

RELIGIOUS LEADER AS A POLITICAL LEADER: RABBI MEIR BERLIN (BAR-ILAN) THE RELIGIOUS-ZIONISM LEADER IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract - The topic of leadership has been studied in various contexts and theoretical models of leadership have been proposed. Scholars distinguish between certain styles or patterns of leadership, e.g. transformational, rewarding and authoritative and so on. Two prominent types of leadership are the religious and the political, which clearly differ in many aspects. The modern era and subsequent process of secularization have sometimes led to tension and clashes between religious leaders and political ones. The entrance of religious figures into the realm of politics may be considered an attempt to regain their lost position and influence. Many sociologists assert that certain religious elements served as vital components in the growth of the new secular nationalism. Various major religions coped in diverse ways with the rise of secularism. In traditional Judaism two different movements emerged: modern orthodoxy, which accepted progress and adopted it selectively, and ultra-orthodoxy which strongly clung to the ancient lifestyle. The "Mizrahi", a Religious-Zionist movement founded in 1902, is an example of the former one, and its undisputed leader in the first half of the 20th century was Rabbi Meir Berlin. The purpose of the present paper is to illustrate, by actual historical examples, how his religious faith and beliefs shaped and influenced his public political positions and actions. This is done by analyzing and discussing six relevant political issues in which he was involved during the crucial period of the British Mandate in Palestine (1917-1948).

Index Terms— Berlin Meir, British Mandate Palestine, Mizrahi, Partition Plans, Religious Leadership, Zionism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of leadership has been studied in various contexts and frameworks and different theoretical models of leadership have been proposed. Scholars distinguish between certain styles or patterns of leadership, e.g. transformational, rewarding and authoritative and so on. Two prominent types of leadership are the religious and the political, which clearly differ in many aspects. The modern era and subsequent process of secularization have sometimes led to tension and clashes between religious leaders and political ones, with the latter usually overtaking. This aspect has been discussed by sociologists and political scientists, producing Berger's "Market Model" and the like [3].

The entrance of religious figures into the realm of politics may be considered an attempt to regain their lost position and influence. To some extent it bridged the rift between religion and secular society, but necessitated some concessions by the religious leaders. In fact, many sociologists assert that certain religious elements served as vital components in the growth of the new secular nationalism.

Various major religions coped in diverse ways with the rise of secularism. In traditional Judaism two different movements emerged: modern orthodoxy, which accepted progress and adopted it selectively, and ultra-orthodoxy which clung to the ancient lifestyle [44]. The "Mizrahi", a Religious-Zionist movement founded in 1902, is an example of the former one, and its undisputed leader in the first half of the 20th century was Rabbi Meir Berlin [1], [43].

II. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the present paper is to illustrate, by actual historical examples, how religious faith and beliefs of the abovementioned prominent political leader shaped and influenced his political deeds, actions and positions.

Our study analyzes R. Bar-Ilan political positions as reflected in his public political activity during the crucial period of the British Mandate in Palestine, among the Jewish community in general and the religious sector in particular.

III. SOURCES

The study made use of primary sources, found in various archives in Israel, including R. Bar-Ilan rich correspondence, reports and protocols of meetings of the Zionist executive, the Jewish community leadership and the Mizrahi institutions. Additional sources were articles he had published in daily newspapers and speeches he had delivered in various occasions.

IV. Biography

Rabbi Meir Berlin (later: Bar-Ilan) was born in 1880 in Volozhin, a small town in Belarus (then part of Czarist Russia), the youngest son of the renowned R. Naftali Berlin, head of Volozhin Yeshiva, the major spiritual center of Russian Jewry at the time. Having lost his father at the age of 13, young Meir studied in various Talmudical colleges in Eastern Europe for the next ten years. In 1905 he was a delegate of the Religious-Zionist Mizrahi Movement to the 7th Zionist Congress and in 1910 he moved to Germany to study and began to publish a political-literary weekly. Soon

he became secretary-general of the Mizrahi Movement, where his organizational and leadership talents were manifested. [35, pp. 10-11, 42-43] [36]-[37, pp. 158-9, 163-5].

Following the outbreak of the First World War he immigrated to the United States, where he became the Mizrahi Movement's president and a prominent figure in the World Zionist Movement. In 1926 he moved to British Mandate Palestine, where he was very active publicly for 23 years till his untimely death in 1949 at the age of 69.

An analysis of his biography reveals a combination of political leadership and intensive activity and initiative in religious and literary fields. He founded two massive literary projects in the field of Jewish studies, that continue to this day. Thus, he can undoubtedly be considered a 'Transformational Leader' rather than a rewarding one [35]-[37].

V. FINDINGS

As one may rightly assume, it is almost impossible for a any human being to separate his actions and positions from his own individual personality, which is in turn considerably affected by, and consisted of his genetic heritage, education, home, parents, family ties, social surroundings, national origin, and life experience, among other factors. It is widely accepted that genetics and the surroundings in which we grow into usually mold our personality.

In the following sections we will bring several historical examples, which illustrate how R. Bar-Ilan's set of religious conceptions and beliefs affected his views and positions regarding current political issues:

A. Striving for Unity: Fighting From Within, Rejecting Seceding

A most important feature of his leadership at all times was to act and stay within the Zionist framework, rather than outside it. As the Mizrahi leader he stuck to this principle all his life, pushing aside demands from his party members and others to withdraw from the Zionist movement. [1] [5] [6] [14].

To be sure, as the Mizrahi president he displayed sometimes a strong opposition to the Zionist Executive, and even led the Mizrahi withdrawal from it in the 1930's, but he never advocated leaving the general frame of the Zionist movement. The close cooperation with the Zionist establishment, strongly advocated by him, evolved from his basic deep religious belief that the Zionist movement and its actions were an important stage in the Divine process of redemption. Besides, he also had a practical consideration, believing that only by a real cooperation in building the homeland the Religious-Zionism would be able to affect the way of life in the state-to-come. Consequently, he had advocated full cooperation of the religious sector in all areas of Zionist activity, an

approach he carried out himself in a variety of public roles [4] [21, p.27] [41].

His constant strive for unity also considerably contributed to his position as an unrivaled leader. Being a Zionist leader, he had a strong aspiration to unite all fractions of the Jewish people in an overall collaboration in rebuilding the Holy Land. This aspiration was especially manifested in his great efforts to connect the ultra-orthodox community to the Zionist idea as well as in his unsuccessful attempts to prevent the split of the Revisionists from the Zionist movement. His aspiration for unity was also felt inside the Mizrahi movement, where he vigorously fought to make peace between the various fractions.

B. Objecting Partition Plans

Politically speaking, R. Bar-Ilan presented a maximalist Zionist position, manifested firmly and clearly, in his bitter battle against the various partition plans as well as in his bold approach towards what he defined as the failure of the British policy in Palestine. There is little doubt that his firm political positions considerably contributed to the formation of the Mizrahi as a movement with firm maximalist political positions. Together with Rabbi Maimon, his partner and rival in the Mizrahi leadership, he became one of the most prominent activists in the Zionist movement in general and among the religious Zionists in particular. His political position was clearly manifested all along the British Mandate period when he was one of the strongest opponents in the Zionist movement to the British partition plans. In fact, there was a minority among the religious Zionists leadership who tended to accept these plans due to pragmatic considerations, but R. Bar-Ilan bitterly objected not only because of tactical reasons, but mainly on a faith and religion background. "Giving up parts of the Holy Land – he said – was a severe blow to the Jewish faith and to the people of Israel hope of Redemption" [2] [8] [17] [18] [20] [25] [27, pp. 350-1] [30] [34] [42] [43]. Claiming that the Holy Land was not merely a territory connected historically to the Jewish people, but also a sacred land which cannot be negotiated, it was almost impossible for him to accept the proposed United Nations partition plan, to which he surrendered only post factum, after its confirmation in November 1947 [43].

C. Position regarding the Arab Population in Palestine

His stand regarding the Arabs in Palestine was complicated: on one hand he negated their rights as a nation, opposed any Arab national feature and displaying hard and uncompromising line in political negotiation with them. On the other hand, however, he was in favor of cultivating good neighbor's connections with them, not ignoring their existence. It was his belief and hope, somewhat naïve, that an

economic cooperation, combined with adequate publicity may improve Arab-Jewish relations and enable a peaceful co-existence [7] [9] [21, pp. 24, 195] [38]. Thus, he strongly supported the 'Kedma Mizraha' organization, which strived in the 1930's to improve Arab-Jewish relations, but objected 'Brit Shalom' activity since its concessions went too far, in his opinion. In fact, his stand displayed a middle-of-the-way position in the Religious-Zionist movement, between the 'rightists' hard line, who disliked the negotiations attempts and the 'leftists' soft line displayed by people like Reb Binyomin (Yehoshua Redler-Feldman) and Moshe Una, who strived to some compromise between the contradicting national aspirations of Jews and Arabs, even at the expense of a Jewish territorial concession [ibid].

D. Security Issues

An important feature in R. Bar-Ilan leadership was his close relationship to matters of security and defense of the Jewish community in Palestine, manifested in his roles in 'Kofer ha-Yishuv' Appeal as well as in the security committees. His first step in this important area, somewhat controversial, was his consent in 1933 to serve in the political leadership of 'Irgun Bet', which withdrew from the 'Hagana', the underground defence arm of the Jewish community, favoring an active military stand. Being the dominant figure in 'Irgun Bet' political executive, he initiated in 1937 its reunion with the 'Hagana', displaying a non-sectorial statehood approach, and angering Jabotinski, also an executive member, who opposed this reunion. His overall security conception was based on a wide scope national-religious viewpoint, grasping that the 'Hagana' and other similar Jewish security organizations should unite forces together, being the infrastructure for the future Israeli army [10] [11] [12] [19, p.339] [24, pp.53-54] [35, pp. 42-43]. His active approach regarding security issues conflicted sometimes with the official policy of the Zionist leadership. A case in point is his complicated position regarding the two dissenting underground organizations, the 'Etzel' and 'Lechi', which fought the British Mandatory regime in Palestine. On one hand he displayed understanding to their motives and refused to publicly condemn them, but on the other hand, as a member of the Zionist establishment, he could not accept their disobedience to this establishment. His deep involvement in security matters indeed manifested the strong strive of the Religious-Zionism movement, evolving from a religious belief, for a full cooperation with all parts of the Jewish community in all areas of activity [26, p. 87] [31] [39, pp. 19-69] [40, pp. 15-45].

E. Jewish Immigration ('Aliya') to Palestine

Being a leader with a religious ideology, R. Bar-Ilan related to this issue, beyond its political significance, a

deep religious value and significance, as an important Divine command bringing near the long-awaited redemption. Consequently, he opposed the 'selective Immigration' policy and disliked the limiting of the 'Aliya' in the 1930's because of 'Limited ability of economic absorption of immigrants'. On the other hand, however, he gave priority to the immigration of rabbis and Talmudical scholars, aiming to raise the spiritual level and strengthen Jewish traditional heritage. Following the Nazi rise in Germany and the threats to European Jewry, he was one of the first Zionist leaders who called already in the mid-1930's to radically change the Zionist and British 'Aliya' policy and to enable mass immigration. It was another example of the all-Jewish facet of his leadership as well as far-seeing political approach [1, p. 190] [17, p. 81] [22, pp. 168-176] [23, p. 37] [28, pp. 423-35] [29, pp. 185-202].

During the Holocaust he strongly felt, like his colleagues in the Zionist establishment, the tension between the will to save and help European Jewry and the need to continue building the land: rescue vs. redemption. Both were considered by him as important religious duties. This tension was manifested in his public speeches and articles: on one hand he denounced the apathy to the great suffering of the Jews in Europe, calling to render help, but on the other hand he firmly argued that the rescue efforts should not come at the expense of building the land. Like other Zionist leaders he considered the Zionist Project to be the real and genuine answer and solution to the 'Jewish Problem' and as such it should be encouraged and strengthened amid the tragic fate of European Jewry [Ibid].

F. Saving the Jewish Heritage

Towards the end of 1942, when reliable information about the extent of the Holocaust became known, R. Bar-Ilan travelled to the US as a messenger of the Jewish community in Palestine, in a double mission: to demand from the American government to rescue European Jewry and to convince it about the urgent need for a Jewish state. At the same time, the religious facet of his leadership was not neglected: very worried because of the destruction of the European Jewish Talmudical schools and Jewish tradition, he saw an utmost importance in strengthening the Talmudical schools in Palestine as a substitute to what was lost in Europe [13] [15] [22, pp. 168-176] [32] [33, p.130] [37, pp. 163-5].

He put many efforts in establishing Talmudical and general literary projects, aiming at strengthening the spiritual traditional life of the Jewish community in Palestine. He was strongly motivated by the Holocaust and the destruction of Jewish religious and cultural centers in Europe. Thus, in the spring of 1942, when the first accounts of the systematic annihilation of European Jewry became known, he announced his

ambitious plans for two huge literary projects: publishing a critical edition of both parts of the Talmud – the Babylonian and the Jerusalem one - with their commentaries, and compiling a Talmudical Encyclopedia that alphabetically arranges and summarizes the lengthy debates of Jewish law from the Talmudical period 2000 years ago to this day, in a modern way. [ibid].

He fervently stated that "his life and energies are devoted to the project and not for the sake of honor or reward". So it was - for the last seven years of his life, he devoted himself entirely to the Encyclopedia project, by systematic and tenuous daily work. He undertook both the spiritual and financial burden, as far as his physical condition and serious heart disease allowed [32] [36, p. 48].

R. Bar-Ilan firmly believed that the Jewish community in the Land of Israel should be a spiritual center besides being a national one. This drove him to take upon himself the maintenance of the Rabbinical learning centers there, to establish new ones in place of those destroyed in Europe during the Holocaust, and to start the two ambitious Rabbinical databases described above. [32].

CONCLUSIONS

1. The abovementioned historical examples illustrate how R. Bar-Ilan's set of religious beliefs and conceptions formed and affected his political reactions to and decisions concerning actual political issues.
2. One must admit, however, that to a certain extent, his adherence to religious principles sometimes acted adversely. He found it difficult to display flexibility, a required feature in political milieu which is built on compromises.

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