

A Liberal Upheaval. Israeli Politics from the General Zionists to the Liberal Party

This essay is part of my doctoral thesis,¹ and book, published in 2013² and is focused on the questions: (i) can the ideology of the General Zionists be seen as liberal? And (ii) how did the General Zionists become the Israeli Liberal party? The research centers on the General Zionists Party, which in the 1960's became the Israeli Liberal Party; then formed a part of Gahal in 1965; became part of the Likud from 1973; and was merged into the Likud (thus effectively disappearing) in 1988. The research also attempts to investigate and comprehend a recurring theme in politics – that nevertheless has not received sufficient attention – the question of estimating the degree of success and durability of party merger. The research hypothesis is that political parties which are divergent in their ideological inclinations, policy, leadership, supporter base and organizational structure can create a lasting merger that will achieve its stated goals. On the other hand, parties who are almost identical in terms of the above variables take a greater risk when entering mergers negotiation.³ The case study focuses on two mergers that the Liberal Party participated in; the first being the merger with the progressive party in 1961, the second the creation of Gahal as a common block by the Herut and Liberal parties – which paved the way to the founding of Likud and the political transformation in Israel of 1977.

The aim of this study is to utilize the analysis of party mergers to examine the historical role of the General Zionists – Liberal Party and its contribution to the success of the center-right bloc in Israeli politics. The essential claim here is that the contribution of the liberal Party was a necessary (though not in itself sufficient) condition for the attaining of power by the Likud in 1977. The contribution of the Liberal Party included changing the priorities of Ga-

- 1 Dror Zeigerman: „The Political Consequences of Party Merger – A Theoretical Framework and Case Study; the Liberal Party in Israel". Doctoral Thesis Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel 2011.
- 2 Dror Zeigerman: *A Liberal Upheaval*, Jerusalem 2013. Published in English as: *A Liberal Upheaval. From the General Zionists to the Liberal Party*. Jerusalem 2013.
- 3 See e.g. J. F. Godbout/ E. Belanger: „A Theory of Party Mergers". Paper Presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Meeting. Chicago 2005.

hal and the Likud in the economic, social, political, and security dimensions. The research demonstrates that Menachem Begin, head of the Likud Party (and later Prime Minister of Israel) comprehended that only cooperation with the Liberals will allow his party to move towards the center – a movement that created a viable alternative to Labor rule.⁴

The General Zionists as an ideological and political current within the Zionist Movement

The General Zionists began organizing as a party after the changes in the Zionist Movement: the formations of the various Labor parties, the religious Mizrahi party, and the Revisionist movement (later became the Herut Party). The General Zionists gradually organized themselves in a political framework from 1929-1935. Among the founders were individuals known as Simply Zionists who refused to identify themselves with one of the political factions. In July, 1931, a general meeting of the group in Basel decided to found an organization: Alliance of General Zionists.⁵ I believe that the assertion that before the establishment of the State, the General Zionist ideology had no relation with Liberalism is too harsh. It might be possible that thorough investigation will show that some of the positions held by the party in the past were based, consciously or unconsciously, on liberal ideology. The care shown for each individual, the readiness to fight dissenting political currents without asking them to disappear are positions that could accommodate any liberal party after World War II. Immediately after the establishment of the State in 1948, the General Zionists supported the formulation of a Constitution, which is one of the basic principles of Liberalism, a citizen's tool for limitation and supervision on the State. There is no doubt that at economic level, the positions of the General Zionists reflected the liberal view that people are free and able to decide on their own. The State should provide the basic conditions, and each individual is free to create a private enterprise or to join a cooperative. The State should refrain from supporting development of one sector at the expenses of the other.

4 Interview with Menachim Begin by the author 9/12/1971; 23/3/1982. Published in the Doctoral thesis (wie Anm. 1), S. 188-191, 339-341.

5 Felix Weltsch: Allgemeiner Zionismus. Eine ideologische Skizze. In: ders. u. a.: Parteien im Zionismus. Prag 1936, S. 5-27, hier S. 23, Moses Kleinman: The General Zionists. Jerusalem 1945.

In the elections for the third Knesset (1956), the General Zionist Party fell from 23 seats to a mere 13, and in the elections for the fourth Knesset (1959), it obtained only eight seats. For the party leaders it became clear that if they wanted to remain on the political map, they had to adapt to the changes that occurred in Israeli society and in the political landscape. It was necessary to connect with another moderate or rightwing party. The extremist rightwing party, Herut, was not considered, even in the 1960s, as possible coalition partner. Therefore, the only option remained a connection with the Progressive party, established in 1948 after splitting away from the Organization of General Zionists. The foundation of the United Liberal Party in 1961 was an attempt to put together an alternative to Mapai, the ruling Labour Party, and to Ben Gurion, in power since 1948. The battle between the Labour Party and the Liberals (General Zionists) focused on the ability to present a social-economic ideology that would appeal to the middle class.⁶

The leaders of the Liberals asked Jacob Talmon, noted historian and Hebrew University professor, to deliver the key speech at the foundation event, focusing on the question: „What is modern liberalism in the State of Israel, and what message should the Liberal party convey to Israel?“ Talmon’s lecture allows us to understand the meaning of modern liberalism, and what sort of attitude should a liberal party in Israel adopt in order to be called liberal. Talmon also tried to answer additional questions: how did the liberal ideology manage to resist for so many years? How could liberalism keep its values and redefine them again and again during a period of 150 years? What is the difference between classic liberalism and 20th century liberalism? In which way is liberalism relevant in the new reality after 1945? On the basis of his analysis, Talmon tried to deal with the question: Which values should the party adopt in order to present a message of modern liberalism in Israel?⁷ Talmon knew about the problem: In the 1960s, a major part of the population in Israel did not have liberal views. Another obstacle was the fact that objective developments had forced the State of Israel into a situation of permanent siege and emergency. Moreover, the ruling party made use of the problems afflicting the State in order to strengthen its grip. The rulers developed a complex of “God sent us”. Talmon argued that Mapai

6 Interview with Yosef Sapir recorded by the Institute for Contemporary Judaism, Hebrew University. Jerusalem 1/2/1965; 5/5/1965, published in Zeigermann: Doctoral thesis (wie Anm. 1), S. 148, 165. Interview with Yosef Sapir by the author 21/10/1971, published *ibid.* S. 136-142, 145-149. Sapir was the chairman of the General Zionists and later the United Liberal Party.

7 Jacob Talmon: Liberalism Tested by our Time. Published in: Haaretz, September 10th, 1961, S. 11.

leaders disregarded the fact that Israel was no more a society of kibbutzim and collective communities but had developed into an urban technological society. This willful oversight enabled Mapai to carry on its policy of limitations of private initiatives and efforts.

Talmon also confronted the question of religion and declared that a liberal party that does not have the courage to deal with that issue cannot be called liberal. He admitted that religious people should be free to pursue their own lifestyle, but he stressed that one has to keep in mind that the majority of the population will not tolerate religious coercion. Talmon declared that it was time for Mapai to part from the government. Talmon addressed also the subject of foreign policy. In his opinion an illiberal foreign policy infringes also on liberalism at home, and foreign policy should not be allowed to become a pretext for staying in power. Talmon concluded his speech stressing that the test of the liberal party will be if they succeed in doing away with the complacency and the self-esteem common in the People of Israel, with the idea that the Jews are a chosen messianic people, and if they can explain the dangers of not having in Israel a truly liberal regime.

The mission of the Liberal Party should be to revitalize and justify the concepts of personal responsibility, of personal engagement, and of the capacity to build a free society. These ideological principles, formulated by the heads of the party with the assistance of Talmon, became the basic principles and guidelines in the founding convention of the Liberal party. The General Zionists adopted a new set of concepts, and became Liberal Zionists. The party leaders tried to convey their messages to the larger public. We shall see later how problematic it was to convey these messages, and how they had been understood by the public. Talmon already hinted at the problem of conveying a liberal message to a public that came from anti-democratic countries. These problems indeed surfaced in the elections for the fifth Knesset.

The dissolution of the „Liberal Party”, and the foundation of „Gahal”

The outcome of the elections for the fifth Knesset in 1961 was quite disappointing for the Liberal Party: seventeen seats were well below expectations. Viewing that outcome as a test-case of party mergers, we may notice that the two partners – General Zionist, and Progressives – were very much alike, and both obtained almost the same electoral results in the same electoral districts. Therefore, the merger was already bound to failure, and a split was foreseeable. The General Zionists became aware that the attempt to latch on to the Progressives in order to enter the coalition, did not succeed, and they

reached the conclusion that the only option was to start negotiations with the rightwing Herut movement.⁸

The effects of the Gahal agreement on the Liberal Party and on Herut

The establishment of Gahal put an end to the isolation of Herut. It was a major step towards the creation of a Center-Right alternative to the Labor rule in Israel. The Gahal agreement positioned Herut at the center of the Israeli political map. Herut obtained legitimacy from the Liberal Party. The latter helped Herut to revamp its extremist image, to mitigate its ideological statements, and to present itself as pragmatic. Begin granted the request of the Liberals, to exempt them from subscribing the Herut statement concerning the „wholeness” of Israel. And the Liberals were granted the right to vote freely on „sensitive” subjects (the Gahal agreement, 1965). The establishment of Gahal in 1965 obligated the Liberals to cope with ideological questions, and also with political and organizational problems. The positions held by the Herut movement in the 1950s were very much contrary to those of the Liberals. The Herut movement, which was founded on the basis of the Revisionist movement, and of the members of the Etzel group (Irgun – The National Military Organization in the Land of Israel), had a vision different from that of the Liberals, in matters of reparation payments from Germany, of martial law, and in particular in regard of relations with neighboring Arab countries, and of the future borders of the State of Israel. The Liberals had to ask themselves whether it was possible for non-socialistic factions to unite, and to create a bloc of parties able to attain power and form a government. The question was ideological, but also practical: how to put together a bloc able to compete for supremacy?⁹

Differences surfaced again and again between Liberals and Herut, in political and organizational matters, and also on ideological principles.¹⁰ The Liberals wanted the connection with Herut in order to reach parts of the electorate that were out of reach for the Liberals: „The masses” have been defined by one of the leading researchers in Political science, and sociology, as one of the most important phenomena of our times. The masses are people devoid of a specific frame of reference. In the case of Israel, the phe-

8 Interview with Elimelach Rimelt by the author 25/10/1971, published in: Zeigerman: Doctoral thesis (cf. Fn. 1), S. 188-193. Rimelt was the chairman of the Liberal Party within Gahal and the Likud.

9 Zalman Abramov: A party that failed – its idea prevailed. Tel Aviv 1995, S. 39-47.

10 Interview with Arieh Dulzin by the author 2/8/1971, published in Zeigerman: Doctoral thesis (wie Anm. 1), S. 222-242. Dulzin was the chairman of the World Zionist Organization and the chairman of the Jewish Agency.

nomenon arouse with immigrants from Arab States, and later from Eastern Europe. The State of Israel had to cope with mass immigration since the 1950s. A political party addressing the masses faces a dilemma: giving-in too much to the desires of the electorate would mean to relinquish ideological tenets. On the other hand, staying in isolation, away from the masses, would not allow the party to gather strength. Liberalism, argues Talmon, is not the kind of stuff you can peddle to the masses but a position that calls for ongoing examination of the situation and ongoing readiness to ideological flexibility.¹¹ Thinkers and philosophers can avoid the pressure of testing their ideology, because they do not take part in political activity, but political leaders must be ready to bear such stress. In 1965, the Liberal Party decided to grow, and to create a bloc with a „rightist” party headed by a charismatic leader, in touch with „the masses”; thus the Gahal party was born. In 1973, further consolidations and mergers created the Likud Party which was to propel the General Zionists to power, to the formation of a government, and to controlling positions. The Liberals, however, paid dearly for that achievement.

From Gahal to Likud and to the upheaval of 1977

The Gahal agreement paved the way to the foundation of the Likud, and the Liberals had a major part in that development. Begin continued to keep the Gahal agreement in force, even after the political upheaval of 1977, and his loyalty paid well, because only the 15 votes of the Liberals enabled the government, and the Knesset, to approve the peace treaty with Egypt, and the evacuation the whole of Sinai and of the Yamit settlement. The assumption of some political scientists,¹² that after the merger the Liberals melted into Herut, proves incorrect. In ideological matters, Prime Minister Begin adopted a major part of the world view of the General Zionists and of the Liberals. It was in the political, national security sphere in fact, that the Liberal party allowed Begin to move away from a fundamentalist perception to an operative realistic perception, and eventually Begin implemented some of the views of the Liberals in the peace treaty with Egypt. Begin not only gave up Sinai in exchange for a peace, he was also the first Israeli Prime Minister that recognized the existence of the Palestinian people and their right for self-governing authority. Begin did not fulfill the principle of annexing the lands of the West Bank to Israel, in accordance with the principle of the

11 Talmon: Liberalism (wie Anm. 7).

12 See z. B. Dan Korn: Time in gray. Tel Aviv 1994, S. 45-60. Giora Goldberg: Israeli Parties. From mass parties to electoral parties. Tel Aviv 1992, S. 23-51.

Land of Israel, even when Israel physically controlled the areas between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

The political perception that characterized the General Zionists and the Liberals was thus fulfilled by the leader of Herut. Begin's successors continued on the same path: Shamir attended the Madrid meeting, Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to turn over to the Palestinians the administration of some parts of Judea and Samaria, and Ariel Sharon evacuated Jewish settlements in the Gaza strip, and in North Judea. After Begin retired from the government and from political activity, unification of the Likud continued. The historical partners Herut and Liberals vanished in favor of the new party: Likud. This party adopted a major part of the ideological positions of the Liberals. In the domain of foreign policy, the Likud showed pragmatism and moderation, quite different from the rigidly hawkish line of Herut. Political scientists¹³ tend to stress that the Yom-Kippur War, and the appearance of Dash party (Democratic movement of change) were the main factors of the political upheaval. We shall not ignore, however, that the process started well before these events. It actually began with the foundation of Gahal, and the turning point was a change in the voting patterns of the Liberals. The „centrist”, or moderate, electorate became aware that Gahal and later the Likud had become center parties, and that the extremist image of the ancient Herut and of its leaders had vanished.

Summing up

The upheaval of 1977 brought us the first peace treaty that Israel signed with Arab neighbors. Another upheaval might extend that peace, and allow for the establishment of a Jewish State, whose citizens will enjoy a liberal and democratic lifestyle. Prof. Talmon likened history to an ‘unfolding teppich’. Great leaders, he said, can stop the unfolding for a moment, and change its course. Ben Gurion accomplished this once in 1948, when he proclaimed the foundation of the State. Begin, with the assistance of the leaders of the Liberal party, changed the course in 1977, when he signed the peace treaty with Egypt and with its leader Anwar Saadat. Today we wonder if a leader will rise in Israel, and change again the course of this ‘unfolding teppich’.

13 Benjamin Akzin: ‘The Likud’ In: Asher Arian(Hrsg.): The 1977 Elections in Israel. Tel Aviv 1980, S. 23-38. Dan Korn/Boaz Shapira: Coalition politics in Israel. Tel Aviv 1997, S. 39.

