
Menahem Rahat
Shas: The Spirit and the Power
Alpha Communications, 1998.
368 pages, Hebrew.

Yo'el Nir
**Aryeh Der'i: The Ascent,
The Crisis, the Pain**
Yedi'ot Aharonot, 1999.
542 pages, Hebrew.

Aryeh Dayan
**The Fountainhead:
The Story of Shas**
Keter, 1999.
365 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Avi Picard

The 1999 elections highlighted, once again, the yawning divide between a considerable portion of Israel's citizenry, mostly Ashkenazi in origin and secular in outlook, and what is often called the "Other Israel"—that is, the traditional and Sephardi Jews. Many of those who were upset in 1996 from the stunning successes of both Benjamin Netanyahu and the Shas party found themselves equally distressed this time around. For although Netanyahu did lose, and rather ignominiously, the meteoric rise of Shas continued apace. If in 1996, Shas climbed from six seats to ten, this past May saw its contingent swell to

seventeen, representing the votes of 430,000 Israelis. This, against the predictions of Israel's finest pollsters, who forecast either no change or a drop in the size of Shas' faction.

Commentators set off to find the secret to Shas' success shortly after the 1996 elections. Three books in Hebrew, all published in advance of the 1999 vote, are the result of this effort. And all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, suffer from the same basic flaw: That their authors are political journalists, whose experience with Shas has been dominated by the comings and goings of a handful of party leaders, and whose primary sources have mostly been found wandering the halls of the Knesset, and not in the streets of the development towns—the repository of Shas' real strength, and the key to understanding the movement's success.

This shortcoming is especially striking in Menahem Rahat's book, *Shas: The Spirit and the Power*. Rahat comprehensively reviews all the intrigues and maneuverings which have accompanied the Shas party since it first appeared on the political scene in 1984. In the book's foreword, Rahat explains that most of his material came from conversations he held with senior Shas members while he worked for the daily *Ma'ariv*, as well as archival material. He purports to "closely and objectively follow all phases of the growth and ascent of this amazing phenomenon in

Israeli politics.” Yet he does nothing of the kind: Over the course of reading one gets the impression that Rahat, a veteran journalist, simply clipped every newspaper article he could find in which the word “Shas” appeared, bound them all together with photographs of the party’s then-chairman Aryeh Der’i and spiritual leaders R. Ovadia Yosef and R. Yitzhak Kaduri, and set out to find a publisher. As for the massive grassroots movement, its institutions and its aspirations, Rahat contents himself with only a brief mention; his entire exploration of the organization, its structure and its social programs is relegated to a page and a half.

Rahat’s explanation of Shas’ electoral success is, to put it mildly, baffling. Primary credit goes to the mystical amulets handed out by Kaduri in the run-up to 1996, which promised health and prosperity to anyone who wore them and voted correctly. “It seems that the brilliant campaign that positioned the amulet maker, R. Kaduri, is at its core the basis for this victory. All other explanations and arguments are dwarfed by this wonderful tactic.” In other words, a quarter million people voted for Shas in 1996 because of a mystical trick. Apparently, Rahat was not alone in his analysis: For the 1999 campaign, the election committee forbade the use of amulets and blessings—and the result was the

refuting of the idea that they bore any connection to the election results. Unaided by amulets, Shas duplicated in 1999 its remarkable success from three years earlier.

A similar shallowness haunts the pages of Yo’el Nir’s *Aryeh Der’i: The Ascent, the Crisis, the Pain*. Nir, a veteran reporter and editor for the Voice of Israel radio, offers a portrait of Shas’ charismatic leader who, after his conviction last March on corruption charges, was forced to resign from the party chairmanship. Yet here, too, the author focuses far more on Shas the party and Der’i the politician than on Shas the social movement and Der’i the inspirational leader. Rather than attempting to figure out just what it is about the Sephardi community in Israel that has made many of its members, rather suddenly, turn to Shas, the author focuses only upon the power plays of the party and its leadership, as well as the political dynamic inside the Lithuanian yeshiva world which led to Shas’ break, in the late 1980s, from the Ashkenazi-dominated Haredi camp.

Another problem is what appears to be Nir’s overwhelming sympathy for Aryeh Der’i. The book is, when all is said and done, a defense of Der’i which should surprise anyone familiar with the timbre of Israeli journalism. Nir’s treatment of the conviction (a chapter hastily appended after the rest of the

book was completed) reads more like a talking-points memorandum for Der'i's defense than a biographer's critique. Nir reveals himself to be a Shas apologist, granting barely any merit to the prosecution's argument—despite the fact that it was the latter which prevailed in court. Of course, as any good journalist, Nir denies the prejudice—“We are not talking about Aryeh Der'i's exclusive version of his life ... it is certainly not a ‘book on behalf’”—yet this is precisely what the reader is forced to endure. As far as Nir is concerned, the Der'i Affair had nothing to do with the five counts of bribery, breach of trust and fraud for which Aryeh Der'i was sentenced to four years in prison. Instead, he accepts Shas' position in its entirety, according to which the case is to be seen as a major battle in the ongoing *kulturkampf*, and the trial as “a new symbol of persecution, oppression and discrimination” against the Sephardim.

Of all the new literature on Shas, it is probably Aryeh Dayan's book, *The Fountainhead: The Story of Shas*, which comes closest to understanding Shas as more than just a political party. Yet here, too, the author's preoccupation with political journalism is evident. He dedicates large segments of the book to a detailed account of Shas' wily tactics, giving particular attention to its role in the “Smelly

Trick” of 1990, when the party teamed up with Labor's Shimon Peres in an effort to bring down the national unity government of which Peres himself was a senior partner. From this one might get the impression that the Smelly Trick was a turning point in Shas' history, or somehow indicative of the movement's nature. Dayan skims over other events, allocating only a few pages to the period of the Rabin government and providing a quick and unsatisfying review of Shas' success in the 1996 elections.

Nonetheless, Dayan perceives the motives behind the establishment of Shas, and the reasons for its success, more astutely than either Nir or Rahat. Dayan turns his gaze towards the underlying social forces: He describes how Shas, initially a Haredi party attuned to the taste of the followers of R. Eli'ezer Shach, the centenarian leader of the Lithuanian yeshiva movement, transmogrified into a populist movement in 1988, tailoring itself to the much wider constituency of traditional Sephardi Jews. Dayan correctly points out that Shas succeeded in filling a void left by Menachem Begin's departure from politics and the Likud's increased focus on political issues at the expense of social issues. (Such an observation seems prophetic after the 1999 elections, in which Shas' Knesset strength nearly equaled that of the Likud.) Dayan also

suggests that the shrinking of the Israeli welfare state significantly contributed to Shas' success, as Sephardim needed a welfare mechanism of their own to provide services to a population let down by the government bureaucracy. Nevertheless, Dayan understands that these factors, important in their own right, are secondary to understanding the movement.

The key to Shas' success was its ability to restore cultural pride to Israel's Sephardi community. According to Dayan, it was R. Ovadia Yosef who first understood that the severing of Sephardi Jews from the traditions and lifestyle which had accompanied them for generations was the true cause of their crisis, and that social problems such as poverty and crime could be solved only once their self-respect had been restored. Shas succeeded in garnering widespread support because "for the first time since they immigrated to this country, an organization stood before them and claimed that they had no reason to be ashamed of their past traditions, or to deny them." Dayan's observation is right on the mark: In the virtual world of the Israeli media, it sometimes seems as if Shas' power is constantly eroding, its senior members deserting the party (R. Yitzhak Peretz in 1990 and R. Yosef Azran in 1995), its leaders charged with criminal offenses and its Council

of Sages disintegrating. Yet in the neighborhoods and synagogues, in the hearts of voters, Shas' strength continues to grow.

The strength of this tree lies not in its blossoms, but in its roots. The Shas movement is built on a broad infrastructure, located in every part of the country, with its multifaceted El Hama'ayan ("Towards the Fountain") educational network—which includes kindergartens, schools, youth centers, senior-citizen centers and more—as its flagship. Shas' Knesset contingent is but a single wing of a vast, cradle-to-grave social organization. In this respect, Shas is much like the Zionist movements around which public life was organized during the Mandatory period. These movements took care of the education and welfare of their members, provided employment, founded sports teams and health clinics, and harnessed the full identification of their members. Members of the Histadrut, Beitar or Hapo'el Hamizrahi organizations were members all year round, not just on election day. Each movement had its own political arm within the Zionist Organization, but that was just one part, and not necessarily the most important part, of the whole.

With time, and especially with statehood, these social movements disintegrated, leaving behind only

their political parties, which relate to their constituents strictly as voters, showing interest in their lives only as elections draw near. Shas differs from them fundamentally. Shas supporters feel the movement's presence in their private and public lives daily. They send their children to the Tora Education Fountain schools for almost nothing. They employ the services of such agencies as the Settlement Fountain, which provides educational services in outlying communities, or the Mother of Pearl in Israel women's organization. They turn to organizations helping the needy, which lend medical equipment and assist in covering the cost of hospitalization and treatment. As opposed to other parties, many "Other Israel" voters see Shas as a permanent fixture in their lives.

The core of Shas' power, however, is not the infrastructure itself. It is the educational-cultural message promoted via this infrastructure. The minimal tuition for the El Hama'ayan schools, the hot meal and free transportation that each pupil receives certainly help increase membership. Yet ultimately the success of Shas comes from something more fundamental. The fulcrum of Israel's ethnic problem, to which Shas is a response, is the delegitimization of

traditional Sephardi culture within Israeli society.

Since the founding of the state, it was widely believed that immigrants from Islamic countries had to be re-educated in accordance with the ethos created by the secular, socialist pioneers of the Labor Zionist movement. This ethos barely exists anymore, and has been replaced with other ideological models which coexist in Israeli society—sometimes harmoniously and sometimes not. And yet, Sephardi culture is still marginalized by those who determine modern Israel's ideological and educational agenda. At best, it is treated as folklore, a source of song, dance and cuisine, among the broader public. But as a way of life, it still is viewed as inferior to the European-American-Ashkenazi culture which dominates the country.

That is where Shas comes in. The ethnic parties which preceded it dedicated themselves mostly to poverty and welfare, as well as problems of political representation and the like. These subjects were not important enough to most Sephardi Jews to persuade them to vote for an ethnic party. Shas alone addresses the problem which touches the Sephardim most deeply. They have understood that social inequality, substandard levels of education, high crime rates and poverty are first and foremost rooted in

the feelings of inferiority and insecurity plaguing the Sephardim. True, they have been made to endure degradation at the hands of a system which by and large scorns their tradition. But the ultimate solution to the Sephardi problem is to be found within the Sephardi community itself: Only by reclaiming their

ethnic pride, “restoring the crown to its former glory,” will Sephardi Jews find their proper place in Israeli society.

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