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## **Shas: A Model for Resolving Israel's Internal Rift?**

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**Executive Summary:**

Amidst the intensified global focus on the ongoing conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian people, internal issues exist within each group. Cleavages exist within Israeli society both on a religious, socioeconomic, and even an ethnic level. These internal rifts play a role in preventing a peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. A case study evaluation of the Israeli political party Shas may help suggest a means to bridging the internal cleavages. In particular, the religious divide within the Israeli Jewish population presents a difficult obstacle in the path to peace with the Palestinians. Shas' unique political structure and stances present an opportunity for analysis and the potential as a model for a political and social structure to begin bridging the societal gaps. Through literary analysis and scholarly interpretation, I discuss Shas' position in the Israeli political landscape and the potential success, though arguably unintended, in bridging the religious cleavage found in Israeli society. The political party's background, leadership, supporters, political stances, and religious foundations and beliefs are unlike any other political group in Israel. My case study examines Shas' uniqueness and analyzes the party's ability to bridge the social cleavages in Israel that affect the nature of Israel's relationship with Palestine.

### **Introduction:**

Negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis have occurred off and on throughout the history of the conflict between the two groups. At times agreements have come relatively close, as in the case of the Oslo accords, yet numerous factors play into the reasons why the negotiations fail. A large factor falls on the deep divides in political views between the right and left political groups in Israel, as well as the rifts within contemporary Israeli society. The Israeli settlements in the West Bank are one of the most if not the most

controversial topic centered within the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Views differ greatly from the political left to right on how to treat the settlements and ultimately on the future of the settlements. The typically politically right aligned orthodox communities and the traditionally left aligned secular communities over the years have continued to distance themselves from one another as their respective views on the state of Israel too continue to grow apart. Religious beliefs, opinions on the settlements, varying political structure visions, among other factors help to explain this rift between the secular and religious.

However, the religious rift is one among other internal cleavages within Israeli society, including socio-economic, interreligious, and even ethnic rifts as well. Divisions between Israeli groups of citizens are not all black and white. The nature of Israeli politics results in dozens of political groups supporting the views of numerous populations of Israelis. The multi-party system of representation and coalition government makes it hard for majority parties to form complete governments without compromising legislative and political views in favor of gaining additional seats to create a majority in the Knesset, or the Israeli parliament. The growing rifts within Israel affects the political landscape of the country and hinders its potential by the fragmentation.

These internal rifts along with the nature of Israeli government structure have made it increasingly difficult over the years to form an actual peace treaty with the Palestinians. Without fixing the internal divides in Israel, peace will be unattainable. Divisions exist as explained before around key political issues, the West Bank settlements being a primary issue. Inability to compromise or even form a unified dialogue on the settlements represents an Israeli factor of the non-resolved nature of the conflict with Palestine. Such internal rifts are not solely found within Israel, as internal cleavages too have affected the

Palestinian society, as seen with the separate ruling entities over the West Bank and Gaza. However, this paper does not focus on the Palestinian side of the conflict. Rather, this project looks at the contemporary landscape of Israeli society as a basis for further demonstration of the complications from an Israeli perspective as to the hindrance of a peace treaty with Palestine.

The focus of this project is to examine a specific political party in the Israeli parliament as a case study in the framework of a contemporary Israel faced with internal rifts. Shomrei Sfarad, more commonly known as Shas, presents a unique case for analysis within the context of the religious cleavage in Israel. Shas is an orthodox led political party of Sephardic background, comprised mostly of Mizrahim, or Jews historically from local Middle East Jewish communities. However, much of this population is comprised of traditionalist Israelis. Thus, Shas' voting base is primarily traditionalist along with small populations of secular Mizrahi Israelis. The project expands upon the questions of Shas as a working bridge between this divisions. Does Shas represent a potential for a party or a political space that can bridge the orthodox or religious and the non-orthodox cleavage in some capacity? In addition, does Shas present a possibility of a means to bypass religious reasons to not regard the settlements as a religious value? Also, the balance between orthodox leadership and a non-orthodox voting base is examined for its effectiveness in legislation, particularly towards legislation involving Palestinians, settlements, and the peace process.

From media depictions to biased literature, it becomes easy to target the Israelis or the Palestinians to place blame. There are groups of people that blindly support either the Palestinian claims or the Israeli claims and therefore place complete blame on Israel or

Palestine. The significance of this project is to take the focus away from the blame game. This project focuses on the Israeli side of the conflict and analyzes the internal issues Israel faces that complicate its efforts in the peace process. This project may appear as if to blame Israel for not fixing its internal issues. Rather, this project uses the case study of Shas to continue the dialogue about the internal Israeli cleavages and look for possibilities for the future to bridge these divisions. I want to illuminate that Israel has its faults and that for peace to exist, despite the issues of the Palestinian side, the Israelis must face their internal conflict and find a way to compromise as the rift is damaging more than just the peace process with the Palestinians. The purpose of this project is to examine the rifts between the populations of Jews in Israel and use Shas as a case study to examine how the party functions in closing the rifts as well as the party's ability to successfully operate in the complex political system of Israel.

### **Literature Review:**

The deepening rifts in Israeli society are part of a larger political, social, and cultural problem for Israel. The rift in Israel's society goes beyond religion and politics, but also involves ethnicity and race. Shas, as is discussed in this paper, is shaped by each of these factors involved in the societal rift in Israel. These rifts are not a new phenomenon, but they have continued to worsen over time and have affected the state's ability in the political realm, including the peace process with the Palestinians. The issue of the settlements has been at the foundation of both the continued unresolved status of the Palestinian conflict and a primary point of division in Israeli politics.

The literature and research used for this paper is comprised of a number of scholarly articles, essays, and journals along with chapters from a number of books related to the topic of the paper. To better analyze the content of the literature it is necessary to first look at the literature itself as a means of understanding the academic field surrounding the topic of this paper as well as to compare the arguments already made on the subject. The literature can broadly be categorized into three groups: 1) the Israeli' political field, 2) culture, nationalism, and religion's affects within Israeli society, and 3) information on Shas.

In developing the argument for my thesis, it is important to first examine what the larger issues are within Israel and what comprises the political world in Israel. As a state founded on Jewish ideals and principles, the Israeli government has been incapable of separating religion from politics. David Schnall (1979) discusses the relationship between religion and state in contemporary Israeli society. His argument is formed around the modern day religious community and their outlook on Israeli politics. Despite being majorly outnumbered by traditionalist and secular Israeli Jewish populations, the orthodox hold a disproportionate amount of political influence. Yossi Klein Halevi (2003) discusses a similar topic, yet focuses more upon the apparent rift between the religious and secular. His argument has similarities to that of Schnall in how he compares the idea of a "Jewish State" in the minds of the modern orthodox communities. A theme of westernization and secularization of society develops around this rift as the orthodox hold quite different views on the direction of Israel's future growth than the secularizing Israel around them. These resources help illuminate the core differences between the religious and secular Israeli Jews in terms of views on Israel's future.

Again, to further the background discussion, the article by Robert Mnookin, Ehud Eiran, and Sreemati Mitter (2005), gives perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian issue as a whole. The argument that these authors form is that internal conflicts within both Israel and Palestine have affected the status of the peace process. On the subject of Israel, the authors argue that the internal conflict revolves around the presence of the settlements, and that the inability of the religious and secular to address the situation of the settlements has been the primary reason of failure for peace from Israel's end. This resource gives an in-depth base to understand the nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as well as addressing a key component of the internal Israeli rift, that being the settlements. Much of the literature that discusses the factor of settlements in the conflict come to a similar opinion that the settlements are one of the primary topics within the divide between religious and secular, and this adds beneficial background to develop the main argument and points of analysis in this paper.

Dov Elbaum and Anna Maria Tremonti (1998) further the discussion of the divide between religious and secular. Their article gives a detailed understanding of the separation in life between the orthodox and secular Jews. The two authors address Shas within their article as well, as they argue the secular should be wary of Shas, as they believe Shas' deep-rooted orthodox ideals play a large role in their operation despite their attraction to the masses of middle class and poor Sephardim and Mizrahi Jews in Israel. This article offers an interesting perspective of Shas as the authors place them firmly in the ultra-orthodox category. Not all literature on Shas suggests this as Shas has shown flexibility politically and has agreed to form coalitions with liberal governments in the past. The political past and the stances that Shas holds politically are a focus of the case analysis,

as much of the religious cleavage revolves around politics. The willingness of Shas to join coalitions and their involvement with issues regarding the settlements and peace with Palestine is key to examining the primary questions of this paper and in developing the conclusions from the case analysis. Still this article is important in highlighting the still stark contrasts between Shas and the growingly secular Israel society.

Extending the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Baruch Kimmerling, in his book *Invention and Decline of Israeliness (2001)*, talks about the situation in terms of Israeli security and the affects of the heavy incorporation of military in society. He too ties the religious aspects and ideals into the discussion of security during Israel's history. Yet, his ultimate argument forms around the effect the militaristic-like society has on the states' conflict with Palestine. This along with the previous article provides the necessary background and literature to depict the modern Israeli political landscape.

The second section of research revolved around the cultural and societal issues that comprise the internal Israeli rift. The rift extends past the simple religious-secular divide into ethnic categories that hold historical context. As outlined in sections of Baruch Kimmerling's book that address the cultural and religious differences that exist among the modern Israeli population and how this affects the idea of "Israeliness", or a specific mindset of the Israeli people. Zvi Zohar (2006) in his article expands upon these discussions with a review of the Ashkenazi European Jewry and the Sephardic tradition of Judaism. He too though focuses a section of his paper on Shas as a movement in contemporary Israeli society. Zohar's article is an examination of the histories of the separate Jewish traditions, as well as the role of Shas as a religious group in a secular society. Kimmerling however takes a stance on the topic of a culture that combines religion

and nationalism. He argues that a number of ethnic and religious factors have prevented Israeli from transforming into a legitimate democracy.

On a similar topic, Matt Evans (2011) writes on the role of media in the religious-secular rift in Israel. He uses the terminology cleavage to describe the religious-secular divide. This terminology can be found in several other sources as it can be applied to other rifts in Israeli society. For example another cleavage exists in the case of ethnicity and race as seen with the cultural differences in Israeli society between the Mizrahi and the European Jewry. The perspective taken by Evans is unique, as it applies an outside player, the media, in analyzing the internal cleavages in Israeli society. The media's ability to affect political and societal situations and the methods media uses to angle situations is used as a lens to address the media's role in Israel.

Matt Evans piece of literature as well as the literature from Tamar Hermann and David Newman (1992), are helpful in understanding how media affects global and western perception of Israel along with mapping out the sociopolitical terrain of Israel. Both the article solely by Hermann (2009) along with the article combining the insights of Hermann and Newman offer a informed perspective of several groups with large numbers in settlements in the West Bank, namely Gush Emunim and the anti-settlement group Peace Now. Specifically the literature of Newman and Hermann gives background on these two groups as well as it lays the foundation to understanding the division between the religious and non-religious groups of Israeli Jews and their disposition towards the settlements and greater Palestinian conflict. A key to take away from their article is that the orthodox and religious groups are not anti-peace. Peace is something these communities want, however they refuse to use the settlements as bargaining chips to acquire peace. These pieces of

literature help to complete the framework of contemporary Israel and the major points of internal conflict. This provides a basis for which the literature on Shas can analyze the party's position in modern day Israel and its effectiveness in terms of answering this paper's questions.

The third broad category of literature used to develop my thesis revolves around Shas. The literature that exists on Shas discusses the group's aims as a social movement as well as a political party. Yet, much of the literature finds that Shas provides a unique case in the realm of Israeli politics. Despite ultra-orthodox leadership, the party has amassed a following that includes a number of traditionalist and secular voters. The uniqueness of Shas as a political party and movement in Israel becomes the focus of the discussion held by Yaacov Yadgar (2003) in his Bourdieuan analysis of Shas, David Lehmann (2006) in his book *Remaking Israeli Judaism*, and in Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson's (2009) analysis of religiously orthodox movements, including Shas. Davis and Robinson using a comparative model of analysis in looking at Shas, the Muslim Brotherhood, Comunione e Liberazione in Italy, and the Salvation Army. The two did an excellent job of laying out a comparison of the weaknesses and strengths of the different movements and provide excellent analysis as to the operation of the movements. Lehmann critically examines Shas' success as a social movement, and offers insight on the outside perspective of Shas and how the common Israeli views the party. Yadgar uses a historical analysis to show the struggles Shas has had to form a new "field" of Bourdieuan analysis.

In understanding the transition to Shas gaining power in Israeli politics and emerging as a social force, the literature of Don Peretz and Gideon Doron (2000), as well as Sami Shalom Chetrit (2000) help elaborate on the background of Mizrahi politics as well as

the important year of 1999, in which Shas found great success at the elections. Chetrit explored the history of Mizrahi politics in Israel and used the movements of Shas and its predecessor TAMI to compare to the powerful political forces of the Ashkenazic Israeli parties. The discussion of TAMI is particularly of interest as Shas rose from the ashes of TAMI, and thus TAMI can too be analyzed and compared to Shas in its strengths and weaknesses and its role within the internal cleavage at the time. Peretz and Doron present a statistical and data-focused article on the effects of the 1999 Israel elections. The article also hosts a dialogue on the emergence of Shas in the elections.

The remaining literature under this category provides background information on Shas, presents the social aspects of the movement, and demonstrates how Shas uses its political influence to fund social projects, including a widespread education system following Sephardic tradition. This becomes the focus for Luke Howson (2015) in his case analysis of Shas and the implications a movement like Shas has on all of Israel's society. Ephraim Yuchtman-Yaar and Tamar Hermann (2000) too focus on Shas' political agenda and its dual-purpose as a social movement. Their argument involved a discussion of a scale of measurement of haredi-secular and dovish-hawkishness to examine the structure of Shas. Their argument is founded upon a number of surveys, political data, and statistics to analyze Shas' structure, agenda, and party population. Ultimately the duo finds that Shas can often appear very dovish at first glance, yet a deeper look indicates a resonating hawkish temperament within the party. This argument may indicate a greater observation of Shas in the Israeli political realm in understanding their stances and decisions on joining government coalitions. Jacob Abadi (2004) connects the religious and ethnic relationship to the political realm in examining Shas. Abadi focuses on the emergence of the Sephardim in

contemporary Israeli politics, and how ethnicity is now a social and political dialogue within Israeli society.

As found in the literature, a number of different perspectives exist on Israeli society, culture, politics, and the conflict with the Palestinians. Numerous views exist too on Shas as a movement in modern Israel. The literature establishes the actuality of rifts or cleavages existing in Israeli society and that the religious and even apparent ethnic rift, as in the case of Shas and the Sephardim, has a profound effect on Israel's government makeup as well as its interactions with foreign affairs. The inability to separate religion and state only resounds a pluralistic framework developed by much of the literature. In politics as is suggested by the literature and the idea of pluralism, that simply there are too many players. Israel has faced fragmentation, and future fragmentation is a possibility due to the relative ease it is to form a new political party or movement. The cultural and religious stubbornness seen by both sides of the internal conflict only resound upon the external issues and how Israel acts upon those. Yet, the literature makes it clear that Shas provides a unique view into Israeli politics and offers a sturdy base for analysis of the internal rifts.

### **Methodology:**

In addressing the topic of this paper, a qualitative research approach was taken to address the questions involved in the discussion of this paper. To create a dialogue on the functionality of Shas as a political party, social movement, and as a solution for the internal Israeli rift, a qualitative approach is needed to guide the discussion and create new topics

for discussion, where current research lacks. Qualitative research is defined as, “any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.”<sup>1</sup> The use of qualitative methods in approaching the research questions allow for flexibility in forming arguments and dialogues that are not directly molded or discussed to create new arguments that apply to Shas in contemporary Israel. This is a topic with limited research on the subject matter, as Shas is often looked at for its religious factors or its actions as an orthodox social and political movement. This project however pushes the analysis of Shas further to examine its role within Israeli politics and whether it offers the capacity to bridge the cleavages in Israel’s society. This framework has not been approached before in the literature, and thus qualitative methods are needed to mold arguments.

The specific qualitative methods that were used in this paper was first an analysis of a case study, that being Shas within the current state of Israeli culture, society, and politics. Breaking down the methods used further, analysis of research materials and textual evidence and examination were the primary methods used to research the thesis topic, discuss the research questions, and to form evaluative arguments based on the preceding literature in the field. Textual analysis can be defined as, “not only linguistic analysis; it also includes what [Norman Fairclough] called ‘interdiscursive analysis’, that is, seeing texts in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together.”<sup>2</sup> Part of textual analysis includes the comparison of the literature on the relevant topics and examining the varieties of influences and styles that formulate the opinions

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<sup>1</sup> Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Vol. 15). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Pg. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. New York: Routledge. Pg 3.

within the field of particular research. This is important and highly useful in the case of Shas and this paper as numerous viewpoints on Shas exist both positive and negative, and it becomes important to critically look at the structure of the literature to better understand the arguments. In examining the factors of a cleavage or divide it is necessary to understand the differences on either side. To analyze Shas in the context of the stated cleavage, a full understanding of Shas through various means of literature is needed to answer the questions posed in this paper.

Due to the nature of the research topic, the research for this paper consisted strictly of archival research and books written on the subject or relating topics to help develop the framework of the problem. The research methods used by the authors of the literature vary between further archival research as well as some quantitative statistics based studies on population tendencies in Israel as well as on voting and elections. To analyze the research from the literature a multi-step process is used to locate valuable sections, arguments, and themes and to effectively tailor the information towards solving or observing the problem within this project. First, a complete read of the literature to comprehend the authors' discussion of the topic, the arguments they form, and the conclusions they form around their arguments. Second, the literature must be traced and connected to or compared against other authors' opinions on the subject. From this comparison against other literature, arguments for this paper were formed and influenced by the outside literature. This multi-step process becomes a mechanism to familiarize, observe, analyze, and tailor the research to the specific problems addressed in this paper.

This paper follows this pattern of analysis by developing sections within the paper. First, a framework was established constructing the situation in contemporary Israel

politically, religiously, and culturally. The dialogue on the internal Israeli rifts develop in this section to illustrate the problem of focus in the paper as well as to formulate the reasoning in choosing Shas as a case study within the developed framework. A general reading of the literature on Shas was needed to prevent bias in determining the group's success within the framework of the problem in this paper. The literature on Shas presents viewpoints that range from complete support to complete resentment. In the analysis of Shas, the arguments in the literature were worth noting, yet oftentimes a secondary reading was needed to read without the author's opinionated bias.

As discussed, the approach used in this paper followed a qualitative analysis of archived research and textual evidence of numerous articles, journals, and books on related subjects. In using the methods, a multi-step analysis process was used to read, observe, analyze, and form arguments for this paper using the research of others. In following the methods chosen in this paper a framework for analysis is developed connecting the various topics within the literature to create the larger problem that the analysis of Shas fits within.

### **Premises:**

The conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians has existed before the establishment of the state of Israel and will continue into the foreseeable future without a drastic action or general change of attitude from Israelis, Palestinians, and other outside influences towards the conflict. Yet, with the constant attention focused on the external conflict Israel has maintained with the Palestinians, the rifts and internal conflicts are often overlooked. This paper examines the current situation in Israel in terms of the internal rifts the country faces. Specifically the rift between religious and non-religious populations

within Israel have affected the current state of affairs in the country, though too, an ethnic rift between populations of Jewish Israelis is partially focused upon in this paper. To establish the context of the paper, premises must be established on contemporary Israel to provide an understanding of the political landscape of Israel and the influences religion has had in Israeli politics and its social structures. A discussion of the internal rifts, specifically the religious and secular rift is addressed. Finally, an analysis of the direct questions of the paper in the context of the greater internal rift puzzle, the Israeli political party Shas is examined for its ability to bridge the internal conflicts within Israel as well as for Shas' potential as a model on how to ultimately solve the inner conflicts in Israel.

In examining Shas in terms of the questions framed in this paper, the context for which Shas can exist must be developed first. Israel is a small state residing within the Middle East, bordering Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. While democratic in nature, Israel established its statehood upon Jewish foundations, and though Israel houses people from any religion, the state openly welcomes any person of Jewish descent to move to Israel and gain citizenship. The Jewish principles that Israel was founded upon have made it impossible to separate religion from state. As Yossi Klein Halevi describes, "Israel is the fulfillment of secular Zionism's promise to transform the Jews into a 'normal' nation that would allow the Jews to collectively enter the international community. But it is also the fulfillment of Judaism's promise of a 'return to Zion.'"<sup>3</sup> By nature, Israel serves a duality of purposes to different groups of people. As shown above, to some Israel is a religious return to the Jewish homeland; to others it became an idea of creating a state of normalcy for the

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<sup>3</sup> Halevi, Yossi Klein. *The Israeli Paradox*, pg. 24. Found in: American Jewish Committee 2003. *Renewing the Jewish Social Contract: Bridging the Religious-Secular Divide / Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli relations, American Jewish Committee*. n.p.: New York : American Jewish Committee, 2003., 2003.

Jewish people. Yet, despite the turn towards a secularist society, “the essence of [Israel’s] society and state’s right and reason to exist is embedded in religious symbols, ideas, and scriptures.”<sup>4</sup>

In contemporary Israel, religion holds heavy influence in the political system. The Israeli parliament, the Knesset, comprises the ruling body of government that runs and operates the country. Israel’s parliament features a multi-party system that as in any country features groups of opinions ranging from the far liberal left to the heavily conservative right. With relative ease for new entrants to join the amassment of political parties, elections become a bit hectic, as coalition formation is complex.<sup>5</sup> The creation of coalitions forces the larger parties to find compromises and agreements with dissimilar parties in order to create a majority in the Knesset, which is the key element of the initial formation of a new government following elections. Though despite the appearance of the political system, “the Israeli state is one of the strongest in relation to society, with a formidable capacity for rule-making and law enforcement.”<sup>6</sup>

The strength of the state may be a reason as to the constant focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the biased media portrayal of Israel globally. Though while the peace process is one of the main issues within Israel’s political and societal focus, this paper focuses on the other main issue, the internal conflicts faced within Israeli society.<sup>7</sup> A number of social divides exist within contemporary modern day society. The literature on the subject labels these divides as categories of social cleavages in Israel. Externally, these

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<sup>4</sup> Kimmerling, Baruch. 2001. *Invention and Decline of Israeliness: Society, Culture and the Military*. Berkeley, CA, USA: University of California Press. Pg. 186.

<sup>5</sup> Howson, Luke. 2015. "Lessons from Shas about Israel." *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 3: 402

<sup>6</sup> Kimmerling, *Invention and Decline of Israeliness*, 212.

<sup>7</sup> Yuchtman-Yaar, Ephraim, and Tamar Hermann. 2000. "Shas: The Haredi-dovish Image in a Changing Reality". *Israel Studies* 5 (2). Indiana University Press: 32

cleavages exist too, as the divide between Palestinians and Israelis too is considered a cleavage. Internally, the cleavages exist factoring in religion, ethnicity, and politics, though it may be argued that the religious and ethnic cleavages effectively create the divide in Israel's political realm.<sup>8</sup> This paper focuses more upon the religious cleavage, which reflects an intra-religious divide rather than an inter-religious divide.<sup>9</sup> However, a premise upon which this case study revolves around is the connection between the internal cleavages to the greater conflict with Palestine. As the literature suggests above, these cleavages have held effects on the unresolved nature of the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

The religious cleavage within Israel is defined as a secular-orthodox divide. Though it is important to note that, "non-orthodox Israelis usually identify themselves as secular," meaning even secular Jews may still be practicing religion.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in the eyes of the orthodox communities, without full commitment to the orthodox traditions of practicing Judaism, these practicing Jews are still secular. Translating this back towards the statehood of Israel, a battle between the religious attachment to the land and the largely secular endeavor of Zionism.<sup>11</sup> The scale has tipped towards the side of the secular population in terms of size and overall control. The orthodox communities comprise a much smaller population of Israeli's Jews, and though small in number, the religious groups hold a great deal of proportional power, and hold control over social institutions that are key elements of religious traditions. Yet, the Israeli Jews in Israel are not simply divided into secular and orthodox communities. A third category of Israeli Jews exists that adds an additional

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<sup>8</sup> Halevi, *The Israel Paradox*, 23

<sup>9</sup> Evans, Matt. 2011. "Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media's Role in Israel's Religious-secular Conflict". *Middle East Journal* 65 (2). Middle East Institute: 237

<sup>10</sup> Evans, *Exacerbating Social Cleavages*, 239.

<sup>11</sup> Hermann, Tamar. *The Israeli Peace Movement: A Shattered Dream*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

complexity in the religious cleavage. This additional category known as “traditionalist” too is part of the religious landscape of Israeli Judaism. The traditionalist population consider themselves neither orthodox nor secular, but the population is comprised of Israelis that practice Judaism to a varying degree. The traditionalist Jews hold their own beliefs, practices, and political stances that only add to the mix of differing views of the orthodox and secular Israeli groups.

To further elaborate on the divisions within the orthodox and secular populations, the orthodox populations are comprised of groups of different orthodox communities that follow specific traditions and hold their own unique beliefs in terms of Judaism. Yet as a whole, the orthodox communities often keep to their own areas and create small centers of ultra-orthodox populations within Israeli cities. Examples of this can be seen in large cities such as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, where orthodox communities “function as cities within cities.”<sup>12</sup> The Israeli orthodox population, however, often receives criticism for its apparent separation from the rest of the Israeli population. Rifts exist among the orthodox communities as well, as groups of orthodox Jews hold different backgrounds, beliefs, religious views, and political stances towards Israel.

Politically, the orthodox community has created a number of political parties. The National Religious Party is a historic and powerful political party within the Israeli parliament. The National Religious Party has held control over “social welfare, interior and religious affairs,” among other social institutional positions.<sup>13</sup> Stemming from the National Religious Party is a segment of orthodox Israelis called Gush Emunim. Gush Emunim was a

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<sup>12</sup> Elbaum, Dov, and Anna Maria Tremonti. 1998. “Israel: A House Divided”. *International Journal* 53 (4). [Sage Publications, Ltd., Canadian International Council]: 612.

<sup>13</sup> Schnall, David J. 1979. "Religion, ideology and dissent in contemporary Israeli politics." *Tradition* 18, no. 1: 13.

group of Israelis that live outside the green line in the settlements in the West Bank that are a topic of heavy conflict. Gush Emunim viewed itself “as a Jewish movement whose Zionism is an integral part of its religion.”<sup>14</sup> This group followed the religious concept of possession to the holy land of the Jewish people. While, the orthodox are not the only groups of settlers, the orthodox led Gush Emunim added to the conflict of the settlements, as they prevented the settlements from being used as bargaining tools for peace. Though it is important to note that not all the settlers, even the orthodox, hold these same opinions. Many moved out to the settlements “to improve their quality of life,” as living in the settlements is much less expensive as within Israel’s borders.<sup>15</sup>

On the secular side of the spectrum, the majority of the Israeli population as previously stated is secular, or non-orthodox Israeli Jews, as a difference is established between orthodoxy and simply practicing Judaism. The secular population has veered towards the westernization of the country and in the eyes of the orthodox community, veering away from the Jewish traditions and principles that the orthodox feel must be kept firmly in Israel. Similar to the orthodox population, rifts exist within the secular community. A secular group that may be seen as the more liberal counterpart to the Gush Emunim, Peace Now, is built of a group of secular nationalists that seek to “preserve the Jewish and democratic nature of the State of Israel.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, Peace Now despite its dedication to Israeli nationalism is more cooperative in terms of relinquishing settlement land towards a possible peace with the Palestinians. On both the orthodox and the secular side

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<sup>14</sup> Newman, David, and Tamar Hermann. 1992. “A Comparative Study of Gush Emunim and Peace Now”. *Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (3). Taylor & Francis, Ltd.: 509–30.

<sup>15</sup> Mnookin, Robert H., Ehud Eiran, and Sreemati Mitter. 2005. “Barriers to Progress at the Negotiation Table: Internal Conflicts among Israelis and among Palestinians [article].” *Nevada Law Journal* no. 2: 310.

<sup>16</sup> Newman and Hermann, Gush Emunim and Peace Now, 511.

rifts exist, which only complicate the overarching religious cleavage further. The discussion of the difference of opinions towards the settlements is another main facet of a premise to the case study. The settlements are a dividing subject between the religious and non-religious and thus become a focus of the questions in this paper.

While the focus of this project is analyzing Shas within the framework and context of the religious cleavage in Israel, the ethnic cleavage must be understood and addressed as it adds additional dimensions to the complexity of the situation in Israel. Kimmerling defines this ethnic factor as “the ethnic limitation.”<sup>17</sup> Different communities of Jews live in Israel, and according to Kimmerling a sort of hegemony has been created among the groups of Israeli Jews. The Sephardim and the Ashkenazim are the two historical populations of Jewish people. The Ashkenazim have traditionally held most of the political power within Israel, and Ashkenazic principals have been established in the political and religious foundations of the country. The labels are given based off of historical location of familial roots, along with the practiced traditions of Judaism. Today, many of the Sephardic Jews are labeled as Mizrahim, or “Sephardic Jews and Jews from the Arab and Islamic countries,” as Sami Shalom Chetrit defines the population.<sup>18</sup> The ethnic factor is important to understand as it shows that the secular-orthodox cleavage is multifaceted, and that there are multiple divisions among the orthodox and secular communities within Israel.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kimmerling, *Invention and Decline of Israeliness*, 206.

<sup>18</sup> Chetrit, Sami Shalom. 2000. “Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative”. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29 (4). [University of California Press, Institute for Palestine Studies]: 51.

<sup>19</sup> Howson, *Lessons from Shas about Israel*, 408.

## **Case Analysis:**

With the context and premises established to understand the contemporary Israeli societal landscape in terms of political and religious influences, this framework can now be applied to Shas and understanding how they fit into the complex portrait of Israeli society. Shas serves as a great case to examine through this framework of analysis due to the uniqueness of the party. As is described further on in this section, the composition of the party's electoral support, the political positions of the party, Shas' role in forming government coalitions, along with its dedication to act as a social movement presents a group like no other within Israeli society. The quality of uniqueness provides the basis as to why Shas was chosen for examination. Shas' history in politics and dually as a social movement, along with the nature of the party's voting population and leadership makes the party a fascinating case to examine in terms of functionality and effectiveness in an internally divided Israeli society.

First to be able to analyze Shas within the framework of the religious cleavages in Israel, some background on the party is needed. Shas, or the Sephardi Torah Guardians, presents a unique case in the chaotic political landscape of Israel.<sup>20</sup> As given in the name, Shas is a party and social movement that represents the Sephardic, and thus prominently Mizrahi Israelis. A previous Sephardic political party, TAMI, existed before Shas, yet failed in sustaining its longevity as a party among Israeli parliament. Following the fall of TAMI, Shas arose from its ashes "in 1983 in Jerusalem under the patronage of the Lithuanian chief

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<sup>20</sup> Abadi, Jacob. 2004. "Ethnicity and Religion in Israeli Politics: Emergence of the Shas Party." In *Religious fundamentalism in the contemporary world: critical social and political issues*, 235.

rabbi Eliezer Shach, to serve 'Sephardi' Torah students and their families suffering from racial discrimination in the Ashkenazi Haredi yeshiva schools."<sup>21</sup> This premise of the party's formation reflects upon the ethnic cleavage discussed previously, as a clear distinction in the sociopolitical realm is found between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Israelis historically in Israel. Shas viewed its creation as "a Mizrahi revolution."<sup>22</sup> Not only was Shas created as a political party trying to gain seats in the Israeli Knesset, but also as a social movement to better the lives of their constituents, or generally the Mizrahi Israelis. The party initially had little success in the governmental elections, gaining only four seats in 1984. Yet, by 1999, the party won 17 parliamentary seats, becoming the third largest party in the country.<sup>23</sup>

The incredible success of the party astonished many people, as Shas presents a unique case within Israeli politics and society. Many people agree that the Sephardim faced "insensitive treatment" upon arrival in Israel by the "secular European elite."<sup>24</sup> Shas emerged as a voice for the mistreatment and inequality of the Sephardic and Mizrahi Israelis. The case of Shas becomes unique in its structure. The movement is headed by "ultra-Orthodox (haredi) Rabbis (Sephardic in their religious behavioral orientation), is oriented towards a Jewish constituency of Mizrahi origin, of varying degrees of religiosity, the largest group of which is 'traditionalists.'"<sup>25</sup> At its core, the party features a highly

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<sup>21</sup> Chetrit, *Mizrahi Politics in Israel*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Chetrit, *Mizrahi Politics in Israel*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Peretz, Don, and Gideon Doron. 2000. "Sectarian Politics and the Peace Process: The 1999 Israel Elections". *Middle East Journal* 54 (2). Middle East Institute: 267.

<sup>24</sup> Lehmann, David, and Batia B. Siebzehner. *Remaking Israeli Judaism: The Challenge of Shas*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006: 157.

<sup>25</sup> Yadgar, Yaacov. 2003. "SHAS as a Struggle to Create a New Field: A Bourdieuan Perspective of an Israeli Phenomenon". *Sociology of Religion* 64 (2). [Oxford University Press, Association for the Sociology of Religion, Inc.]: 224.

orthodox leadership. But, as is unique, especially in terms of the question of this paper, is that the voting and support population features a variety of Israelis expressing different levels of religiosity.

Even as a movement, Shas uses marketing devices and slogans to “appeal to multiple identities- to the ethnicity, class, and/or religion of potential supporters.”<sup>26</sup> Shas, despite its religious core, is looking for the mutual support of all Mizrahi Jews no matter their level of involvement in Judaism, breaching the divide between the religious and secular groups.<sup>27</sup> This heavy push for Mizrahi support again emphasizes the ethnic differences within Israeli society, and it is common in the ultra-orthodox communities, such as the leadership of Shas, to be “characterized by a conscious of superiority”, challenging the opposing orthodox communities traditions as being prominent and ‘right’.<sup>28</sup> The push for Mizrahi leadership by Shas in Israel and the methods that the party employs to gain support and resources causes for a spectrum of views on the party. Some view the party as an extremist right wing party, compared to other religiously orthodox groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>29</sup> But others view Shas as moderate and even left-oriented, perhaps as seen with the party’s flexibility in joining coalitions. As Omar Kamil suggests in an analysis of understanding Shas as a political party, that “the bulk of Shas voters are Sephardim does not mean that

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<sup>26</sup> Davis, Nancy J., and Robert V. Robinson. 2009. “Overcoming Movement Obstacles by the Religiously Orthodox: The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Shas in Israel, Comunione E Liberazione in Italy, and the Salvation Army in the United States”. *American Journal of Sociology* 114 (5). University of Chicago Press: 1309.

<sup>27</sup> Davis and Robinson, *Overcoming Movement Obstacles*, 1332.

<sup>28</sup> Zohar, Zvi M. 2006. "On European Jewish Orthodoxy, Sephardic tradition, and the Shas movement." *Jewry Between Tradition And Secularism* 143.

<sup>29</sup> Davis and Robinson, *Overcoming Movement Obstacles*.

Shas is an ethnic party with an ethnic-separatist message."<sup>30</sup> Shas wants to restore the Sephardic tradition of Judaism into the nationality of Israel.

Shas acts as a multi-purposed group, both to serve as a social movement for the betterment of the Mizrahi Israelis, as well as a representative of the Mizrahi community in Israeli parliamentary government. The dual purpose of Shas arguably is the reason they have had continued success in elections and hold a sort of long-term stability as a political player in Israel. Due to Shas' focus on the low-income populations that comprise a large percentage of the Mizrahi Israeli populations, Shas "has won electoral support and political respect for this return to faith by addressing the very real social problems of inequality and discrimination facing Mizrahis."<sup>31</sup> Shas has addressed these very issues by using their political support by gaining resources to fund schools, forms of media, religious seminaries, along with other heavily needed social institutions disproportionately received by the low-income populations of Israelis.<sup>3233</sup> Thus, despite a ultra-orthodox leadership and a push to reestablish Sephardic tradition in Israeli society, many Mizrahi Israelis considered traditionalist or secular give their support to Shas as they receive physical social institutional benefits through their support.

On the political realm, Shas employs strategies to create a fog around the party's true political stances. No true stance on "territorial concessions, a Palestinian state," among other prominent topics have been publicly developed by Shas' leadership.<sup>34</sup> In the past,

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<sup>30</sup> Kamil, Omar. 2001. "The synagogue as civil society, or How we can understand the Shas Party." *Mediterranean Quarterly* no. 3: 136.

<sup>31</sup> Usher, Graham. 1998. "The Enigmas of Shas". *Middle East Report*, no. 207. Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP): 34-36.

<sup>32</sup> Usher, *Enigmas of Shas*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Evans, *Exacerbating Social Cleavages*, 244.

<sup>34</sup> Yaar and Hermann, *Shas: The Haredi-Dovish Image*, 32.

Shas has formed government coalitions on both the left and right side of the spectrum, displaying flexibility to compromise more so than other religiously led Israeli political parties. Shas is so very unique within Israeli society for its lack of solid opinion on such matters. For a country that displays powerful opinions and stances from every side, Shas has employed a strategy of mystery, but willingness to compromise.<sup>35</sup>

Shas' actions on the political level specifically are central to answering the questions posed in this project. As stated above, Shas has displayed the characteristic of jumping between coalitions. It is important to say that Shas was "the only orthodox party in Israel to join the Labor party's coalition government of 1992-96, staying with it long enough for Rabin to sign the Oslo accords with the PLO in 1993."<sup>36</sup> However, Shas soon turned to the right political coalitions led by Likud and Prime Minister Netanyahu. This turn to the right political side was both due to "tactical gain" and that moving away from the secularist left was less "over the peace process than over the religious-secular divide in Israel."<sup>37</sup> This statement speaks to the religious foundations of Shas in its political actions. Though Shas has formed coalitions with leftist governments, "the core of Shas' ideology is guided by religious concerns."<sup>38</sup>

A largely secular or traditional voting base has supported an ultra-orthodox leadership core since the party's establishment in the 1980s. The religiosity of the party's functions are either ignored or accepted by Shas' supporters. In a highly secular country, the Mizrahi population is focused on receiving the same social benefits and institutions that the rest of the country's population receives. Shas' ability to provide for its supporters

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<sup>35</sup> Davis and Robinson, *Overcoming Movement Obstacles*, 1322.

<sup>36</sup> Usher, *Enigmas of Shas*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Usher, *Enigmas of Shas*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Howson, *Lessons from Shas*, 403.

outweighs the religious messages and goals the group wishes to achieve. Along with Shas' apparent willingness to join coalitions both on the left and right in Israel's Knesset too may play a role. The ability of the party to avoid direct labeling on the Israeli political spectrum and its focus on supporting the Mizrahi population removes the focus internally on the divide between religious and non-religious to an extent.

However, the issues with Shas representing a political actor that bridges the orthodox-secular gap in Israel still exist. The inability to form firm stances on key political issues is concerning in terms of the religious cleavage. Without true stances on primary political issues, the religious cleavage becomes difficult to examine in the framework of the political divisions within Israel. Shas' stance on the West Bank territories is "sufficiently abstract and flexible to allow Shas to work with parties with a wide range of positions on the occupation question."<sup>39</sup> Shas is not against peace and wishes to work for peace, yet refuses to make a firm stance on the key subjects surrounding a solution to the Palestinian conflict. The characteristic of Shas' willingness to work with a range of political parties is part of the party's inherent nature to "get leverage to push its theological, cultural, and economic agendas."<sup>40</sup> Shas' flexibility, in other words, is again to gain financial means to support the party's social institutions and agenda. The vagueness of the party on the political sphere only widens the religious cleavage in Israel as it directly avoids giving stances, essentially avoiding the dialogue of compromise that must exist to close the rift.

Along with the political complications that Shas' party characteristics form, additional issues with the party's construction exist. Due to the party's dedication to Sephardic tradition and to the Mizrahi Israelis, while ethnic superiority may not be the

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<sup>39</sup> Davis and Robinson, *Overcoming Movement Obstacles*, 1322.

<sup>40</sup> Davis and Robinson, *Overcoming Movement Obstacles*, 1322.

message Shas is trying to send, the question of ethnic cleavages is again established. Shas is capable of bridging the religious cleavage internally for its ability to keep voters focused on the Mizrahi cause. While solving one rift, Shas expands the ethnic rift. Shas' intent is not to state that the Mizrahi are superior, but rather to create a sense of equality among the different ethnic groups of Israeli Jews. Yet, with the complex nature of Israel's politics ethnic rifts would widen as the focus is turned away from orthodox and secular specifically, but towards Sephardic and Ashkenazic differences, which encapsulates both the ethnic rifts and religious rifts. Shas is unique in its ability to bridge the secular-orthodox gap in it's electoral support, but the style of which the party and movement was originated and operated would only cause further cleavages if adopted by other groups within Israel.

### **Conclusions:**

To reiterate what was said above, Israel finds itself with a semi-fragmented society. The inability to separate religion from state, due heavily to the nature of Israel existing as a Jewish state, along with apparent socioeconomic divisions that seem to correlate with an ethnic divide between the Ashkenazic and Mizrahi Israeli Jewish populations. Shas, as described above, presents an incredibly unique case to examine the party's ability to lessen these internal cleavages in Israel. From the examined literature, Shas working dually as a social movement and political party has managed to effectively bridge the religious divide, at least among Mizrahi Israeli Jews. The methods of employment through which Shas has been able to garner traditionalist and secular votes to support their orthodox leadership has maintained a socioeconomic focus. The school systems and other social benefits that Shas has developed and continued to fund over the years focuses on the socioeconomic

differences between populations of Israelis, and Shas successfully gathers support by providing support systems to these populations.

However, the party's focus on Mizrahi communities along with the goal to restore Sephardic law to Israel shows that an ethnic divide still remains. Shas provides a possible platform as to addressing the rifts between the orthodox and secular populations of Israeli Jews, yet the visible ethnic divides that Shas presents through its Mizrahi support base and its Sephardic beliefs and ideals prevents the party from being a complete solution to fixing the internal rifts. This appears to be a reoccurring issue, as solutions to Israel's problems both internally and externally are unable to solve all the primary issues. The complex nature of Israel's society and the wide spectrum of beliefs and opinions present a difficult if not impossible issue to solve. Even compromise is made difficult, as there are so many groups and actors at play that compromise becomes unreasonable due to the nature and number of agreements that would be needed.

The ethnic cleavage is one factor of why Shas fails to act as a model for a political actor that is capable of bridging the religious and non-religious divide. However, as discussed in the case study the political actions and stances of Shas are ultimately why they fail to bridge this gap in the political landscape. Vagueness within the key political views towards the settlements and the peace process give the notion that Shas is willing to adhere its political views to the majority coalition in return for financial gains. The nature of their vagueness is unique such that Shas is considered an ultra-orthodox party. One might argue that in fact their decision to not commit to a given stance is in fact a method of bridging the religious cleavage. However, I believe that this given vagueness is rather a means of avoiding the discussion needed between the religious and non-religious. If

anything, this point reinforces the fact that Shas is flexible for the purpose of gaining the financial means to look out for “its own.” Yet, to move in the right direction of fixing the religious cleavage an open dialogue is needed with all sides clearly stating their intentions and views towards the settlements and the peace process. Thus, I cannot say Shas as a political party bridges this religious cleavage as it avoids direct confrontation with the necessary political dialogue.

Shas, again is a case that perhaps offers insight into how to better connect the religious and secular populations in Israel as is seen in the construction of the electoral populations of Shas. Yet, referring back to Abadi’s study of Shas, the party’s existence brings the ethnic dialogue back into focus. As seen in Lehmann’s article, Shas too receives a lot of criticism within Israel. Their drive to reestablish Sephardic religious law to power in Israel has resulted in comparisons of the party to the Muslim Brotherhood and even Hamas, in terms of Shas’ actions as a social movement to acquire support. This paper acted as a case study to examine a unique case within Israeli politics and society that may give indications as to helping relieve the tensions of the internal cleavages. Further research could be directed to finding the factors and correlations between these internal rifts and the effects they hold on the greater Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Another avenue of research could be towards examining the internal rifts and the issues presented by the populations of Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews. Israeli Arabs hold citizenship within Israel along with the right to vote. Several Arab parties exist within the Knesset, and the effects and roles of these parties within a Jewish state too would provide a unique perspective on the internal cleavages and their effects on the external issues Israel faces.

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