



Dror Zeigerman

A Liberal Upheaval

Friedrich Naumann
STIFTUNG **FÜR DIE FREIHEIT**

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TO MY WIFE ASIA WITH LOVE

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from the General Zionists to the Liberal Party



The Liberal Party, Jerusalem branch, 1960's, Zion Square, Photo by Ytzhak Saad

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DROR ZEIGERMAN www.drorz48@gmail.com

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Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty
Israel Desk
P.O.BOX 18133
PHONE: 02-5326080/ 1/2/3
Fax: 02-5326084
JERUSALEM@FNST.ORG
WWW.FNST-JERUSALEM.ORG

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Preamble

Throughout my academic studies, and also in public life and political activity, I have been preoccupied with understanding the historic role of the Liberal Party (*General Zionists*) and its contribution to Israeli politics.

As offspring of a family of General Zionists (co-founders of Nes-Ziona); as student in the political sciences department at the Hebrew University Jerusalem and at George Washington University, Washington D.C. an active member within the association of Students of the Liberal Party; and as member and party representative of the Knesset, I felt that the public image of the Liberal Party had been distorted. The Party was presented as spineless, and the impact of its electorate on political developments in Israel was allegedly marginal: It was seen as a party that fully absorbed into the Israeli Right and the *Herut* Movement.

Two questions prompted me to believe that the current image was misleading: first, why did Begin agree to give the Liberals something in return for their readiness to merge with *Herut* - that is, a major share in the leadership of *Gahal* (and later the Likud) at all governmental, parliamentary and administrative levels? That share has been maintained for over twenty years.

And second, what made the leaders of the General Zionists and the Liberals choose to unite, to split, and to unite again in order to avoid becoming one of the satellite parties in the orbit of the ruling *Mapai*, the labor party?

I found that the desire to change the government and to create an alternative – a trend that was already part and parcel of the liberal ideology - became the leading principle of the General Zionists.

I decided to examine these issues within the framework of a research project, beginning to write my doctoral thesis on this subject at George Washington University in Washington D.C., and continuing at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. As mentors, I had Prof. Gideon Doron, Prof. Giora Goldberg, and Prof. Bernard Reich. The subject of the thesis was defined:

The Political Consequences of the Party Merger, Framework and Case Study: the Liberal Party in Israel.

In 2013, my book *The Liberal Upheaval*, based on my doctoral thesis, was published in Israel by Schocken Publishing House with the financial support of the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty. The essay in the present booklet is part of the original book and is focused on the questions: can the ideology of the General Zionists be seen as a liberal message? And how did the General Zionists become the Israeli Liberal party?

Introduction:

This essay is based on a doctoral dissertation, later turned into a book entitled “The Liberal Upheaval.” The focus of the research is 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 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 variable take a greater risk when entering mergers negotiation.

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 of 1977.

The aim of this study is to utilize the analysis of party merger 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 *Gahal* and the Likud in the economic, social, political, and security dimensions. The research demonstrates that Begin comprehended that only cooperation with the Liberals will allow *Herut* to move towards the center - a movement that created a viable alternative to Labor rule. It shows that the motivation to attain power became an inseparable part of the ideology of the General Zionists and the Liberal party; and claims that the Liberals saw the creation of *Gahal* as a test for the ability of non-socialist forces to form an alternative capable of attaining power.

The study observes the political and organizational tensions between *Herut* and the Liberals, despite of which the merger survived and was successful. It examines the manner in which by 1965 the strategic aims of Begin and the leaders of the Liberal party converged. The creation of *Gahal* paved the way to participation in the emergency unity government after the 1967 war.

The research points towards the tendency of the of Israeli voters to move towards the political center and claims that after the creation of Likud in 1973 *Gahal* was already in a situation where the merger was a profitable one. The voters in the center of the political map comprehended that *Gahal* and the Likud became a center party, erasing the fringe image of *Herut* and Begin. The study examines the relationship between party mergers and transformations in the political system. It emphasizes the inter-party, intra-party and intra-block dimensions, aid into comprehend political mergers and the potential of a proto-coalition for becoming a ruling coalition, a process that has crucial implications for the stability of the political system and the policy

executed by governments. The political party in all of its facets is presented –it is claimed that only an integrated analysis of all components allows for explaining the failure or success of political processes such as party mergers.

Chapter 1:

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

This chapter shall deal with the transformation of the General Zionists from a current within the Zionist Movement into a political party, and explore the ideology of this party.

The General Zionists began organizing as a party after the changes in the Zionist Movement, as a response to the formation of the various Labor parties, the religious *Mizrahi* party, and the Revisionist party.¹

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.

Also during the years 1929-1935, about 70,000 Jews from Poland immigrated to Israel. The majority of the immigrants were middle-class people, and they arrived while the country was facing an economic crisis. The situation of these immigrants motivated the General Zionists to support the middle-class population in order to achieve the goals of the Zionist Movement. They sustained that the building of cities and the encouragement of commercial enterprises, were the right ways to achieve Jewish majority in Mandatory Palestine, which would lead to the establishment of a Jewish State. In their

¹*Hapoel Hatzair* party was founded in 1905; *Poalei Zion* in 1906; *Achdut Haavoda* in 1919; *Mapai* in 1930, after the merger between *Hapoel hatzair* and *Acdut Haavoda*; *Mizrahi* was founded 1902, and the Revisionist Party in 1925.

view, this was the only way to save the Jewish people. The General Zionists believed in the necessity of productivization, without need for proletarianization. Within the framework of the sovereign Jewish State, they held, there is room for all social classes.

As soon as the General Zionists became a political party, they had to ask themselves a few questions: what position should the party assume toward the Zionist leadership? What should they demand from workers' associations? How should they interact with the General Union and the Labor movements? These issues triggered the party split that loomed over the General Zionists soon after the foundation of the party.

In 1933, the 18th Zionist Congress in Prague was attended by two factions of the General Zionists. These factions were called "A" and "B", according to the labels on the congress rooms.

In the early 1930s, the General Zionists achieved a majority within the Zionist Movement, and they started to wonder why a movement that was supported by some of the Zionist founders and leaders, such as David Wolfson, Chaim Weizmann, and Nahum Sokolow, was unable to use its strength in order to gain dominance of the Zionist Movement. One of the reasons for this was that the leaders refused to enroll in one of the factions or in the party, while the leaders of the Labor party, Ben Gurion, Berl Katznelson, and Moshe Sharett, did not refrain from engaging in party politics.

In Mandatory Palestine, the supporters of the General Zionists were part of the bourgeois sector, apparently without a political conscience, and they had various groups. A few new organizations were founded in 1941: the representatives of local authorities, the *Farmers Union*, and the

manufacturers, called the *Civilian Union*. Among the leaders of the latter were the mayor of Tel Aviv, Israel Rokach, the mayor of Petach Tikva, Yosef Sapir, the chairman of the *Farmers Union*, Haim Ariav, and General Zionists leaders who immigrated from Europe. One of them was Peretz Bernstein. Here again, one may wonder how despite the dominance of these groups at municipal level, their economic leverage could not be used for political purposes. The answer is their apathy regarding political affairs, their loose organization, and the lack of strong leadership.

Two of the party factions took part in the 1949 elections: the General Zionists obtained seven seats at the Knesset, and the Progressive party obtained five seats.

Zionist ideology in the pre-State period

The General Zionists party had not been founded from an ideological basis but rather, out of necessity. Moshe Kleinmann argued that General Zionists could not be a party. In his opinion, they were the essence of Zionism, its bone and marrow. Their first model was the Zionist Federation. Kleinmann refused the concept of General Zionist ideology. In his view, the Socialist Zionism or the Orthodox Zionism were additional layers, not prerequisites for the realization of Zionism (see Kleinmann, 1945). Despite his position, both factions (A and B) of the General Zionists adopted a specific ideology, based on the special requests of the class they represented. The leaders of the General Zionists did not want to be seen as political leftists, nor to be part of the workers union. Within the “B” faction, the opinion was that the working class was hostile to the middle class and to the recent immigrants,

while the “A” faction showed readiness to cooperate with the working class and to acknowledge its position as central factor in the realization of a Jewish Homeland.

Within both factions, there was a variety of opinions. But the fact that the Zionist movement devoted itself more and more to practical work, i.e. development of the state of Israel, gave more leverage to the General Zionists. Instead of theoretical discussions, they were now compelled to look for solutions to actual problems. Both factions of the party acknowledged the principle of priority of the Nation: helping the people and building the Jewish Homeland was more important than the ideology of groups, associations and classes. Organizations and Kibbutzim must work towards general and national goals² .

On the basis of the priority of the Nation, the General Zionists factions agreed to adopt a series of principles:

1. To adopt the Basel Program, which means recognizing the authority of the Zionist Congress and of the Zionist leadership.
2. To support a uniform education program (instead of education according to party lines).
3. To create an employment bureau open for all people, (instead of employment bureaus affiliated with parties, or with the *Histadrut* (trade unions organization) and to resolve conflicts at work places through mandatory arbitration.
4. To maintain the importance of employing Jewish manpower, and the right

²From the party platform, formulated May 15, 1931

to have private capital, private property, and freedom of business;

5. The unification of all productive elements, both labor and capital, for the good of the people, In the view of the Party, private enterprise should be the main factor in the development of the Eretz Israel economy.

These principles indicate that there is a General Zionist ideology despite the presence of opposing factions. Individuals who did not want to join any of the Zionist parties, enrolled in the General Zionists. Isaac Schwarzbart wrote: “(the party) was a collage of many opinions, without a precise ideological identity” (*Haolam*, 19.5.1931). And Prof. Joseph Klausner wrote: “The main principle is that we are not a bourgeois party. In our party we have members from all ranks and classes. Our principle should be pure, not-sectarian, Zionism. We are not a right-wing party, we refuse to mix Zionism with Religion, or with Socialism or Communism” (Klausner, 1943). This was also a way to define the party by saying what it is not.

In his book *General Zionist Ideology* (1936), Felix Weltsch depicted the gradual formation of this ideology. He sustained that the negative definition (“we are not...”) was the first stage. They were uneasy with the negative definition, and went on to the next phase. The General Zionists wanted to be a central party, a bridge between the extremes: “A person affiliated with the General Zionists is aware of the fact that he is *claly* (midway) – not because he is not a member of another party, but because he consciously chooses the middle way. This consciousness was not born out of weakness, or readiness to compromise, but out of awareness that one must create an ideology that frees a person from a situation of doubt and dilemma”. At that point in time began the third stage of formation of an ideology that was the driving force for “unity and integrity of the party.... a force that was not centrifugal, but

centripetal, with a goal: to mediate between opposite sides, to unite factions and to propel the whole movement forward.”

Despite the formation of this ideology, differences and controversies remained in matters of interpretation and implementation, and even more so because the ideology was very general, which made it easy for various groups to adopt it. The splits resulting from these controversies were easy prey for the Labor Parties, whose ideology was much more clear and defined. That was the main reason for the inability of the General Zionists to compete with the domination of the Labor Party at the centers of power in the Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the communal administration.

Historians who did research on Zionist parties tried to find out whether the General Zionist ideology was connected with Liberalism, because in a later stage, these parties adopted the label *Liberals*. Shimoni, (1995) found that the linkage between nationalism and liberalism was problematic because the classical liberal view calls for individual autonomy and refrains from coercion and limitation by the authority. Gideon Shimoni held that there is no indication that in the pre-State period, the General Zionists adopted tenets of liberal ideology. The party put an emphasis on the economy, and refrained from addressing social issues. It defended the unity of the Jewish People (nationality first), against the socialism, which stood for class struggle and opposed private enterprise. The emphasis given to nationality is in contradiction with classic liberalism, because it puts so much value on loyalty to the nation. Shimoni explained that the economic platform of the General Zionists included liberal principles of non-interference, of freedom of enterprise and the establishment of a system of mandatory arbitration. These principles originated, however, from “integration between purely national

objectives, with minor economic interests.”

David Schaary noted that, even if one cannot define the General Zionists platform as liberal, the fact that the party demanded economic freedom, readiness to compromise, and mutual concessions, indicated that the objective was the creation of a moderate atmosphere, similar to the one sought by liberals. As an example he cited Glickson, who was affiliated with the Progressives (the A faction). He was in favor of a planned economy. Shaary said that the avoidance of the *liberal* label may have originated from the connotation of that word among Jews in Germany: there it indicated a Reformist, anti-religious and anti-Zionist movement (Schaary, 1990)

Supersky, who was a member the B faction, made use of the word liberal, stressing the need to create a liberal economy, as opposed to the socialist economy nurtured by the Labor Party. Bernstein used that concept in meetings with Ben Gurion in London, in 1939, but at the first General Zionists conference after the establishment of the state, he dismissed a request from members to change the name of the party to the Liberal Party. He wrote, “I am a fan of liberalism, but that depends on the circumstances. We cannot adopt a foreign ideology. We must make our way according to our needs... the time is not ripe for an ideological dispute about the character of the State. The request to protect private enterprise is based on national reasons, and not on class interests (The Peretz Bernstein Book, 1961 p.159).

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 WWII. It is true that the General Zionists did not emphasize the principle of freedom of the individual, nor did they occupy themselves with the relations between State and Religion, but we have to keep in mind that this was in the pre-State period, and the main objective was the establishment of the State. The General Zionists, which represented the middle class, tried to prevent discrimination against that sector. They focused their efforts on urgent problems and refrained from dealing with theoretical issues.

Immediately after the establishment of the State, 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 (Klinghofer, 1993). They also demanded National Health Care, unification of educational programs, and establishment of national employment bureaus. 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. Enterprises operated by the *Histadrut* should be subject to the same rules valid for other businesses, and should not enjoy monopolistic status. The State should not support a monopoly. In economy and in commerce, monopolistic enterprises violate the principle of fair competition (from the platform of the Center Party at the first Knesset, 1949). The General Zionists believed in economic pluralism, in which the *Histadrut*-run enterprises can exist side-by side with other types of enterprises. These

principles that the General Zionists formulated in view of the elections of the first Knesset were based on platforms and ideological guidelines drawn up by the various factions of the party before the establishment of the State.

The General Zionists, and the Progressives adopted the label Liberals only at unification of the party in 1961, in order to present an alternative to the domination of the Labor party.

For most of the years between the foundation of the General Zionists and the establishment of the State of Israel, people were asking themselves if this organization was indeed a party. Moshe Glickson (The editor of *Haaretz*) had already addressed this question in 1924, in an article in the *Haaretz* newspaper. He insisted that the General Zionist Federation was a useful body, and he cautioned against the attempt to transform it into a party because it would lose its appeal. He concluded his article: “the major weakness of the Zionist Organization is that it became a combination of parties... this situation required the establishment of a strong Federation of General Zionists, to stay away from parties and above parties” (Schaary, 1990). On the other side, Supersky supported the creation of a party with a firm hand on factions, able to cope with leftist parties.

Bernstein sustained that the only way to tackle the Left was to have a united party. In his book, he said that one should impose discipline by force, and also by education and propaganda (The Peretz Bernstein book, 1962).

Bernstein's position reflects his activity in the 1940s. He took the initiative to shun the elections of the constitutional assembly in 1944, and he tried to create a large national party. That attempt failed, and Peretz Bernstein was fired from the *Haboker* newspaper, but he remained leader of the General Zionists.

Political scientists define the General Zionists as a skeleton-party, different from the Labor party, which is defined as a mass party (Goldberg, 1995). The General Zionists did not bother with construction of a party apparatus and organizational basis. One of the major differences between a mass party and a skeleton party is the variety of functions that the party intends to fulfill. The Labor Party offered a variety of services to its members, mainly through the Histadrut trade unions organization. Some of the party members found jobs within the administration of the party, or the *Histadrut*. The members of the General Zionists, on the other hand, were middle class bourgeois, and most of them didn't need services from the party or financial assistance. The General Zionists demanded that the State authorities provide equal services to all parts of the population. As this effort failed, they were forced to put up service centers for support of the needy, but only on a small scale. Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak wrote: "Because of lack of powerful secondary centers, the General Zionists party could find assistance, only from the party apparatus (Horowits and Lissak, 1977, page 236).

Political science researchers specified additional traits of a skeleton party: a weak ideological dimension, weak party apparatus, closed leadership, homogenous electorate and membership, and loose ties to the government. No doubt one can find these traits in abundance within the factions of the General Zionists. The administrative backbone of the bourgeois parties was weaker than it was in parties like *Mapai*, the Religious parties, or the Revisionist party. The party apparatus was more restricted, and the budget was smaller, despite the fact that the supporters were wealthy people. The question of party discipline also indicates organizational weakness. The discussion on this issue began with the 1935 congress that ended with

a party split and continued, in particular within the *Hitachdut HaZionim HaClaliyim*, until the establishment of the State.

In his book, Lissak dealt with the traits of the leadership in the bourgeois sector. He argued that most of the leaders had a record of leadership in the Zionist movement, that they were highly educated individuals, and that they did not consider themselves as professional politicians. It was difficult to evaluate their electoral appeal within the population, and their turnover rate was high because they were unable to devote their time, energy, and wealth to the party for an extended period of time (Lissak, 1981)

This faithful description shows a close elitist group that was unable to accept authority rule. The differences of mentality between immigrants from Europe, and those born in *Eretz* Israel added to the stress within the party. The vast majority of the party members and of those who voted for it came from East and Central Europe. They were middle-class people, business people and professionals, who settled mainly in cities and *moshavot* (small towns). To the party came also the farmers who were born in the first *moshavot*. Because of its organizational weakness, we have no exact records of the registered members of the General Zionists. An analysis of the political conduct of the party shows that it did not have a chance to become a well-organized mass party, whose members are disciplined and recognize the authority of the leaders. General Zionists instead became a skeleton-party which tried to cope with practical questions and did not indulge in ideological soul-searching. The party could not demand long-term loyalty from its members, it was dormant most of the time, and became active before elections. Because of these traits, the party tried to fight against the politicization of public life in Mandatory Palestine. In view of the conditions prevailing in the land in the

pre-State period, this fight did not have a chance. Because of this among other reasons, the party was unable to harness its power and its electoral successes at the Zionist Congress in order to become a worthy alternative to the Labor parties. These developments influenced the subsequent course of the General Zionists, even after the establishment of the State, when it became the Liberal Party in 1961, merged into *Gahal* in 1965, and was assimilated within the *Likud* in 1988.

Chapter 2.

The General Zionists as political party from the establishment of the state to the fourth Knesset.

The General Zionists began the first Knesset as an opposition party. The group of individuals who represented the party at the Knesset was composed both of leaders such as Bernstein, Yosef Serlin, and Shoshana Persitz, who immigrated to Mandatory Palestine from Europe before WWII, and of sons of local old-timers, as Israel Rokach, and Yosef Sapir.

A major development occurred in the party after the establishment of the State. Yossi Beilin maintained (1985) that they started acting as a national party, unlike the liberal parties in Western Europe – skeleton parties that woke up only in view of elections, but remained mostly dormant between elections. Zalman Abramov (1995), and Itzhak Berman (in an interview, 2007) agreed with the assumption of Neuberger, B (1991), that the great success of the General Zionists in the elections for the second Knesset was due mainly to the changes in the image the party had of itself, and to its political conduct. The party leaders built a political party that fought to win, and we can detect symptoms of mass party within its conduct.

Duverger, M (1967) assumed that mass parties would become models for conservative liberal parties. He called that phenomenon “catching from the Left”.

The situation of the General Zionists in the early 1950s fitted Duverger’s definition, and this became evident in the first national congress, held November 20-21, 1949 in Tel Aviv, which has been labeled “Congress of Change” or “Congress of Momentum”

The records of that congress³ show that the most impressive speakers were Rimalt and Bernstein. They stressed the change in the party image in the

³Published in the bulletin of the headquarters of the General Zionists organization (1949, No. 3)

eyes of the public. Rimalt pointed out the fact that a major part of the party supporters were wage-earning workers. On the subject of ideology, Rimalt suggested to conform it to that of the liberal parties in Western Europe. Rimalt and Bernstein stressed the relevance of the addition of the Central Party label, meant to appeal to Israeli citizens who did not believe in the autocracy rule and in hegemony of a single ideology (*Haboker*, 21.7.1948). The same view can be found in the lead article of *Haaretz*, which said that the Israeli democracy would be endangered without a Central Party (*Haaretz*, 23.7.1948).

The ideology of the General Zionists in the Fifties

Bernstein noted that the Ben-Gurion government accepted and implemented major parts of the classic General Zionists principles: freedom of the individual and responsibility of the State in matters of education, health, and employment. Bernstein said that over 130,000 people voted for the General Zionists, which proved that the party had a clear and understandable ideological line. He stressed that the people who voted for General Zionists did not do so out of need and did so without any reward.

In the 1950s, the ideological debate within the General Zionists focused also on the question of whether it was to be a democratic liberal party, like the parties in Western Europe, or if they should keep the guidelines the General Zionists adopted in the pre-State period, while the party was active within the Zionist Organization in Europe, and in Mandatory Palestine .

Bernstein was against the suggestion to establish a liberal party. In his opinion, it was wrong to adopt foreign models that were not fit for the newly established State. He said that the nation itself should always have priority, and argued that the time for a debate on nature and character of the State had not come yet. The claims for private initiative and for an influx of capital were based on national interests, and not on class interests (Bernstein, 1961).

The first platform of the party, adopted in the first National Conference⁴, speaks of democratic regime, but the word liberalism is absent. In the platform adopted by the party for the second Knesset, the word liberalism is still missing, but we can find expressions that are close to liberal themes, for example, that the freedom of the individual is a basic condition for development and prosperity of the people, opposition to any coercion of individuals, and a promise of unfettered freedom and safety. The platform calls for drawing-up a constitution, is opposed to awarding too much power to the government, and warns against the use of emergency laws. In the Congress of 1951, a debate on these subjects occurred between Abramov and Bernstein. In an article: "The victory of Bourbons – the Achilles heel of the General Zionists", Abramov wrote (*Beterem*, 1951, Abramov. 1995) that the party leaders, and in particular the members of the "Ichud Haezrachi" (Sapir and Rokach) refrained from ideological confrontation with the Labor party and refrained from presenting a democratic-liberal option as opposed to the Socialist vision,.

Another request for affixing the liberal label to the party was voiced by student circles. In the journal they published (*Niv*, May 1951), they called for a party based on the principles of liberal democracy. In that journal, an article by Yosef Serlin determined that the General Zionists must call for a democratic-liberal lifestyle. He added that for General Zionists, the individual citizen is more important than the State, because the latter had been created in order to serve the citizens. On top of the ideological debate, the discussion dealt also with the question about the character of the party: should it be a party representing the people, or a class party? At the beginning of my book, I said that in the pre-State period, the General Zionists intended to represent "the People", and not a specific sector. Their request for protection of private enterprise was a reaction to the Socialist policy adopted by Labor parties.

⁴ Published by the *Histadrut Hazionim Haclaliym*, (union of the general Zionists) the records of the Headquarters, 1950 – November 1949

The General Zionists party was against class struggle, but in fact it became a party that represented the upper middle class. After the establishment of the State, most of the civic groups joined the General Zionists in order to protect their interests. The Farmers Association, the Association of Citrus-Growers, Homeowners, the Merchants Association, and Manufacturers Association – all called for support of the General Zionists. One of the allegations of the Progressives during the election campaigns for the first and second Knesset was that the General Zionists became a class party, representing only bourgeois capitalists.

The leaders of the General Zionists tried to disprove the allegations raised by the Progressives. Sapir (*Baderech*, 8.6.1950) stated that the party did not identify itself with a single class, because the electorate of the party was composed of economic groups with conflicting interests. The uniting factors of all those groups were freedom of enterprise and a humanistic outlook. Ezra Ichilov, one of the leaders of the younger generation in the 1950s, wrote an article (*Haboker*, 20.6.1951) headed “From Class party to Peoples’ party”. In his opinion, a party demanding national services in matters of health, education, employment and insurance is not a party that represents a specific class. In the 1950s, the appropriate definition for the General Zionists was a party that supported State institutions and took care of all classes and sectors, as stated in the platform for the first Knesset in 1949.

The report submitted to the First National Congress by the Party leadership said, on the subject of social services, that health insurance should be at the disposal of everyone and not owned by the State. In matters of education, the report demanded basic elementary education for every child, free of charge. The report called for uniform education in care of the State and for abolition of

the linkage between schools and political parties. The platform for the second Knesset stated that the party demands uniform national education, and health and social insurance run by the State. The platform determined that the General Zionists party will try to take settlement and housing regulations out of the hands of political parties and to assign these functions to the State. At the end, the platform stated that the changes listed there are necessary in order to free Israeli citizens from submission to political organizations and to avoid the danger of a totalitarian regime⁵.

These requests stoked the dispute between the General Zionists and the left wing of the Labor parties. Ben Gurion intended to adopt a major part of the ideology of the General Zionists, keeping essential services in the hands of State authorities. On the other hand, other *Mapai* (the main Labor party) leaders, as Mordechai Namir, Golda Meir, Levi Eshkol, and Pinchas Sapir, as well as the leaders of *Mapam* and *Achdut Haavoda* (both minor Labor parties) dismissed any option to adopt parts of that ideology or to engage in a coalition with General Zionists (Abramov, 1990).

Ben Gurion desired a compromise, but in fact, he implemented a substantial part of the platform of the General Zionists striving for unitary national education, establishment of national health and welfare services, and putting essential services in care of the government. These principles, however, are not mentioned at all in the *Mapai* platform for the elections. With only one exception, Ben Gurion always refrained from including the General Zionists in his governments. The national principles demanded by the General Zionists did not appear in the governmental guidelines.

The disputes about the ideological basis and the public status of the General Zionists went on in the 1950s within the Party. Young members, headed by Abramov and Ichilov, fought against the Civic Union. They claimed that Sapir and Rokach were not interested in a political party and only tried to protect their municipal position and to develop economic branches under their own control, thus preventing the development of free democratic life. The Civic

⁵From «Principles and programs of the General Zionists organization - Center party, for the elections of the second Knesset, April 1951

Union became the most powerful element in the party, and it chose the list of candidates running for the second Knesset. In an article (*Beterem*, 1951) headed “How can we have an alternative party?” Abramov warned that there was no guarantee that the party would continue to exist unless it could enroll a larger public from middle class.

In the economic domain, the platforms for the first and second Knesset include many items stressing the importance of the private sector, which shows the dominance of capitalists, most of whom were members of the Civic Union. The platforms stress freedom of enterprise in order to ensure competition, efficacy, and low wages. In opposition to the centralized system adopted by *Mapai*, the General Zionists demanded abolition of the state supervision on the economy, and the party wanted to have the economy based on the free play of demand and offer (from the platform of the General Zionists – the Party Center, report to the Congress, November 1949).

The General Zionists after the elections for the second Knesset

In the elections for the second Knesset, the General Zionists obtained 20 seats. One should also add the three seats obtained by factions close to the party. By this, the General Zionists became the second-biggest party in Israel. The elections took place in a period of economic stress. Food was rationed, and distributed by stamps. The sectors most affected were the middle class and small businesses. The General Zionists campaigned with the slogan: “Away with the domination of *Mapai*,” and “Let people make a living in this Land”. Hundreds of thousands voted for the Party, and maybe there is reason to assume that after the 1951 elections the General Zionists led to a turnaround in the political map.

However, the big success in the elections for the second Knesset did not

allow the General Zionists to become an alternative to the *Mapai* rule, nor did it allow the Party to join the government coalition immediately after the elections. When the party entered the coalition one year later, its leaders became aware of the fact that political and economic power remained in the hands of *Mapai*. The insignificant government portfolios that were awarded to the General Zionists representatives did not allow the party to exert real influence in the social and economic domain. The Ministry of Finance remained in the hands of *Mapai*. The Ministers of Finance – Eliezer Kaplan and Levi Eshkol –along with other Ministers in the economic domain, thwarted all attempts by the ministers in charge on behalf of General Zionists – Bernstein, who became Minister of Industry and Commerce, Rokach (Minister of the Interior), Sapir (Minister of Transport), and Serlin (Minister of Health) – to take an initiative or to improve legislation in favor of middle class. In the 1950s, governments headed by Ben Gurion and by Sharett passed several landmark economic and social laws and regulations that were in accordance with the principles of the General Zionists. Among others things, the State Education Law, the National Service Act, the Flag and Anthem Law, and National Welfare Chambers. These laws and regulations, however, are listed in history books as achievements of Ben Gurion and *Mapai*, and the General Zionists are not mentioned. These laws and regulations had been negotiated while the party participated in the government coalition, and they were passed thanks to their participation. But their electorate – middle class and political moderate – refused to believe the claims of the party leaders that these laws would not have passed without their contribution. In the 1950s *Mapai* and Ben Gurion considered the General Zionists to be their main antagonist. They knew that the General Zionists challenged their economic

and social vision, and so they directed their electoral campaign against the Party and succeeded in reducing the Party's appeal to the electorate. They did so by addressing the center of the political map and adopting parts of the ideas of the General Zionists– without mentioning the source – and also weakened the Party's power and influence within the government and in social, political, and economic circles. In the 1950s, the almost monopolistic domination of *Mapai* on mass media (radio and newspapers) enabled the ruling party to claim authorship of all governmental achievements.

As soon as the social and economic situation of the state became stable and the economic situation of the middle classes improved dramatically, *Mapai* had the government resign before the elections for the third Knesset – a move intended to rally votes from leftist parties and to prepare for unification of all Labor parties. It has been claimed that the decision by *Mapam* (United workers party) to join the Ben Gurion Government in 1955 signifies the demise of the left in Israeli politics (Tomer Zeigerman 2010).

The General Zionists had no option but to become once again the main opposition party on behalf of the center-right, together with the *Herut* movement. The middle-class electorate was in major part moderate and was not attracted to the extremist views of *Herut*. They understood that only a stable political map, headed by one strong party, would be able to guarantee social and economic stability. Thus, the electorate turned its back on the General Zionists and started supporting *Mapai*, which became a center-left party. These developments enabled *Mapai* to continue ruling for another two decades. In the long run however, the way they treated the General Zionists and pushed them towards *Herut* strengthened both parties.

The records of the 20th Conference (1954) show that the discussion focused

on social and economic issues. Subjects of foreign and security policy were dealt with in one sentence praising the I.D.F. and expressing hope for normal relations with all nations that recognized the State of Israel. As for the economic domain, we see a chapter of five pages, calling for a drastic reduction of the State budget and for changes in the regulations of income tax, arguing that these regulations were discriminatory and caused flight of investors and capitals. The Congress also demanded abolition of the regulation of foreign currency exchanges, and called for improvements of the State Education Law, for support to the HMOs of the General Zionists, and for a National Health Care Law. The decisions adopted by the Conference also concerned changes in the electoral law and asked *Mapai* to raise the electoral threshold to 10% in order to avoid having a multitude of parties. The General Zionists were not opposed to change of the electoral system to a system integrating personal election with proportional representation. They rejected, however, Ben Gurion's suggestion to adopt a majority election system, like the one in use in the United Kingdom (From: The book of the twentieth Convention, *Haboker*, 15-26.6.1954)

Chapter 3

The Liberal Party 1961-1965

In the elections for the third Knesset (1956), the Party fell from 23 seats to a mere 13, and in the elections for the fourth Knesset (1959), it obtained only 8 seats, as in the first Knesset. For the party leaders, it was clear that if they wanted the Party to remain on the political map, they had to adapt to the changes that occurred in the 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 two parties started negotiations for a union in order to present a common list in the elections for the fifth Knesset. They shared a historical background, an almost identical social-economic outlook, and an overlapping electorate, in particular the upper middle class in major cities and in well-settled *moshavot* A—factors that contributed to expeditious negotiations and quick agreement. The Progressives focused in particular on the salaried middle-class in the old quarters of major cities. Both parties were not much interested in issues of foreign policy and defense. A closer look at their respective views shows that the General Zionists party was supposed to be a bit more hawkish than the Progressives. While both parties took part in the government headed by Sharett, the ministers representing the General Zionists supported the more hawkish line of Ben Gurion, against the softer attitude of Sharett and of the

majority of *Mapai* ministers (The Sharett's Diaries, 1978).

The two parties had also different views concerning the role of the party. The Progressives were content remaining a small party that joined the coalition with *Mapai* in order to protect the interests of the economic sector they cared for. On the other hand, the General Zionists never gave up, at least publicly, the claim to become an alternative to *Mapai*. From the electoral point of view, the Progressives counted among the small parties, fighting to stay above threshold, while the General Zionists was one of the medium-size parties. The similarity between the two parties and the disharmony between Pinhas Rosen and Ben Gurion in the aftermath of the "Lavon Affair" (The scandal and bad business) helped to bring about the decision of a merger and foundation of the Liberal Party.

The leaders of the General Zionists had also another option: negotiations with *Herut* for the formation of a common block. The Progressives voiced strong opposition to that move, because *Herut* was considered unfit by most leaders, who could not forget the fact that the Revisionists left the Zionist Organization and represented an extremist rightist, anti-WZO policy before the establishment of the State. The common historical background, and the collaboration in the administration and defense before the establishment of the State, tipped the balance in favor of the Progressives. The General Zionists hoped that the merger would restore the party and raise it to a position of senior partner in the coalition.

The ideological message – a liberal outlook as alternative to *Mapai* rule

The foundation of the United Liberal Party in 1961 was an attempt to put together an alternative to *Mapai* and Ben Gurion. The General Zionists were aware of the fact that they would not become an alternative unless they conquered the middle class. They had to fight against *Mapai*, as the latter also understood that the working class alone would not guarantee a stable dominance. The battle between *Mapai* and the Liberals focused on the ability to present a social-economic ideology that would appeal to the middle class. Abramov addressed this issue in his book. He said that it was wrong to assume that the party had been founded in order to promote the material and economic interests of its members. He sustained that a political party is first of all an educational enterprise and that this should bear on its conduct: cultural lifestyle, a courageous intellectual approach, tolerant attitude towards different shades of ideas – these are of vital importance for a political body that intends to raise to the level of alternative party (Abramov, 1995)

Both the General Zionists and the Progressives, considered the middle class as their home base, but they disagreed in regard of tactics and strategy. The Progressives thought that the middle class had a task: to do something to help the working class. The General Zionists considered the middle class an autonomous sector, with its own legitimate objectives, whose attainment might benefit the entire community.

Newspapers that were not affiliated with political parties (*Haaretz* and *Maariv*), and the morning paper close to the General Zionists (*Haboker*) published editorials stressing the need to have a moderate party which would be an alternative to the divided *Mapai*. Most of the articles wondered

what message the party would send to the public. Would the message be well-accepted? Would the party gather an electorate large enough to form an alternative? The authors of the editorials knew that the sympathy of the intellectuals would not be sufficient to translate moral quality into ballots.

Immediately after the merger, Bernstein was aware of the difficulty in conveying the liberal message to the larger public. In an article headed "The liberal party" he wrote: "More than once it has been said about the General Zionists, that the *Claliut* (*generality*) does not say anything about the situation of the society that came to be in Israel, and that the main theme of the General Zionists is negative: not to connect with the religious parties, or with the Left. It is possible that we shall engage in the near future in a discussion about the actual meaning of liberalism. But the public instinctively grasped the meaning of the liberalism of this new party, and therefore the extraordinary enthusiasm by which large segments of the population welcomed the news about the establishment of the Liberals (*Haboker*, 31.3.1961)

Rosen and Sapir also stressed in their comments the necessity to clarify the meaning of the liberal label, which was to be the centerpiece of the ideological message of the new party. Rosen argued that the unifying idea of the party was the liberal ideal in a modern form, adapted to the reality of the welfare State. He said that it was important to stress issues like the preservation of economic and social freedom, protection from administrative and bureaucratic interference by the government, independence of the courts of justice, limitation of the area in which the government can act as autonomous and competitive economic actor, education to morality, abolition of the martial law, and request of a Constitution able to guarantee citizens' rights (*Haboker*, 14.4.1961). Sapir explained that the new party would not be

conservative. In his opinion, Israel needed a liberal regime, and therefore a liberal party was necessary (*Haaretz*, 16.4.1961)

The founding conference of the Liberal Party convened at the Culture Hall in Tel Aviv, on April 24, 1961. Thousands of people attended, from all parts of the Country. The conference's opening statement and main speeches indicated that the party leaders did not intend to content themselves with slogans, like the necessity to have an alternative to the rule of *Mapai*, but rather, that they intended to take on the ideological question: what kind of liberal message should be presented to the public? The opening statement of the conference stressed the intent to realize a social liberalism, that is, to adjust the classical economic and social liberalism to the reality in the State of Israel, with its influx of mass immigration and the necessity of being a welfare State. The statement called for a Constitution, for free competition in the economic domain, and for freedom of initiative of private, cooperative, and national enterprises on the basis of equal opportunity (The records of the conference, the initial meeting, the Liberal Party).

The General Zionists created the Liberal party out of awareness of the fact that ideological opposition was not enough. The objective of the party was to form a real political alternative. The Progressive party came to the merger on different reasons. The speeches of the leaders reveal a variety of motives. According to Rosen, the leader of the Progressives, the party decided on the merger because they were disappointed with *Mapai* after the Lavon affair. "In my heart there was a horrible doubt whether *Mapai* would be able to play its role and fulfill its cherished mission, to ensure the stability and security of the State". Sapir noted that the General Zionists didn't expect anything from *Mapai*. In his opinion, a democracy inherently needs a distribution of forces in

order to allow for review and control.

Sapir's speech reflected the objective of the General Zionists – avoidance of the perpetuation of the *Mapai* rule, and creation of a political body able to challenge its status. The “Lavon affair” illustrated the urgent necessity to create a political alternative. Sapir reached the conclusion that in view of the parliamentary situation in the first decade since the establishment of the State, the creation of an alternative required the expansion of political bodies created in the transition between settlement and State. He transformed Civic groups in a political party, established the Liberal party in 1961, and after acknowledging that his party was no match for the Labor party, tried to start negotiations with *Herut*.

Sapir, like the historian Prof. Yaakov Talmon (*Haaretz*, 10.2.1961), maintained that liberal Zionism is basically a comprehensive ideological attempt to cope with a new reality. The letters of Sapir (1977), Rimalt (1989), Bernstein (1961), Abramov (1995), Talmon (*Haaretz*, 10.1.1961), Klinghofer (1993), and Goldman (1976) reveal how they conceived the linkage between the liberal and the generally Zionist ideologies. In their opinion, the new or advanced liberalism endowed the general Zionism with a conceptual framework. The starting point of the liberal Zionism is the reality of the existence of a Jewish State. The liberal Zionism is an ideological attempt to cope with the new reality created after the establishment of the State. The people in Israel live in a political and geopolitical situation that is fundamentally different from the one they knew in Eastern Europe, the birthplace of the general Zionism. The leaders of the Liberal party had been aware from the beginning that they would have to adopt the views of modern liberalism, which integrate absolute and relative elements. The absolute parts are human values,

such as freedom of choice, freedom of expression and freedom of personal development. The relative part is the readiness to reassess definitions and positions in view of situational changes.

The leaders of the Liberals asked Prof. Talmon 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?" Prof. 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 WWII?

Talmon tried to deal with these questions by contrasting liberalism with socialism. He argued that the achievements of liberalism were greater than the achievements of socialism or of any other regime. Only liberalism ensures a real democracy and changes in government. A modern liberal state is based on the union of social, political and economic forces against the cult of the rule of the majority, meaning that the majority is not omnipotent, and its powers are limited. Talmon warned against popular slogans such as "The worker is forever" (socialism), or "Race is forever" (Nazism).

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? Talmon knew about the problem: in the 1960s, a major part of the population in Israel did not have a liberal lifestyle. Another

obstacle was the fact that objective developments had forced the State of Israel into a situation of permanent siege and emergency. This kind of situation favors dictatorship and assignment of priority to security and to foreign policy, which necessarily creates unsupervised power centers.

Another problem was the fact that in Israel, one party stayed in power for a long time, and that 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 pointed out that this was shown in the *Mapai* press, where dissenters were called “abominable”, “ruffians”, “hooligans”. This language revealed people who believed that they were always right and that mistakes must be swept under the rug.

Talmon argued that *Mapai* leaders disregarded the fact that Israel was no more a society of *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* 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 develop their own lifestyle, but he stressed that one has to keep in mind that the majority of the population will not tolerate religious coercion. One should not allow religion to exert terror and to put down esthetic emotions, ignoring that these emotions are legitimate and natural. Talmon declared that it was time for *Mapai* to part from the government: “Whoever is in power, and controls powerful tools and property, cannot be seen as *halutz*. Sending *Mapai* to opposition seats will allow them to become *halutzim* again...” In his speech, Talmon addressed also Ben Gurion’s suggestion to change the election system, a suggestion supported

by the “General Zionists”. Talmon said that he was not opposed to the change, but he warned that such a step might perpetuate the *Mapai* rule. He said that a change might be appropriate after the presence of an alternative party.

Talmon addressed also the subject of foreign policy. In his opinion, Israel cannot do much in regard to its international standing. *Mapai* makes use of the security situation and claims to be the only party able to steer the Israeli ship in matters of security and foreign policy. In Talmon’s opinion, an illiberal foreign policy infringes also on liberalism at home. We should not allow foreign policy 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 we 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 is to revitalize and justify the concepts of personal responsibility, of personal engagement, and of the capacity to build a free society (the speech by Prof. Talmon, the Conference book, opening session, 24.4.1961, Talmon’s speech was also printed in *Haaretz*, 19.9.1961).

Talmon’s speech paved the road for the party leaders, and also for Nahum Goldman, the founder president of the World Jewish Congress, The speech was the basis of the decisions adopted and of the party platform submitted to the party center, which was approved in view of the elections of the fifth Knesset. These principles defined the view of liberal Zionism: the State and its administration exist for the sake of each individual, for its freedom and development, and therefore one of the first demands of the liberal party was to draw up a Constitution, meant to protect the individual. They also called for

national health services, open for each citizen.

The economic positions of the Liberals are based on their liberal outlook: people are able to decide about their fate, and the State should content itself with guaranteeing minimal basic conditions. A citizen should be free to choose whether to build a private enterprise or to join a cooperative. One should not interfere in the development of one sector at the expenses of another sector: The *Histadrut* owned enterprises should be subject to the same rules as other sectors. No business should be monopolistic, because this prevents fair competition. The liberal Zionism believes in economic pluralism, and therefore the *Histadrut* owned economy may prosper together with other forms of economy.

These ideological principles, formulated by the heads of the party with the assistance of Prof. 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.

In the founding Conference, Sapir assumed that the party might obtain over twenty seats at the Knesset. He explained that the *Herut* movement was not part of the merger because its participation in the negotiation would take more time, and it would have been difficult to agree on a common denominator. *Herut* had strong opinions in matters of security and foreign policy, and the chances to reach an agreement were slim. Sapir said that it was improbable

that a united party would achieve majority after the election, and noted that *Herut* was no partner for coalition negotiations. Sapir didn't rule out the possibility to co-op with *Herut* later. The agreement between General Zionists and Liberals does not mention the option of co-opting the *Herut* movement. There is only a paragraph indicating the possibility of gathering additional liberal forces. The agreement does not include a paragraph saying that the addition of another group requires the consent of both parties (The agreement on the foundation of the united liberal party, the convention book, 1961).

The first Conference of the “Liberal Party” in 1963

In 1962-1964, the leaders of the Liberal Party tried to recover from the disappointment of not have been able to join the governmental coalition, and made efforts to put the party in shape in matters of ideology and organization. In the fifth Knesset, the Liberal faction was well-appraised because of the quality of speeches, of legislative initiatives and of the parliamentary activity, but the representatives of the party were devoid of charisma and of leadership qualities. They were not a militant opposition to the Leftist rule. The *Herut Movement* became the leading – and fighting – opposition faction, while the Liberal Party looked like a coalition member that was not taken aboard by the government. The party representatives thought they were acting responsibly and putting forward constructive initiatives, but the public saw that as weakness, as lack of leadership, and of real determination to become an alternative. (Abramov, 1995)

The leaders of the Liberal Party, Rosen and Sapir, tried to formulate a liberal

ideology, to serve as party platform. In a series of articles in the *Haaretz* newspaper, Sapir had a lengthy dispute with Ben Gurion. The articles were headed: "Party of change, or party of clerics". Sapir argued that a liberal view calls for economic efficiency and requires redress of distortions, like the different exchange rates of foreign currency, and cancellation of discriminatory taxation between *Histadrut*-owned plants and private enterprises. He pointed out that there was a huge discrepancy between the ideology of the Left, which intends to preserve the present situations, and enslaves people, both physically and mentally – and the liberal view, which strives to improve the situation and liberate society. The Socialist regime insists keeping controlling tools, like Health services, Education, Insurance, and Employment services, in the hands of a group of professional politicians. Socialist ideology became a religion, and the government is like a clergy, trying to shape the society in its image. Sapir concluded his articles admitting that for the time being, the clergy won, but promised that the struggle for change would go on.

Chapter 4.

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 Zionists, 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.

In other aspects, the two parties were also alike. Their social-economic ideology was almost identical, and in matters of foreign policy and security, both were rather moderate. Negotiations between the parties were concluded in a short time, and ended with a decision of full merger, including a united leadership, and elections by party members. Negotiations were quick and successful because of time pressure: the necessity to be ready for the elections for the fifth Knesset. The leaders of the General Zionists refrained from a dispute on the list of candidates, and agreed to an equal basis between the two parties. The same principle was adopted for the party management and the board. Rosen, the leader of the Progressives, was put on top of the list of candidates.

During negotiations, and after signature of the merger agreement, there was some hope that because of the split in *Mapai*, the Liberal Party might become the alternative. The names of Goldman, Talmon, and Schocken, were

mentioned as possible party leaders, as anti-thesis to the conflicted *Mapai* leadership (Abramov, 1995). These hopes, however, collapsed. The new party was headed by the traditional unattractive leaders of the General Zionists, and Progressives, and the outcome of the elections failed to make the Liberal Party into a pivotal element at the Knesset, and did not prevent *Mapai* from forming a government.

Mapai choose to form a small coalition, with leftist parties and with the Religious. At a certain point in time, Ben Gurion tried to take-in also the Liberal Party, but the Left vetoed that step. The outcome of the elections for the fifth Knesset, and the formation of a coalition without Liberals, persuaded the Progressives to become once again an autonomous party, in order to enter the coalition with *Mapai*. They admitted that the merger was a blunder.

The General Zionists became aware that the attempt to hitchhike with the Progressives in order to make the coalition, did not succeed, and they reached the conclusion that the only option was to start negotiations with the rightwing *Herut* movement. Otherwise, they would have to engage in a war of attrition against the *Progressives* and *Rafi* (a party founded by Ben-Gurion in 1965) on the Left, and *Herut* on the Right. That would put the party in danger of collapse. The General Zionists leaders understood that if they wanted a change of government, they had to engage in negotiations with *Herut*. On the other hand, Begin was aware of the fact that only by the creation of a common political body with the General Zionists he would be able to liberate *Herut* from isolation, and to push it neared to the center of the political map. In a situation like this, the desire to change the government allowed for union of forces and creation of a joint faction, despite ideological divergences.

Negotiations for the creation of a common parliamentary faction started in

1964. One may ask: what happened in the few months since Sapir rejected the offer of *Herut*? The answer can be found in the developments in the *Mapai* government, and in the internal developments within the General Zionists group in the Liberal Party. Sapir represented the farmers born in the old *moshavot* (small towns), who were very much disappointed by the failure of the Liberal Party to join the Ben-Gurion coalition. That group of people had hawkish views in matters of security and foreign policy, and they wanted to have a “national and liberal” union, to stand up against the group of leftist parties, to present an aggressive policy in matters of security and foreign policy, and to encourage private initiative and free economy.

On April 1964, the party Centers of *Herut* and Liberals approved the agreement, and it was signed by 13 members of *Herut*, and 14 members of the Liberals. It was a two-part agreement: the open part “The agreement for the establishment of *Gahal*” (acronym for Gush *Herut Liberalim* = *Herut* and Liberals bloc), and the secret part “Appendices to the agreement”.

The first part set down the statement of intentions and the organization of the new party, and the secret part specified the distribution of the list of representatives for the Knesset. The statement of intentions read: “The *Herut* movement and the Liberal Party inform the citizens about the establishment of a joint parliamentary bloc, whose objective is to replace the present regime by a national-liberal regime. The bloc will become the cornerstone of a new government, or a strong and influential opposition”. As for the issue that in the past prevented the establishment of the bloc – the question of “the wholeness of Israel” – Begin agreed to compromise, and to accept the formula proposed by the Liberals: “The right of the Jewish People on the entire historical *Eretz* Israel shall not be questioned”.

Begin granted the request of the Liberals to exempt them from signing that part of the *Gahal* agreement. At the beginning of negotiations, the *Herut* members demanded that the issue of “the wholeness of Israel” be part of the agreement. The Liberals suggested to include that formula in the preamble only, and they didn’t want to be committed. Zvi Zimmerman noted: “We told Begin: if you want to be an alternative, you’ll have to prove that *Gahal* is not *Herut*. *Gahal* will have to compete for “floating” votes in the center, and around *Mapai*, and not for rightwing votes that you have already” (Zimmerman, 1994). In the discussions that arouse in the course of negotiations, he pointed out that *Gahal* should remain open to additional circles and groups, whose ideas in regard of the “wholeness” of the Country were different. Even within the Socialist parties there were different opinions in regard of the future borders of Israel, and the same was true within the Liberals, and the General Zionists. Prof. Klinghofer suggested including the statement in dispute in the preamble, and not in the operational part of the agreement. Zimmerman said that Begin accepted that suggestion, because it came from the Dean of the Law department at the Hebrew University.

Herut agreed with the economy part of the platform of the Liberal Party, and both parties agreed to allow Knesset members freedom of choice in matters of “State and Religion”, and in relations with Germany. As for working relations, they agreed that each party would have an equal share in the directorate, and decisions adopted by majority ballot. In case of sensitive subjects, each partner would be free to decide how to vote. The parties also agreed that “The bloc shall operate jointly, in case of forming a government, or as opposition, and neither party will make any agreement with other factions, without consent of the other.” The actual result was an alignment

between the two parties, in which each party conserved its organizational structure. The ceremony of signature of the *Gahal* agreement took place April 26, 1965, in the Z.O.A. building, Tel Aviv.

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 legitimating by the Liberal Party. The latter helped *Herut* to refurbish 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)⁶

The *Gahal* platform in view of the elections for the sixth Knesset, shows that *Herut* adopted almost in full the positions of the Liberals in economic and social matters. The platform stressed the necessity to promote the middle class, self-employed professionals, and to support small and medium-size businesses. In matters of “State and Religion”, the partners made a compromise: the State will guarantee freedom of conscience and of worship, according to the eternal traditional values of the People of Israel, in the life of the Nation and in education. (The *Gahal* platform, 1965)

The formation of *Gahal* was a historical turning point for *Herut*. Horowitz and Lissak(1977) noted that Ben Gurion succeeded to lock *Herut* in a position of

⁶That clause caused harsh discussions between the partners, and also within the Liberals The members of that Party made use of that clause in order to justify voting against the proposals of the Likud government in matters of State and Religion, and in matters of foreign and security policy

eternal opposition party. He declared that he would not allow a governmental coalition with either *Herut* or *Maki* (the Israeli Communist Party), Begin was aware of the fact that in the elections for the fourth and fifth Knesset, his party reached the limits of its electoral potential, with 17 seats. Therefore, he started looking for a partner willing to run on the same ticket as *Herut*, in order to free his party from ostracism, and to become a possible coalition partner.

Goldberg (1992) pointed out that by the formation of *Gahal*, Begin obtained a softening of the fundamentally nationalistic tenet of *Herut*, based on the principle of “the wholeness of Israel”. Begin understood that in order to conquer the political center, he had to make a distinction between the fundamental principles and the operational plan. The *Gahal* agreement enabled Begin and his party to justify the non-implementation of their fundamental principles, alleging that the Liberals were not ready to accept the principle of “the wholeness of Israel”. The *Herut* movement accepted the request of the Liberals, without giving up its ideological principles. *Herut* also agreed to equal shares in the leadership of the *Gahal* bloc, despite the fact that at signature of the agreement, the General Zionists had only 9 Knesset members, against 17 mustered by *Herut*. Begin understood that a compromise in the short run would pay off later.

The *Gahal* agreement was one of the rare political agreements made in Israel that remained in force for many years. Thanks to that agreement, the Liberals kept, and increased, their parliamentary representation for the next six terms – despite the fact that their party could not rely, as *Herut*, on a the secure electoral basis among the new immigrants and the younger generations. The *Gahal* agreement was the first step towards a political upheaval in Israel. It

was a part of the process of formation of large party blocs, that began in 1965 with the merger between *Mapai* and *Achdut Haavoda* (a smaller labor party), and creation of the *Maarach*. The process continued with the establishment in 1968 of the *Avoda* (Labor) party, composed of *Mapai*, *Achdut Haavoda*, and *Rafi* (The Ben-Gurion party), and culminated in 1969 with the alignment between *Haavoda* and *Mapam* (a leftist labor party). On the other side, the process culminated in 1973 with the creation of the *Likud* – a bloc of most Israeli rightwing parties. That process, however, failed to put an end to party splits and to the formation of small parties, which continued to be influential, thanks to the proportional electoral system. Anyway, the mergers resulted in the creation of two major party blocs, left and right, that competed for supremacy. Sometimes, however, neither bloc did achieve clear majority, and both blocs were forced, from time to time, to collaborate in a joint coalition.

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 achieve a turnover of the government. The question was ideological, but also practical: how to put together a bloc able to compete for supremacy? Sapir talked about a

change of regime. In his opinion, a regime that does not experience turnover of leaders, and of views, is less democratic: “The Liberal party had to make an effort, in order to prove one of its principal ideological political tenets. A regime must always be rechecked, and able to change.” (Evidence given by Sapir, 5.5.1965)

Rimalt argued that *Gahal* was meant to be a federative framework, according to the agreement signed between *Herut* and the Liberal Party - an agreement intended to highlight common ground, but to acknowledge the differences of opinion. He assumed that the common ground could be found in regard of the economic and political regime and in particular in matters of care for the individual. The partners agreed that in case of different views, each party would be at liberty to vote according to its principles (Rimalt, in an interview, 1971).

Discrepancies surfaced again and again between Liberals and *Herut*, in political and organizational matters, and also on ideological principles. 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 phenomenon arose with immigration of masses from Arab States, and later from Eastern Europe. The State of Israel had to cope with that phenomenon since the 1950s. Because of the nature of the immigrants, the influential mass of the electorate lives in the cities. A political party addressing the masses faces a dilemma. Giving-in too much to the desires of the electorate would mean to give up ideological tenets. On the other hand, staying in

isolation, away from the masses, would not allow the party to gather strength. Liberalism is not the kind of stuff you can sell to the masses. Liberalism calls for ongoing examination of the situation and ongoing readiness to ideological flexibility (Based on an article by Talmon, *Haaretz*, 10.9.1961). Thinkers and philosophers can avoid stress, because they do not take part in political activity, but political leaders must be ready to bear stress.

In 1965, the Liberal Party decided to grow, and to create a bloc with a “rightist” party headed by a charismatic leader, and in close touch with “the masses”. The Liberal leaders who decided about this move were the founders of the Liberal Party: Bernstein, Sapir, Serlin, Rimalt, and Dolzin. In charge of the negotiations were: Simcha Erlich, Moshe Nissim, Yitzhak Moda’i, Gideon Pat, and Abraham Sharir. The pact with the *Likud* propelled the General Zionists to power in the framework of the *Likud*, to the formation of a government, and to controlling positions. The Liberals, however, paid dearly for that achievement.

Chapter 5:

From Gahal to Likud and to the upheaval of 1977

The 1965 merger suited the strategic objectives of the Liberals, as well as those of the *Herut*, and in particular the overthrow of the *Mapai* government. Begin tried to reach that objective since the second Knesset, by calling the Liberals to unite forces. Begin knew that only a new political body, open to factions whose position in regard of the territorial “wholeness” of Israel was different from those of *Herut*, would enable the party to compete with the bloc of leftist parties. In this matter, Begin was in disagreement with the *Herut* leadership, and with the principles that nurtured “generations of Jabotinsky’s disciples; for these principles thousands of young members of *Betar*, *Ezel*, and *Lechi* gave their lives” (Zimmerman, 1994).

Gahal had to face various crises, that brought the bloc repeatedly to the verge of a split. The biggest crisis came in 1970, after the *Gahal* leadership decided to leave the “united” government headed by Golda Meir. Some of the Liberals leaders were tempted to leave *Gahal* and to remain in the coalition. These crises, however, did not dismantle the *Gahal* bloc, and for a reason: *Herut* needed the Liberals in order to get legitimacy, and to move towards the political center, and the Liberals knew that the partnership endowed them with a few more seats at the Knesset, above and beyond their electoral appeal. Both parties were aware of the fact that if they wanted to become an alternative, they had to remain united.

The *Gahal* agreement paved the way to the foundation of the *Likud*, and the Liberals had a major part in that development. In 1972, members of the

Liberal student circles started forming an alliance with two other factions: *Hamercaz Hahofshi*, and *La'am*. In the Zionist Congress of 1974, Dolzin initiated the merger between the Liberals and these factions. In 1973, Arik Sharon joined the Liberal party and suggested cooptation of other factions and the foundation of a *Likud*. The suggestion was met with opposition from *Herut*, but Rimalt, Dulzin, and Erlich persuaded Begin to accept the cooptation of the other factions, in contrast with key members of his party. He adopted a strategy of flexibility, in order to reach its principal objective. 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, that after the merger the Liberals melted into *Herut*, proved incorrect.

In ideological matters, Begin adopted a major part of the ideology of the General Zionists and of the Liberals. A comparison between the party platforms of the 1950s and 1960s shows that the *Likud* platform was more like the platforms of the General Zionists, than the platforms of *Herut*. These principles have been adopted by Israel governments in the last few years.

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 (Autonomies). Begin did not fulfill the

principle of annexing the lands of the West Bank to Israel, in accordance with the principle of the 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, and Netanyahu agreed to turn over to the Palestinians the administration of some parts of Judea and Samaria. And Sharon evacuated Jewish settlements in the Gaza strip, and in North Judea.

After the 1977 upheaval, the Liberals obtained most of the economic important portfolios in the government: Finance, Industry and Commerce, Tourism, Building and Housing, and Energy. The party leader Erlich became Minister of Treasury. Their political transportation brought about an economic one, as the General Zionist Liberal perception became dominant in the Likud and in the state of Israel. The Liberals chaired the Knesset, the Zionist Organization, and the Jewish Agency, number of mayors were Liberals: Lahat in Tel Aviv, Peled in Ramat Gan, Rechtman in Rechovot, Rome in Holon, and Ben-Ami in Natania. After the 1981 elections, the Liberals obtained 18 seats at the Knesset; six Liberals became ministers, and Erlich became deputy prime minister. These figures show that the Liberals and their leaders took a crucial part in the shaping of Israel's policy.

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*.

In the social and economic domain, the policy of the *Likud* showed variable, from “free market economy” as suggested by Erlich, to a socially oriented line, as demanded by David Levi and Yoram Aridor. When Netanyahu became Minister of Finance in 2003 in the government headed by Sharon, the *Likud* reverted to the original policy of the General Zionists and the Liberals: a neo-liberal line, encouraging competition and free market, but still providing basic welfare. Netanyahu, a fan of Thatcher’s economic theory, claimed that he was carrying on the policy of the General Zionists and of the Liberals. He is still implementing liberally-oriented economic reforms that had been initiated by Erlich, Modai, and Nissim, when they acted as Ministers of Finance on behalf of the Liberals.

A personal note was added to the *Likud* by new leaders who had been invited by Begin to join the *Herut* movement. Most of them were devoid of Revisionist roots. Some emigrated from Arab countries, as David Levi, Meir Shitrit, Moshe Katzav, David Magen, Moshe Cachlon, and Silvan Shalom. In 2005, Sharon left the *Likud*. He founded the *Kadima* party, and brought about a major change in government. Several of the most conspicuous *Herut* leaders changed their minds in matters of foreign policy and security, and joined Sharon’s new party: politicians as Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni, and former high-ranking military and security officials, as Shaul Mofaz and Avi Dichter. All former Liberals left the *Likud*. Disputes within the *Likud* caused the collapse and prevented the growth of a new generation of leaders. We should notice that all “new” parties – *Kadima* and *Yesh Atid* – adopted a moderate-liberal view, in order to remain near the center of the political map. That motion toward the center began as Bernstein, Serlin, Rimalt and Dolzin joined *Gahal*, and by this pulled *Herut* out of the isolation imposed by Ben Gurion on that

right-wing party. The foundation of the *Likud* in 1988 completed the process, and the historical *Herut* as well as the Liberals vanished into the new party. The present book shines a new light on the classification of the Liberal party as participant, and not as leading element. After the foundation of *Gahal* and *Likud* it would be hard to assess the electoral weight of the Liberals. Fact is that after the 1965 elections, *Gahal* became the most important opposition party, and after the following merger and the foundation of the *Likud*, the latter came finally into power in 1977.

The conduct of the electorate of the General Zionists and Liberals shows that until the 1965 merger into *Gahal*, the Liberals harvested votes mainly in major cities and *moshavot*, from people who immigrated before the foundation of the State. The General Zionists collected votes in wealthy neighborhoods. On the other hand, *Herut* received support, mostly in towns and villages whose population immigrated after the foundation of the State. *Herut* was most popular in the newly founded “development towns”, in poor neighborhoods of cities, and with young people. In 1961, after the *Gahal* merger, many liberal voters refrained from supporting the new party, and instead started to vote for *Mapai* or for one of its satellite parties.

The 1969 elections took place after the Six Days War, and after the establishment of a “united national government”, which included *Gahal*. The latter obtained more seats, mainly thanks to supporters of *Herut*. In 1973, the party, which already became *Likud*, obtained results that justified the merger: for the first time, the *Likud* won massive support, even from traditionally liberal voters, in major towns and among old-timers. The most striking results were in Tel Aviv, where the *Likud* won 38% of the votes, but also in wealthy quarters of Jerusalem. These results were not sufficient yet for an overthrow

of the *Mapai* coalition, and harvest-time came only in 1977 – the year of the upheaval. The results of the 1981 elections confirmed that the change was durable.

Political scientists 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, and for a reason. 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.

In the 1981 elections, after *Dash* party disappeared from the political map, the support for *Likud* increased even more, thanks to a substantial share of former Liberals. This trend continued afterwards, and enabled the government headed by the Likud to remain in power, even after the turn of the millennium.

Summing up

The results of the elections for the 19th Knesset raised once again the question, if we may expect a political reversal, and the appearance of a liberal party, able to unite under its wings all “centrist” parties in Israel. The answer to this question is beyond the scope of an academic research paper, and belongs to the domain of political observers.

In my doctoral thesis, I indicated that the contribution of my research might be the specification of the array of factors necessary (but not sufficient)

for a merger between political parties, in order to produce a change in the Israeli political map. In my paper I mentioned variables related to the type of regime, and other structural variables. (Zeigerman, doctoral thesis. Page 12)

The findings indicate that mergers between parties might reduce the number of parties, and enable one of them to win the elections, to form a government, and to rule for an entire term, without partners.

In my opinion, within the parties relevant today – *Likud*, *Maarach*, *Yesh Atid*, and *Hatnuah*, there are important circles and currents that favor liberal positions based on social justice, on law and order, on pluralism in matters of State and Religion, and on moderation and flexibility in the domain of foreign policy and security. These are the traditional positions that the General Zionists sustained before and after the merger into the Liberal party.

The merger model presented in this paper indicates that mergers between political factions that differ in the emphasis on ideological tenets, in the composition of their electorate, in the type of leadership, and in organizational structure, may have better chances of success in elections, and a longer life-span, provided that the merging parties agree on the main objective: change of government and of regime.

The politically relevant question today is: will the leaders who consider themselves to be part of the Zionist liberal and national current – leaders as Benjamin Netanyahu, Itzhak Herzog, Tzipi Livni, and Yair Lapid – be able to overcome opposition within their own parties and show flexibility as in 1965, when the leaders of the Liberals – Sapir, Bernstein, and Rimalt – and Begin, the leader of *Herut*, founded *Gahal*, triggering a process that resulted in the first political upheaval in Israel? The State of Israel needs a stable

government, headed by a homogenous party with a majority at the Knesset, a situation similar to the one prevailing in many of the European States. We need a government able to cope with the necessity to make important and vital decisions, that will have consequences for the generations to come.

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 life-style.

My mentor, Prof. Talmon, likened history to a unfolding carpet. Great leaders, he said, can stop the carpet 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 of the carpet 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 carpet'.

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