th, asking for moral and financial help in the battle¹⁰. On January 10th, he again cabled to Mizrachi in New York, noting that :

"dramatic action is necessary for the final settlement of this tragic episode. Please pass this information along to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, Hapoel Hamizrachi, and the press"¹¹.

Orthodox organizations in the U.S. planned a mass meeting for January 23rd at the Manhattan Center in New York to air their grievances and their demands. Rabbi Maimon cabled American Mizrachi urging them not to participate and "not to interfere in the internal problems of the State of Israel", but Leon Gellman, Chairman of the Mercaz Olami, urged participation as did other leaders of the Mizrachi

7. *ibid.*

8. *ibid.*, p. 101.

9. *ibid.*, p. 102.

10. *ibid.*, p. 105.

11. *ibid.*, p. 106.

and Hapoel Hamizrachi in Israel¹². However, they also cautioned against "dramatic activity" until the Government's Committee had completed its investigation.

The Government, as we noted, was both sensitive to and resentful of these activities and pressures. The question is how responsive were they? Publicly, they expressed indignation. Ben-Gurion, in reply to the cable referred to earlier, from the United Religious Front in America, charged them with reaching conclusions without knowing the facts. But most of his reply was directed to their "threats". The cable to Ben-Gurion had maintained that the Government must act "to avoid a world wide scandal bearing tragic long-run implications". To this Ben-Gurion said :

I am especially astonished at the peculiar threat with which you turn to the Government of Israel. The State of Israel is a democratic republic based on liberty, freedom of conscience and the freedom of religion, and all her affairs are determined by the decision of a majority of her citizens in accordance with their best understanding. You can rest assured that we will do nothing under the pressure of threats if the matter is not of itself just and necessary. If you want to exercise direct influence on the direction of the State of Israel and strengthen certain tendencies among us, the most efficient method for you and for those on whose behalf you speak is to come to us and settle in our midst¹³.

Shazar, referring to the Manhattan Center meeting of the Orthodox groups said :

Since the creation of the State of Israel, this is the first act, the first organized protest among the Jews of the world against the State of Israel¹⁴.

He went on to say that anyone who knows American Jewry knows the meaning of "meetings" (he used the word in English although his statement was in Hebrew) when, as he put it, "we were accustomed to have 'meetings' like this against Hitler". According to Shazar, even if all the charges of coercion were correct, they were an internal matter and the responsibility of the Government and the Knesset "and the

12. *ibid.*, p. 107.

13. *ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

14. *ibid.*, p. 11.

matter should not be passed outside the country or come to us from outside the country”¹⁵.

The representatives of the Israeli religious parties denied, in turn, that they made any effort to organize Diaspora Jewry¹⁶.

In its conclusions, the Committee of Enquiry addressed itself to the general question of world Jewry and Israeli public policy. They noted that Diaspora Jewry had the right to take an interest in Israeli affairs especially in the areas of culture and religion, and especially at a time that the State was so dependent on their help. They also had the right to criticize, but they did not have the right to interfere in matters that should be left to the State to decide, and they must even refrain from activity that could be interpreted as such interference¹⁷.

The statement is, of course, self-contradictory. But it merely expressed the self-contradiction that was inherent in the prevailing attitude of Israel toward Diaspora Jewry. No one wanted to deny world Jewry's right to criticize. But the line between criticism and pressure is not only a thin line, it is a line that no one can realistically draw in circumstances in which Israel was so much dependent on Diaspora Jewry for assistance and necessarily sensitive to their opinion.

The same day (January 17, 1950), on which the Government had appointed the Committee, it also appointed a five-man ministerial committee (two of whose members represented the religious parties), to make recommendations on the problem of education in the immigrant camps. As the Committee of Enquiry issued its report only in May, while the Ministerial Committee completed its work in a matter of weeks, we may assume that it was not influenced by the other Committee's conclusions that religious coercion had indeed taken place. The Committee's appointment does suggest the Government's recognition that some new steps were necessary; this despite the fact that it did not accept the Committee's recommendations which tended to be favorable to the religious position. After further negotiations, the Government, however, did approve and the Knesset did adopt on March 14, 1950, a proposal to transfer educational responsibility in the immigrant camps from the Department of Culture to the Department of Education and to insure that there would be provision for religious education under the supervision of religious educators and administrators¹⁸.

15. *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

16. *ibid.*, pp. 13-14, 24-25.

17. *ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

18. *Ha-Mercaz ha-Olami, op. cit.*, p. 69.

The conflict over religious education, in general, and the education of new immigrants, in particular, continued, but the Knesset decision of March represents the concluding phase of one link in that conflict and the one in which Diaspora Jewry's role was most pronounced. Policy, more or less, in line with the formal demands of the religious parties was adopted. Three questions offer themselves. First, would the Government have acted any differently had there been no pressure upon them by the religious parties? Secondly, assuming the Government responded to pressure of religious groups—were they responding to domestic or Diaspora pressure? Thirdly, assuming the Government was responding to Diaspora pressure—was Diaspora Jewry acting only as an instrument for Israeli religious groups or was Orthodox Jewry in the United States (and elsewhere) acting independently and on behalf of its own interests as it perceived them? We shall discuss each question in turn.

1. Was the Government influenced by the pressure of religious groups?

It is fairly obvious that the Orthodox did influence the Government. Although placing control over education in the immigrant camps into the hand of the Department of Culture was contrary to the law, the question was how soon this would be rectified. As we shall see, the Orthodox perceived as their real goal getting the Government to move as rapidly as possible. The fact that a ministerial committee was appointed on January 17th indicated that the Government was willing to take action, but it also served to delay immediate action. The Orthodox, therefore, saw their fight as one against time, and the fact that they forced a Government decision and a Knesset law within the period of about three months is an indication of success.

The Orthodox influence is all the more noteworthy because of a powerful constraint, which one assumes led Ben-Gurion in particular to resist them—surrendering to pressure from Diaspora Jewry on the religious issue might lead to Diaspora intervention in other social and economic policies. Ben-Gurion and other leaders of the State were sensitive to the threat of pressures from American Zionists allied to the right-wing General Zionist Party in Israel. This is even hinted at in the final conclusions of the Committee of Enquiry's report which acknowledged the special privileges, as it were, of Diaspora Jewry to concern itself with cultural and religious matters and, by implication, not with social and economic matters which were of greater concern to the General Zionists. But surely, the very fact that Diaspora Jewry

did intervene, must have led Ben-Gurion to consider the possibility that precisely because of their intervention he could not set a precedent by giving in to their demands.

2. Did the Government respond to domestic or Diaspora pressure?

This is a more difficult question to answer unequivocally. In the very nature of political influence, the major pressures, no doubt, came from the Religious Front in Israel. Their threats of resignation made as early as November of 1949 and their refusal to participate in Cabinet meetings in early 1950—that is, their direct political pressure on the Government was, perhaps, the strongest influence. On the other hand, Ben-Gurion was apparently willing to risk a Government crisis on the issue. Therefore, domestic pressure alone might not have sufficed. Furthermore, the political leaders of religious Jewry in Israel themselves felt that they needed the broad public support of religious Jews¹⁹. This point of view was expressed in the communications with Orthodox Jewry abroad.

The Religious Front, as we noted, supported the mass meeting in New York. Throughout the period of negotiations between the Religious Front and the Government, Leon Gellman, Chairman of the *Mercaz Olami*, cabled information to the United States and on two occasions asked the American *Mizrachi* to send cables “and to get other influential religious bodies to send cables of protest to the Government on this situation”²⁰. He wrote that the Religious Front can be strengthened to a considerable extent by the backing of strong organizations throughout the world. In a letter to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis on March 4th, he stated that “religious Jewry here requires in the highest measure possible help and assistance from the Diaspora”²¹.

Hapoel Hamizrachi leader, Moshe Shapiro, the man who would eventually become the undisputed leader of the National Religious Party (formed from a merger of *Mizrachi* and Hapoel Hamizrachi) stressed that left-wing parties in Israel were happy to delay any

19. At a meeting of the *Mercaz Olami* of *Mizrachi* together with their Knesset representatives in early December, 1949, a motion to organize a public committee to assist the Religious Front in the education controversy was adopted. “Pressure and public opinion are liable to help us.” *Beit Meir Archives* 31/1, Minutes of the Meeting of the *Mercaz Olami*, No. 23.

20. *ibid.* 31/1 Report of Leon Gellman, March 12, 1950.

21. *ibid.* 32/1 Letter from Leon Gellman to Israel Rosenberg, March 4, 1950.

changes since the children were under their influence. The real hope, he argued, was pressure from the Diaspora ²².

Diaspora Jews, by and large, are unable to make specific demands with respect to Israeli policy. They can raise general demands—charge religious coercion, or protest religious discrimination—but they cannot involve themselves in the details of policy or administrative execution. Diaspora Jewry tends to respond and, indeed, is only really aroused over what it views as religious and moral imperatives. It was pointless to try and educate the masses or even the leaders of Orthodox Jewish organizations about the Religious Front's demands to move educational authority from one Ministerial department to another, much less to educate it on the details of who should serve on a Ministerial or administrative committee to oversee the changes, or what *type* of referendum should be held in the immigrant camps. This necessarily was left to the politicians of the religious parties. But this constitutes a serious limitation of Diaspora effectiveness. For, in fact, what the religious parties really wanted was control over immigrant education—at least over the education of those children whose parents desired religious education for them. This necessarily became an administrative political battle in which the Religious Front could no longer count on Diaspora support once the general moral issue of "religious coercion" was resolved. It seems quite proper to attribute an important role to Diaspora Jewry in contributing to the sum total of pressure on the Israeli government; but this pressure led to victory in a battle that was only part of a much broader conflict.

3. Did the initiative come from Israel or Diaspora Jewry?

This question is the most difficult of all to answer. Apparently, influence worked both ways. Information, of course, flowed from Israel, and without this information, Diaspora Jewry would have done nothing. Specific requests for help also came from Israel. On the other hand, once alerted, some Orthodox elements were quite willing to work independently. We noted the cables from the Union of Orthodox Rabbis to Israeli religious authorities, including the Chief Rabbi, which insisted on knowing what steps were being taken—almost implying that they were not sufficiently militant. Indeed, some political leaders of religious Jewry in Israel found themselves constrained to moderate the militancy of Diaspora Jewry. For example, Mizrachi and Hapoel

22. *Beit Meir Archives*. Minutes of the Meeting of the Mercaz Olami, No. 41, January 13, 1950. See also the remarks of Rabbi Zev Gold. "We must tell our friends there [in America] that they must carry on concentrated activity."

Hamizrachi leaders Gold, Gellman, Shragai and Raphael, cabled the American Mizrachi urging that drastic action should not be taken, that they were "on the alert to protect demands of religious Jewry", and that they would "keep you informed of further developments and advise you on necessary steps" ²³. There is an implication in this cable, as well, that Israeli leaders were fearful that Diaspora protests might get out of hand and were anxious to maintain control of the situation. Religious forces hostile to Israel within the Diaspora required very little encouragement to demonstrate against the State.

In summary then, it is clear that Diaspora Jewry by itself could have accomplished little or nothing since they would have been hard pressed to know what to ask for other than a generalized demand to stop religious coercion. On the other hand, it also seems clear that religious politicians in Israel were assisted by Diaspora Jewry whose help might even have been critical in the influence they were able to exert over Israeli policy. Finally, Diaspora Jewry was aroused, and its leaders were capable of arousing it because they viewed religious education of immigrant children as their own self interest.

23. *ibid.* 32/1 Cable of January 22, 1950.

SOLIDARITY

'And they shall stumble one upon the other' — one through the iniquity of the other! This teaches that all Israel are surety for each other... To what are they likened? To a boat in which one plank is torn. One would not say: one plank of the boat is torn, but the whole boat is torn.

(Shevu'oth 39a ; Tanna de-bey-Eliyahu, ch. 12)