Guest Editors' Introduction

● ● ● *Resisting Liberalism in Israel—the Case of Marginalized Mizrahim*

Nissim Mizrachi and Menachem Mautner

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Over the last two decades, the liberal democratic form of governance has been facing a major challenge. This challenge is manifested in varying ways around the globe, with crises erupting in diverse geopolitical contexts, including democratization in Eastern Europe, objections to the human rights discourse in East Asia, disillusionment following the Arab Spring, and the decline of the liberal left in Israel. The modernist secular utopia is far from sight. The porous borders of Western liberal democracies, open to global migration in post–Cold War Western Europe, have allowed the challenge to internal social and political order to become pressing and even acute, in some cases. The question of how to accommodate new ethnic and religious groups that hold profoundly different views about social justice and the 'common good' yet share the same political space has become critical. In this special issue, we delve into the Israeli case in order to take a glimpse into the crisis of liberalism in a particular setting, without losing sight of the global context and its deep historiosophical roots.

The 2015 Israeli election results left little doubt as to the place of the liberal left in Israel's political arena: it has failed politically to win over the electorate. Meretz, the Jewish leftist-liberal party, obtained votes barely sufficient to allow it to remain in the Knesset. The votes won by the Labor Party failed to lift it out of its middling size or to spread it beyond the middle class. These results came as no surprise to those following the gradual decline of the liberal camp in politics, civil society, culture, the press, the media, and academia. Since the elections, Israel's Jewish population appears to be torn more than ever between two poles: those who wish to fight for democracy and civil rights, on the one side, and those who prefer communitarian, traditionalist, and religious values, on the other—a division that highly

correlates with the ongoing tension between the democratic and the Jewish character of the state.

Over the years, the left has attempted to understand its consistent failure to obtain broad-based legitimacy. This is especially the case among disadvantaged groups in Jewish-Israeli society, the largest and most pivotal being the working-class Mizrahim at the social and geographic periphery. This group, whose numbers have made it the majority in the Jewish demographic, is considered to be a political game changer: its massive support of the right (e.g., the Likud party) serves as the main impediment to the liberal left's acquisition of power. From a sociological and academic perspective, the Mizrahim's support of the right has preoccupied social scientists, resulting in a sizable amount of research focusing on this issue.

If we lump together the reasons for this phenomenon found in public, political, and academic discourse, we can identify two primary repertoires. The first is the liberal left's failure to transmit its message, reflecting its inability to find a way to reach the hearts and minds of working-class Mizrahim. The second is the Mizrahim's failure to receive the left's message, with explanations ranging from problems of understanding, such as false consciousness, to the lack of 'normal' or rational reactions to the Israeli establishment and to the country's social conditions and structure of power.

Unlike these explanations, which have achieved dominance in academic and public discourse, this special issue seeks to turn the direction of inquiry to the message itself, irrespective of its transmission or reception. We therefore direct our critical gaze at the liberal grammar that is common to contemporary academic discourse as well as to activists. This new direction diverges from the entrenched point of view, in which rejection of the liberal message is symptomatic of a social and political malady rather than an alternative worldview whose recognition may cast doubt on the absolute certainty attached to the liberal stance as the only vision of a proper life and the key to salvation.

All the articles in this special issue problematize the liberal message itself. The opening article, "Liberalism in Israel: Between the 'Good Person' and the 'Bad Citizen,'" by Menachem Mautner, draws attention to the limits of the Israeli form of liberalism—that is, negative rights liberalism—which provides the state's citizens with a list of rights to protect them from interference by the state's institutions in their affairs. This form of liberalism embodies people's urge for normality, and it faces difficulties when a liberal state demands sacrifice from its citizens. This is what happened in Israel in the 1950s, asserts Mautner. The successful absorption of Mizrahi immigrants demanded sacrifice on their part, while the mostly Ashkenazi veteran public gave preference to their liberal-inspired, personal urge for normality. These processes are manifest not only in the

continuing disadvantage suffered by lower-class Mizrahim, according to many socio-economic indicators. They are also evident in the low support shown by lower-class Mizrahim for Israel's liberal project.

At the center of Nissim Mizrachi's article, "Sociology in the Garden: Beyond the Liberal Grammar of Contemporary Sociology," lies the seeming paradox between the universalistic message of human rights and the social particularism of not only its adherents but also its opponents. In other words, the article turns its analytic spotlight beyond the failure of the human rights message to gain support among working-class Mizrahim to the adamancy, if not violence, with which Mizrahim reject that message. By attempting to unravel this conundrum, Mizrachi invites entry into a new and broader interpretive space from which the crisis of liberalism can be understood. What Mizrachi demonstrates is that contemporary critical sociology has 'blinded' academics and activists alike. They share the same interpretive stance that considers disadvantaged groups' resistance to the liberal message to be incomprehensible or anomalous.

The heart of the problem, Mizrachi suggests, is the 'politics of universalism', an approach resting on the image of the autonomous individual having self-owned rights, a status existing prior to and having precedence over the state in which she lives and the collective to which she belongs (in this case, the Jewish state). From this standpoint, the position accepted as a sublime moral stance by the liberal left is perceived as posing an existential threat to communitarian groups because it endangers the collective boundaries that mold and secure their 'core identity'.

Shlomo Fischer's article, "Two Patterns of Modernization: An Analysis of the Ethnic Issue in Israel," casts historical light on the origins of the chasm between Mizrahi Jewish communitarianism and Ashkenazi universalistic liberalism. In Fischer's account, these two distinct orientations did not result from cultural essentialism or developmental stages in the linear progress of modernity. Instead, they are the outcome of the divergent historical conditions surrounding these people's experiences of modernity. According to Fischer, the Mizrahi experience of modernization in the extremely particularistic colonial settings of North Africa and the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inclined them to respond to modern political and social challenges and opportunities not by transforming Jewish collective identity, but by seeking to strengthen the Jews as a traditional ethnic-religious community. However, it is precisely this response that became the basis for their exclusion from full membership in Israeli-Jewish society in the early decades of the state. The Mizrahi Jews were deemed 'not creative' and 'backward' because their experience of modernization persuaded them not to attempt to reconstruct the Jewish collectivity as part of a nation-state with universalist citizenship and

rights (which would have had no place in a particularist colonial setting). Rather, their goal was to maintain and strengthen the traditional Jewish ethnic-religious collectivity.

The Mizrahi Jews reacted to their exclusion from Israeli-Jewish society by constructing an alternative Jewish-Israeli collectivity along traditional ethnic-religious lines. They embarked upon a politics of delegitimizing and excluding the veteran Ashkenazi population precisely because of their universalist orientation, deeming them 'disloyal' and treacherous vis-à-vis the Jewish ethnic-religious collectivity. In essence, Fischer contends, ethnic conflict in Israel involves two different visions regarding the construction of the Israeli-Jewish collectivity: a universalist nation-state based (declaratively, at least) around equal rights and citizenship versus a primordial, traditional ethno-religious collectivity.

In their article, "A Woman of Valor Goes to Court: Tort Law as an Instrument of Social Change under Multiculturalism," Yifat Bitton and Ella Glass examine the encounter with liberal justice experienced by two groups belonging to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. What happens, the authors ask, when the liberal justice system, viewed with disregard and misgivings, is the only resource for remedying a wrong committed in a non-liberal community? Bitton and Glass seek to answer this question by examining the 'Immanuel affair' in which a Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox community resorted to the secular legal system when seeking relief for the discrimination it had suffered in an Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox school.

The core of Bitton and Glass's analysis resides in their identification of the deep cosmological chasm between the ultra-Orthodox and the liberal worlds of meaning. The case is revealing for its demonstration of the various avenues employed to resolve a case of gross discrimination within this community. The plaintiffs, together with the offenders, reacted in a fundamentally different fashion to the offered remedies, depending on the worldviews reflected in the arguments presented and legal mechanisms employed. Remedies based on constitutional claims presented on the plaintiffs' behalf by a civil society NGO and highlighted in the media were pitted against claims based on 'emotional harm', adjudicated on the basis of tort (i.e., civil injury) law.

Bitton and Glass conclude that the adjudication of wrongs on the basis of tort law, with remedies targeted at the individual, is perceived as more compatible with the 'ethical cosmology' adhered to by the non-liberal groups than is adjudication of the same wrongdoing on the basis of constitutional law, with claims addressed to the community's institutional boundaries. The case thus sheds light on the cultural repertoires available to non-liberal communities living in liberal democracies that enable the selective use of liberal justice and its multiple tools.

Merav Alush-Levron's article, "Creating a Significant Community: Religious Engagements in the Film *Hamashgihim* (God's Neighbors)," takes us beyond liberal imagery to a fictional space that presents the Mizrahi working-class spiritual experience as an autonomous cultural option vis-à-vis the state. Alush-Levron shows how *God's Neighbors*, an award-winning 2012 Israeli production directed by Meni Yaesh, deviates from the precise liberal parameters that generally guide the representation of religion in Israeli cinema. The movie describes one cultural alternative to the secular liberal platform. This option, as adopted by a group of Mizrahim living in Israel's periphery, is portrayed as an appealing and resource-enriching human existence, enabling a world of meaning that is autonomous in its status, independent of the liberal state. The film suggests that religion may provide thick layers of meaning entirely outside of Israel's liberal project, which expects each individual to fill her life with contents of her own making. The plot's tension and the film's resolution remain within the spiritual cosmology of the hero's Mizrahi origins. No liberal 'salvation' is proposed.

In his afterword, Eilon Schwartz reflects on the collaborative project between Shaharit and Tel Aviv University, culminating in this special issue, and on the theoretical horizons it opens for what he calls a 'politics of the common good' as a new avenue for political thinking and acting in Israel.

In addressing the crisis of the liberal program, this special issue focuses on Israel. However, its theoretical and political implications are not geographically or theoretically confined. The wide reach of these articles is pertinent to many countries in the world in which the negative rights liberal project, which in many instances has spiraled into neo-liberalism, encounters religion with its different cosmology and dense layers of meaning. The articles in this publication thus offer a point of departure for further post-liberal investigation.