

## Escape from Politics: The Case of Israel

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“Politics in Israel has become the greatest strategic threat to Israel’s future” (Shavit 2008)

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle thought of civic life as the highest expression of humanity. Aristotle assumed that those who attempted to escape politics were displaying ignorance and were almost less than human. Man, claimed the philosopher, is a “political animal.” Yet escape from politics has become ubiquitous in the contemporary world. Defining “politics” in the way referred to here is no easy task, as there are many different meanings and understandings of its connotation. Here “politics” is referred to as a conventional form of *participation* in public democratic life. Escape from politics is not manifested in what people think, or how they feel, but in what they *do*, that is in their actions or inactions regarding civic life.

Escapists can resort to one of the following four options: first, they can be indifferent and careless in regard to their civic duties. They can remain secluded from the political world concentrating instead on their private affairs and personal well-being. When they choose this option they tend to keep away from the ballot, remain indifferent to political parties, and refrain from raising a public voice. They decline to attend protest demonstrations and keep silent on public affairs. Second, citizens may take part in political life by casting a ballot, but their mode of activity reveals

their disenchantment with, or at least reservations concerning, politics. Voting for escapist, or “anti-party” parties (Schedler 1996), is typical of this type of escape. Third, escape from politics may be achieved by confining activity to civil society. By virtue of its “civil” disposition, civil society is part of the political milieu. Activity performed on a voluntary basis, however, can provide a haven for escapists by allowing them to disengage from the political world. According to some commentators (Foley and Edwards 1997), civil society can provide a route for escape by resorting to non-political means in confronting social problems. When charity substitutes righteousness, the road for flight from politics is clear. The fourth option provides a channel of escape via challenge. When challenging the political order, individuals are engaged in “uncivil” and antipolitical behavior (Berman 1997). Challenging the political order is a form of escape because it rejects the democratic rules of the game and because it threatens the political order.

The four brands of escapists vary in their regard to politics. Apathetic citizens choose a course of *less* politics, partisan citizens selecting the channel of escapist parties demonstrate *different* politics, civil citizens opt for *non*-politics and the challengers resort to *more* politics, albeit in a destructive manner. Each type of escape may be detrimental to democracy. Apathy threatens legitimacy. The absence of active support for government jeopardizes its capacity to govern. Even regimes that approach totalitarian control over their societies feel the need to convince the outside world that they have mass support. Escapist partisanship undermines the proper conduct of parliamentary politics as a portion of the legislature is irrelevant, or even detrimental, to the conduct of its affairs. Reliance on charity can reduce government’s accountability and public commitment by relieving the state of its fundamental duties. Finally, by breaking the

rules of the political game, challenge may threaten the very existence of the state. Some measure of escapism, however, is not all negative. It has been suggested that a certain level of apathy is required for democracy to survive because the alternative of full participation in political life is an unrealizable goal whose attempt would lead only to chaos and political disintegration (Green 2004). Scholars have warned against over-participation contributing to the emergence of mass society (Kornhauser 1972). Supporting escapist parties allows citizens to remain within the bounds of conventional politics and express their political preferences. Likewise, civil society, particularly organizations engaged in providing charity, are essential in taking care of the vulnerable, whose access to available resources is often limited. Challenge, particularly when it is violent, is obviously not helpful to democracy, but an acquiescent public, unwilling or unable to raise a voice is also disadvantageous. Whether escapism performs a negative, or alternatively, a positive role in democracy appears to depend on both volume and contents. The more channels of escape used by individuals and the deeper and more entrenched the escape, the graver the danger to democracy. Democracy can bear some measure of escape, particularly when ephemeral and episodic, but it can be overwhelmed by its accumulation.

Israel provides a good case study for testing the four forms of escapism. Indicators of voter turnout, party affiliation, and protests reveal a growing sense of apathy. Escapist parties have become ubiquitous in Israeli democracy. Reliance on the third sector to solve social problems has increased in recent years. NGOs not only supplement politics but actually substitute for authoritative allocation of essential goods, such as shelter and food. Challenge to the rule of law is manifested by political violence and disobedience, motivated by anti-democratic ideology. The simultaneous presence of the four

forms of escape may not be accidental. Apathy serves as a fertile soil for challenge, flourishing when the state is not sufficiently powerful to encounter intransigence. Disenchantment with politics motivates people to support non-political parties. Weak states yield power to civic associations motivated by biased and often inequitable interests. They also prompt challengers to disobey the law and reject political authority. This combination should alert all those concerned about Israel's democracy. The following discussion delves into the four forms of escapism from politics in Israel and their implications for democracy.

### **Escape via Apathy**

Disengagement from politics can take various forms. Apathetic citizens immerse themselves in work, leisure time activities, and family life. They are not interested in the political world and have no knowledge about its whereabouts. This is not the case in Israel. Data reveal a high rate of interest in politics. In fact, Israel stands first among democratic nations in the interest its citizens show in political affairs with 70% reporting they do have an interest (Arian et al. 2007, 59). Israelis also ranked first among the studied countries in stating that they follow politics discussed in the mass media and in discussing politics with friends (Arian et al. 2007, 60). No decline has been identified in this respect over the years (Arian et al. 2007, 61). Yet three indicators show that Israel is experiencing a participation crisis, both leading to and reflecting apathy: in voter turnout, party affiliation, and participation in protest demonstrations. Compared to the past, Israelis turn out in lower numbers to vote in general and local elections, they display comparatively less commitment to political parties, and are not inclined to attend protest demonstrations.

Elections are critical junctures where individuals take stock of their various political attitudes and preferences, and transform them into a single vote choice. One of the parties' primary tasks in a democracy is vote structuring, which is successfully achieved when they efficiently mobilize voters to cast their ballot. Comparative data reveal that turnout in elections has generally decreased across the advanced industrial democracies, especially over the last decade (Dalton et al. 2005). Various reasons were found to account for this trend. Foremost, the political system has been failing to provide the stimuli necessary to encourage people to vote. The resulting lack of public trust in the traditional party and parliamentary political system contributed to large-scale abstention. The expansion of the "new politics" agenda also removes individuals in affluent societies from mainstream politics (Inglehart 1990). The shift is most noticeable among younger age cohorts whose apathy to conventional politics has been widely documented (Henn et al. 2005). Individualization and de-ideologization of public life also removed people from the ballot. The convergence of elite values and a diminution of articulated differences among them inhibit voting. Finally, most people assume that they cannot influence policy in meaningful ways. Lacking the institutional mechanisms to intervene effectively, they lose the incentive to participate. All these factors are evident, although to a varying degree, on the Israeli scene.

Records drawn from the Inter-Parliamentary Union regarding voter turnout in 36 countries in the last elections before data were compiled show that Israel scored in the lowest third of the scale, between Canada and Ireland (Arian et al. 2007, 55). Furthermore, a temporal analysis reveals a significant drop in voter turnout in Israel during the same period. In the first elections (1949) Israelis flocked the ballots, with an 86.9% vote. Citizens were motivated to participate in the electoral process by enthusiasm for the recently acquired sovereignty and the

wish to grant legitimacy to the new state. During the first 20 years of statehood, until the elections for the seventh Knesset (1969), the average turnout was over 80%. During the following three decades (until 1999), voter turnout somewhat declined to 78.8%. Since 2000, a substantial decrease in electoral participation is evident. In the 2003 (the 16<sup>th</sup>) Knesset elections, turnout was low—67.8%. In the elections for the 17<sup>th</sup> Knesset, in March 2006, the rate of vote reached a record low of 63.5%. In the elections for the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset (held in February 2009) voter turnout slightly increased to 65.2% but remained relatively low. These data reveal a consistent trend of indifference to, and alienation from, parliamentary elections. As abstention is divided across parties, it also represents a tendency of dissociation not from a specific political party but from the entire party spectrum.

Findings relating to party affiliation are no more encouraging. Skepticism is corroborated by voluminous literature indicating a growing disenchantment with parties among Western democracies. Parties are often seen as both the institution most susceptible to corruption and the least trusted by the public (van Beizen 2008). A significant decline in both membership in and identification with political parties has been widely noticed. Has Israel escaped this fate? The answer is largely negative. As elsewhere, there is a considerable decline in political parties' popularity, seen in three manifestations: public trust, party membership, and party identification. Data presented here are derived mainly from the annual *Israeli Democracy Index* based on surveys conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute (Arian et al. 2007) and supplemented by a survey carried out by the author in March 2009 (respondents, n = 556; hereafter, survey).

Political parties enjoy the least trust among political institutions. In 2004, 32% of the respondents stated that they trust parties to a large or to some degree; in 2006, 22% did so and in 2008, a record low of

15% trusted parties. Some 40% of the respondents stated that they have no trust at all in political parties. Segmentation of distrust shows it is more prevalent among the ultra-Orthodox and among those with lower educational attainments. As a result of slackening in the image of political parties, membership has declined from a height of 18% in 1969 to 16% in 1973, to 10% in 1981, to 8% in 1988 and to only 6% in 2006 (Arian et al. 2007, 81). According to the survey, only 7.4% stated they are active in a political party, even though an electoral campaign is expected to spur partisan engagement. In the past, party membership was designed to facilitate loyalty and to create a disciplined cadre of activists. It was also geared to providing members with welfare and other social benefits. In Israel, individuals are attracted to (some) parties in order to influence the selection of leadership, but they shy away from membership once the process is concluded (Rahat and Hazan 2006).

Attachment to political parties was also examined by tabulating closeness to a particular political party. Data reveal an ongoing trend of decline in the number of people who state that they are close to a particular party, suggesting a weakening of the party structure in general and not only specific parties. In 1996, 64% of the respondents stated that they see themselves as close to a particular party. Ten years later only 54% of the respondents reported on “closeness.” When asked how close they feel to the party of their choice, fewer than a quarter of the respondents (24%) reported that they are “very close,” compared to 37% in 1996 (Arian et al. 2007, 85).

That Israeli citizens are not enthusiastic about participation in politics is revealed also by another indicator—participation in protest demonstrations. Across the globe, from South Korea to Canada, from the United States to Germany, citizens of democracies rally around a social or ideological flag, calling for change of policy or leadership. In

Israel protests are not a common phenomenon. In the past, researchers documented wide-scale political protest (Wolsfeld 1988; Lehman-Wilzig 1990). More recent data (from 2001) show that the number of demonstrators in Israel is low compared to other democracies.<sup>1</sup> Worth noting is that 2001, the year data were gathered, was a stormy one with increasing economic distress and the ongoing Palestinian intifada. Yet Israelis did not take to the streets. Comparative data (presented in Table 1) clearly show the low frequency with which Israelis demonstrate. Not only do they decline to use this form of political participation, but they also do not consider it a viable option in the future. Nearly half the respondents do not plan on demonstrating in the future, compared to Sweden, for example, where over half the respondents are positive about future participation, and only 12% reject such an option ([http://www/worldvaluesurvey.org.2006](http://www.worldvaluesurvey.org.2006)). Only in Portugal, not yet having recovered full democratic capacities, are the figures regarding street demonstrations lower than in Israel. Even there the proportion of those intending to demonstrate in the future is higher than in Israel (38.9% and 31.0%, respectively). Rate of participation in protest demonstrations did not increase with time. In the 2009 survey 86.7% of the respondents stated they had not taken part in such an event during the preceding year preceding it. Less than 1% (0.7) reported they do so often.

1 This assertion is less accurate as Israeli waged mass protests in the summer of 2011, joining their counterparts in other western societies. Although street demonstrations have subsided protest persist, manifest mainly in Facebook activity. It remains to be seen whether the 2011 campaign indicates a change of mood and a shift from apathy to involved and active citizenship.

**Table 1** Demonstrations in Israel and in selected European countries (percent)

State	Demonstrated in the past	Likely to demonstrate in the future	Certainly will not demonstrate in the future
Greece	47.6	38.2	14.2
France	39.7	33.6	26.4
Belgium	35.8	30.6	33.7
Sweden	35.3	52.7	12.0
Italy	34.8	39.4	25.9
Germany	34.1	38.3	27.7
Holland	31.3	36.8	31.9
Denmark	29.3	39.3	31.4
Spain	26.3	41.3	32.3
Norway	26.1	52.4	21.5
<i>Israel</i>	<i>24.6</i>	<i>31.0</i>	<i>44.4</i>
Portugal	14.8	38.9	46.2

Source: Authors' development of data from [www.worldvaluesurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluesurvey.org) (2006)

To sum up, data presented above show a great deal of disengagement from politics in contemporary Israel. Escape from politics, in the sense discussed here, appears to be both comprehensive and profound. If this trend persists, legitimacy of the political system could be under threat.

### **Escape from Politics: The Partisan Channel**

Partisan politics and escapism ostensibly are mutually exclusive. Partisanship is the hub of politics. Those involved should be impervious to escapism. Yet, the party arena provides escapist with two main options: escapist parties and anti-establishment parties.

Although sharing some properties, the two types of parties are distinctively different.

Escapist parties, noted Susser and Goldberg (2005), promise a clean break from past politics and tend to be ideologically diffused. Lacking a rigid ideological basis, the leadership of escapist parties is likely to be a mixed bag of individuals with little ideological coherence. The fact that they tend to be drawn from a varied background, often from all corners of the ideological spectrum (which, in Israel, is focused on the future borders of the state), further limits their unity. It is typical for an escapist party to offer the public a platform of “cleaning up the mess” of deceptive and immoral politics or to focus on narrow issues, such as the legalization of marijuana or guarding the interests of taxi drivers. By virtue of their limited goals, these parties were also termed “niche parties” or “new parties” or “minor parties” (Adams et al. 2006; Krouwel and Lucardie 2008). Escapist parties tend to be short-lived. They generate zeal and enthusiasm, but they fail to establish a solid organizational basis. Mood fluctuations among the public also thwart their longevity. Many escapist parties are interest groups in disguise (Yishai 1994). They emerge from civil society, but owing to circumstances such as a new grievance or constituency available for mobilization they join the electoral competition. Voters for escapist parties are not really interested in “politics” but rather in securing private and narrow advantages. However, escapist parties’ attraction is not confined to those having a direct stake; it is often expanded to protestors whose vote conveys disillusionment with traditional politics. Escapist parties enable individuals to use the ballot as a mechanism for both protest and escape at the same time.

A second type of escape is via anti-establishment or anti-party parties. Anti-party parties are simply “anti: anti-establishment, anti-

elite, anti-state, anti-politics, anti-anything outside their campaigns” (Schedler 1996, 292). They are perceived as acting outside the party system, although they are themselves part of it. Some of them, particularly right-wing parties, describe themselves as victims of exclusion and use exceptionally aggressive tones in their messages. Others suffice with presenting an anti-establishment novelty. They can be thought of as “a voice against politics in general” (Belanger 2004, 1057). Rejection of politics, however, does not necessarily result in abstention but occasionally in support of parties whose rhetoric and mode of organization display rebuff of ordinary politics.

The two types of escape were visible in Israel’s partisan arena. Among the more salient escapist parties are the Democratic Movement for Change (*Dash*) (1977 elections), the Center Party (1999 elections), *Shinui* (Change) (1999 elections, with a genealogy going back to 1977), and the Retirees party (2006 elections). All these parties gained a substantial number of Knesset mandates. Yet, these parties were no more than a knot of people who coincidentally found themselves thrown together without a political platform or political savvy. Their ideology was blurred, they had no clear history of development, their leadership was drawn from both sides of the political spectrum presenting itself as belonging to the political center, they had weak political organization, they laid emphasis on the quality of their leaders, and they offered the gospel of purity. All these parties had a brief time span and did not pass the test of time. That these parties often offered a form of escape is clearly evident from the case of the Retirees Party (2006), for whom, according to commentators (Susser 2007) many young people cast a ballot as a form of protest. The fact that many young voters cast a ballot for an issue normally beyond their ken revealed a form of escape. The Retiree’s Party was described in a *Haaretz* editorial of April 30, 2008

as “one more repellent and frustrating episode in the history of Israeli politics.”

All parties described above attracted sufficient support enabling them to obtain Knesset representation. A more serious form of escape is to be found in those niche parties failing to pass the threshold needed to gain a Knesset seat. Since the elections to the first Knesset there have been 161 such parties, promoting a variety of goals, such as those of taxi drivers, divorced men, and tax resisters, to name just a few. In the 2009 elections niche parties reached a record high of 21 (as in 1981). These comprised, among others, two green parties, two parties demanding the legalization of marijuana, a party of the young, of the old, and of those demanding to curb the banks' power. One party was committed to the eradication of organized crime and another to the separation of state and religion. All these parties failed to obtain a mandate but their cumulative power was quite significant. In 2009 they attracted the support of more than a hundred thousand individuals (that is, about 3.8 Knesset mandates). The survey revealed that 5.1 of the respondents voted for parties that did not pass the threshold for gaining a seat. In the previous elections (2006) the number of those casting a ballot for niche parties was even higher, with some 200,000 citizens choosing to escape by voting for parties whose chance to pass the threshold was nil. The fact that no such party has ever succeeded in securing a mandate does not prevent the advocates of narrow issues to invest energy and scarce resources in running an electoral list. Against rational electoral calculation, voters persistently cast a ballot, not to secure representation but to engage in electoral activity in order to escape politics.

Although to a lesser extent, anti-party parties were also present on the Israeli scene. Israel's character as a Jewish and democratic state is a perennial source of constant anti-establishment agitation.

The majority of religious parties would prefer Israel to be a Jewish state while forgoing its democratic principles, and most Arab parties would rather see Israel as a democratic state while relinquishing its Jewish attributes. The overwhelming majority of Israeli parties act within a delicate balance recognizing both the Jewish character of the State of Israel and its democratic commitments. Yet, anti-party parties tainted with racism and bigotry, dismissing “politics” as an instrument for settling disputes, emerged on the partisan scene. The most conspicuous of these was *Kach*—an ultra-right party. *Kach* alleged that the deportation of Arabs was the only feasible course toward a genuine resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It survived only in one Knesset (1984–1988) before it was banned and removed from the political scene. The demise of *Kach* was followed by its splinter—*Kahana Hai*, which, too, was disqualified by the Central Election Committee on account of its racism and anti-Arab stances. Other hate parties have been more successful in integrating into mainstream politics. In the 2009 elections the offspring of *Kach* were integrated into the newly formed party—The National Unity. Although right wing parties are not “anti” in all respects mentioned above, their rejection of the fundamental principles on which the Israeli democracy is established justifies their categorization as anti-establishment parties.

Resort to partisan channels of escape can be attributed to specific circumstances such as awaked identity or the inattention of establishment parties to a fledgling political issue. But there are also reasons grounded in Israel’s political institutions and culture. The favorable institutional framework based on extreme proportional electoral system as well as the funding provided by the state to new parties coupled with an entrenched tradition of political fragmentation sustained escapism via the partisan channel.

## **Escape via Charity**

Charity demonstrates the apolitical face of civil society. It plays a positive social role by extending access to useful goods and services, but it is detrimental to politics. Charity tends to pay no heed to fundamental and deep-rooted problems of injustice associated with distribution of wealth in society. It is, furthermore, imbued with commercial considerations lacking public visibility and accountability in what has been described as “philanthrocapitalism” (Edwards 2008). Charity channels constructive civic energy, but good intentions do not always yield positive results. Israel is visibly moving toward adoption of philanthrocapitalism.

During the 1990s Israel’s economy experienced a significant boom, partly as a result of investment attracted by the Oslo Accords of 1993 setting up the Palestinian Authority and fuelled by a vibrant high-tech computer industry. But in the wake of the global economic downturn, and particularly since the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada, Israel’s economic and social infrastructure has begun to deteriorate. Economic recovery, launched by Prime Minister Netanyahu, entailed shrinking of public budgets and major restrictions on subsidies and allowances. Drastic cuts were introduced in income and child allowance in the attempt to reduce government spending. The continuing damage done to the social security system by the government, the erosion of the value of benefits and more stringent conditions for receiving those benefits, have contributed to the ascension of poverty rates and to a widening gap between the rich and the poor (Doron 2006). The Israeli economy grew at an amazing pace but growth was not divided evenly among the population as certain parts became richer while others lagged behind. The Bank of Israel reported (2007) that social distress in Israel has reached a high level. Poverty among individuals, as measured by the relative index

customarily used in Israel, was in 2006 24.4%. The high incidence of poverty over the years makes it difficult for the weaker sections of the population to maintain a reasonable standard of living and reduces their level of consumption.

Level of consumption relates mainly to food. It has been reported that over 400,000 families in Israel, that is some 22% of the population, suffer from “nutritional insecurity,” a euphemistic term for hunger. This is a very high rate by international standards. Data compiled by the Ministry of Agriculture in the US reported in 2007 that 10.9% of the population suffers from nutritional insecurity (Nord et al. 2007). People who lack nutrition security are not necessarily starving, but are in distress. They eat smaller portions, skip meals, and, in extreme cases, do not eat for a whole day. Nearly a quarter of Israelis are forced to make choices between food and other expenses such as mortgage, rent, medicine, heating, and electricity. About half choose to get along with less food (Sinai and Leiden n.d.). Nutritional insecurity is divided unequally among sectors of the population. It is most common among single mothers (39%), among Arabs (36%) and among new immigrants (26%). Some one-fifth of the families subject to nutritional insecurity are elderly; about half of the Jewish families whose major source of income is derived from state allowances (Committee Report 2008) also suffer from nutritional insecurity. The proportion of these groups in the general population is far lower.

The American solution for nutritional insecurity is food stamps provided by the state. In Europe the tight social welfare network ensures that no one lacks food. In Israel, nutritional assistance is provided almost exclusively by charity associations, dispensing food baskets and fresh produce, handing out prepared meals and managing soup kitchens (Levinson 2005). Some of these associations are as old as the state, but since the 1990s there has been a striking growth in

the number and volume of their activity. The budget for distributing food is derived overwhelmingly from private donations, in Israel and abroad. In a survey of nutrition associations, whose number in 2005 was 146, it was revealed that only a scant 4% receive government funding, and 8% are assisted by the municipalities. A substantial proportion (40%) receive donations from Israelis only and nearly half (47%)—from the Jewish community abroad. Headlines such as “Hunger in Israel” or “Save the Israelis from the Shame of Hunger” were posted in the internet as a means to garner resources for charity associations.

As noted above, on the face of it charity is a blessing, portraying a sense of solidarity and communality among fellow citizens. It is the culmination of social capital, serving as cement bonding people and erecting bridges to diminish social differentiation. The fly in this ointment, however, is that nutrition associations are not evenly distributed among social sectors and within various parts of the country. Of the 146 food associations 77.4% operate in the big cities (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, and those in the center), with only the 22.6% remaining active in the periphery. But it is the periphery of the country where poverty is most conspicuous. The number of associations per 100,000 in the northern part of the country is only 0.87 and in the Negev—1.75. The respective figures for Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are 4.67 and 2.49 (Levinson, 2005). These data reveal that the population in dire need of nutritional assistance, such as Negev dwellers who were found to experience a high rate of nutritional insecurity, are not included among those enjoying the benefits of charity. Likewise, only two associations distribute food among the Arab population, where in 2007 unemployment reached a record high of 10.9%, compared to 6.8% among the Jews (Statistical Abstract 2008, table 12.1). Furthermore, relying solely, or even

overwhelmingly, on private funds is a risky endeavor. At the time of writing, the world is undergoing a severe economic crisis, jeopardizing the flow of donations and threatening to reduce the scope of charity. Donors, furthermore, have priorities other than nutrition. Substituting state commitment by civil voluntary activity could wreak havoc in the social fabric. Food distribution is amateur, not based on the survey of needs, and public supervision is limited. Only a quarter of food associations are checked by the Ministry of Health (Sinai 2005). Period of assistance for individuals is unlimited and entitlement is hardly checked. There is no supervision on food quality and safety. Associations are often eager to enhance the scope of their activity in order to attract further donations. The activity of nutrition associations was likened to a “honey trap” (*Haaretz*, editorial, October, 15, 2008), thwarting the elimination of hunger.

Despite the fact that Israel has historically been a welfare state, the slashing of transfer payments and the tightening of recipient criteria motivated escape from politics. Reports issued by the National Insurance Institute, by the Bank of Israel and private research centers show that many families are struggling to keep their heads above water but the government chose to ignore its commitment to provide citizens with means for existence and chose to throw the poor to the mercy of charitable associations. Sticking to the principle of liberalization, care of the needy was transferred to the voluntary sector. Citizens, on their part, opted to associate with big business, and to provide charity instead of taking political action demanding that the state fulfill its elementary obligation toward individuals in distress. Resort to charity did not exhibit only the state’s retreat from commitment to justice and welfare, but also the inclination of (benevolent) citizens to find solutions outside the realm of conventional politics.

## **Escape via Challenge**

The role of civil society in democracy has been subject to controversy. A leading criticism waged against civil society emphasized its conflictual and violent aspects (Foley and Edwards 1998). Berman (1997) for example, has demonstrated the role public associations played in the downfall of the Weimar Republic and the concomitant rise of the Nazi regime. This criticism led to classification of parts of society as “uncivil” (Booth and Richard 1998). Uncivil society includes associations of a challenging nature. Challenging groups, referred to here are not clandestine organizations, such as Bader Meinhoff in Germany or the Red Army in Japan; neither do they choose other social groups as their target of activity, such as the Ku Klux Klan in the United States or the extreme right squads in Europe, preaching, and often acting, against immigrants. Needless to say, challenge groups are not composed of criminal offenders operating violently against individual citizens. Rather, challengers target their activity at the state, its leaders, and authority. They contest the law but they remain within the political system, choosing to act from the inside. Violence, when used, is not spontaneous or random but is carefully designed as a political strategy. The moral justification for the use of violence lies in the presumed deviation of the incumbent regime from what is perceived as the democratic rules of the game of which challengers regard themselves as true guardians. The principle of free speech is often used to justify mild cases of violence performed to promote an idea to which the challenge group adheres and for which it attempts to secure popular support.

In order for a challenge to emerge, mature, solidify, and threaten democracy four conditions ought to be met: a presence of grievance, a radical ideology, sustained by unyielding commitment, and atrocious deeds (Peleg 1997). All these components were

identified in the challenge presented by right-wing extremists to Israeli democracy. Hawkish zealots were not the only perpetrators of violence in the history of the state. Ultra-religious groups challenged the rule of law and confronted secular people in their attempt to compel religious norms, and Arab citizens defied their economic and political deprivation by committing violent demonstrations. But the most profound threat to Israeli democracy emerged from what is considered to be the rift between the “right” and the “left,” that is, between the proponents of Greater Israel and those advocating territorial compromise.

The roots of this ideological cleavage date back to the pre-independence era, but in the formative years of the state the tension subsided and challenge was dormant (Sprinzak 1998, 1999). The resurgence of the deep rift occurred in the wake of the Six-Day War when the right-wing extremists cast serious doubt on the government’s legitimacy and launched a campaign of delegitimation against incumbent leadership (Pedahzur 2002). *Gush Emunim* was the harbinger of challenge, continuing through the 1980s and particularly during the 1990s in defiance of the peace process and the Oslo agreements. The culmination of this process was the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, but challenge did not stop there. The adamant opposition to the dismantling of settlements in the Gaza Strip and illegal settlements as well as the occasional use of violence against those advocating territorial compromise were typical of the challenge activity which has gone on, unremittingly from the mid 1970s to the present. This challenge, based on grievance, sustained by deep commitment, structured on profound ideology, resulting in atrocious activities, has turned it into a serious hazard to democracy.

Grievance had been cultivated on a fertile soil. The carriers of challenge were strangers in their own land. They were mostly

outsiders, not belonging to the mainstream of Israeli society. They did not dry the swamps, did not fight in the legendary pre-state army (Palmach), and were hardly involved in the struggle for independence (Yishai 1987). They remained marginal and excluded from mainstream society. Their social grievance was sustained by a profound ideology. Challengers held strong ideological convictions regarding the type of state they wished to live in. Their state was Jewish more than democratic. According to their view, with the “liberation” of Judea, Samaria and Gaza from foreign control, Israel was undergoing a process of redemption. It was the zealots’ mission to precipitate this process and to fulfill the Divine promise, guaranteeing the Jewish people possession of the country as a whole. Commitment to this ideology was sustained by a tightly knit social network. Members of right-wing groups have had a secluded and unique way of life. Since the mid-1970s networking among the settlers of the occupied territories became deeper and more inclusive. Members of right-wing challengers either lived in settlements mushrooming in the occupied lands or were socially and ideologically associated with them. The line separating mainstream Israel and Eretz Israel was not only ideological but actually physical. Solidarity and social cohesion solidified commitment among members sharing a lifestyle, a vision, and mundane target: to challenge incumbent governments and fulfill the missionary goal.

The combination of grievance, deep conviction, and commitment galvanized atrocious activity. As noted earlier, challengers are not criminal offenders. But they are encouraged “to be steadfast and to stake everything, because the goal is ultimate . . . and no compromises are admissible” (Peleg 1997, 233). This attitude cleared the way to act in defiance of the rules of democratic game. Challengers defamed every aspect of the regime’s legitimacy, presenting an alternative which, in their view, exposed the true values on which the state was

founded. Their status as the true guardians of truth warranted means, which could be interpreted as illegal, but were justified in the eyes of God. Militants used illegal measures to establish settlements; they physically attacked soldiers when their access to sacred sites had been barred; they adamantly protested any move toward conciliation with the Arabs and the disengagement from the Gaza strip. They were involved in violent clashes with security forces attempting to evict unauthorized settlements in the West Bank.

Challenge takes two to tangle. It exists only if the state, even halfheartedly, allows individuals to violate the word and letter of the law. Insisting that every violation, be it ideological or criminal, is an offense cuts short challenge. Perpetrators of challenge should be approached as wrongdoers, irrespective of the ideological character of their message. This was not the case in Israel, where the state was reluctant to react. It tacitly endorsed the notion that suppressing challenge was tantamount to an “anti democratic attempt to silence different voices” (see <http://jtf.org/index.php>). Challenge could not have flourished without the state’s endorsement of this approach. It is the uncivil parts of society that unravel during challenge, which has become a common scene in Israeli politics.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence uncovered in this paper indicates a volume and form of escape from politics that pose serious threat to Israeli democracy. In some respects, instead of being a symbol of democratic citizenship, politics became a term of opprobrium, an activity to be avoided, or even shunned. The minimum for the exercise of citizenship in a representative democracy is casting a ballot but, as was shown above, turnout is declining progressively (though not systematically) as is affiliation with political parties. Some scholars suggest that

partisanship is substituted by other forms of civil activity and that people tend to resort to direct action instead of attending party meetings. But data show that this type of participation is also low in Israel compared to other industrialized democracies. Israelis accept bad decrees as a heavenly stroke, reluctant to raise a loud voice to rectify the situation. The only protest in town is about academic tuition, and the “Big Brother” is at the center of public discourse. Data show that nearly 70% of the adult population in Israel use Internet (98% among youngsters aged 12–14), a proportion which places Israel fifth among surveyed countries. Only 22%, however, stated that using the Internet gives them more political clout. This places Israel in the fourth place from the bottom, lower even than China and Hungary (*Haaretz*, November 24, 2008). To a question presented to the respondents in the survey (2009), 62.9% stated they are apathetic to politics to large or some extent. The reasons for apathy are grounded both in culture and in the institutional make up. Israel was described as a non-participatory democracy, where casting a ballot constitutes a symbolic activity rather than a channel for grassroots political engagement (Ben Eliezer 1993). The absence of direct linkage between citizens and their elected representatives, individualization of society, and low efficacy (only 19.8% stated in the survey they, and their friends, can influence government policy to some or great extent) also augment escape. Many Israelis, however, grew up in a country where partisanship is a virtue if not a requisite. Hence, escape recurrently takes place in the support of “non-political” parties. Admittedly, these are short lived, and the impact of many among them on the political scene is nil, but the wish to escape is glaring. Voting for such parties allows Israelis to remain inside the conventional political structure and to defect at one and the same time.

A third form of escape is via charity. Those regarding civil society as the crest of liberal democracy will find it difficult to assume that

charity is a version of anti-politics. Rather, it is widely perceived as a fertile soil for the flourishing of democratic politics. But the fact of the matter is that well-meaning people and associations that mediate between the needy and the establishment contribute their share to the dismantling of the welfare state. “The more efficient they become” noted a journalist, “the faster the demolition will occur” (Golan 2008). Despite their admirable energy, enthusiasm, and genuine intent, philanthropists risk misfiring when it comes to complex and deep-rooted problems of injustice. In the case of nutrition security, civil society has been a form of escape from politics, resulting in the circumvention of the state. One could argue persuasively that it is not citizens who break away from politics but rather it is the state that flees from its commitment. But the process is mutual. Civil society, when engaged in providing charity, propelled by the business community, willingly monopolizes the food provision service. Absent from the scene are infuriated protests of either poor people or of those speaking on their behalf for more equity and justice. Worth noting is that in a national survey 92% of the Jewish population stated that philanthropy supplements the activities of the government but is not a substitute for them (Schmid and Rudich 2008).

The final form of escape is via challenge. Violent protests against detested politicians or policy are occasionally evident on the public scene of Western democracies, followed by legal recriminations against those violating the law. These, however, are infrequent and sporadic. In Israel challenge is part of routine politics. Challengers escape “normal” democratic channels of deliberation and representation and resort to semi-legal or even illegal activities to confront the state and its authority. Armed with historical memories, patriotic messages, and animated adherents, they defy the very existence of state authority. The reasons for the state’s ongoing tolerance of challenge are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that a combination of fear (civil

war!), political considerations of coalition making or maintenance, and entrenched sentiments regarding the historic cradle of the Jewish people forestall adamant action to suppress challenge and nip it in its bud.

All of the above tells us that Israeli democracy is in deep trouble. Remedies are simple and easy to take: they could start with politics, that is, the state. The state should encourage and enable individuals to actively participate in social and political life (Tamir 1998). A good example for this approach is derived from California, where citizens were offered, via e-mail, channels to participate and encouragement to do so ([www.sos.ca.gov](http://www.sos.ca.gov)). The elimination, by legal means, of corruption from the partisan arena and the elaboration of more articulate policies, may lower the attraction of anti-party parties. The state should take responsibility for providing basic needs, because its commitment to equality, an essential condition for liberty, can hardly be disputed. Finally, challenge should be taken seriously and dealt with by adequate legal and social means. These measures may lead to reduction in the intensity and volume of escape, to an extent tolerated by any democratic state.

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