

**The *Herut* Movement's Central
Committee and the *Mizrahim*, 1965-1977**

**From Patronizing Partnership
to Competitive Partnership**

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Abstract

An important chapter in the development of the Israeli nation state in recent decades was recorded on May 17, 1977, the day of the general elections for the ninth Knesset. For the first time in its history, the Labor movement lost its long-standing political control over the Zionist enterprise to the successor of the revisionist-line, the Likud party, led by the *Herut* movement. The change of ruling power was given a nickname that became part of the political lexicon of Israeli society: “*Hamahapach*” (lit. “the upheaval”). This term expressed not only the ousting of the ruling party by the seemingly-eternal opposition party, but also the widespread feeling, at least among the shapers of public opinion, of the historic, revolutionary-like significance for a society, which, albeit under a democratic regime, was nevertheless ruled for years by a single founding party.

This study deals with the internal conditions that transformed the *Herut* movement from a small opposition party to a ruling party as

* Translated by Elisheva Blusztajn

well as those that contributed to its consolidation as a central axis of the new dominant party – the Likud. Following the examination of the 1965–1977 protocols of the *Herut* movement’s central committee and their analysis, this study identified three distinct processes taking place within *Herut* in the decade preceding the turnover.

The **first process** describes a party swinging between its past political failure of almost three decades, and which some – even among the *Herut* leadership – viewed actually as an expression of the party’s loyalty to its principles, and between the recognition of political and social conditions as well as electoral trends that clearly signaled the possibility for the party to realize its aspirations of governance. This process brings with it a demand for pragmatism and a diversification of the issues brought before the party’s central committee – not only political issues in the spirit of Jabotinsky’s Zionist monistic, single banner (*Had-Nes*) outlook, but also those pertaining to the social and economic life affecting the citizens’ daily lives.

The **second process** was basically organizational. In the course of the 1970s, organizational reforms took place within the party, transforming its identity and increasing its chances to turn from a large opposition party into an axis party capable of offering a realistic alternative to rule. One reform constituted the expansion of the *Herut*-led bloc of parties and movements, and the establishment of the Likud. The second was the expansion of the party mechanism infrastructure by enhancing activity in the party’s local branches, recruiting new members and activists, and integrating the most prominent among them within the party’s central committee.

The **third process** was at its base social and related to changes in the composition of the activists and members in the party’s central committee. From a relatively small central committee relying for the most part on veterans of the *Etzel* and *Lehi* pre-State underground

movements, it became a much more diverse central committee from a generational and ethnic perspective.

Herut's central committee was the supreme organ of the movement, which met on a monthly basis, and which was perceived by its leaders as the party's keystone. The central committee's sessions were run by the movement's chairperson, who, throughout the period under study was Menachem Begin, or by the chairperson of the executive committee, among them Ezer Weizman, Haim Landau, and Yitzhak Shamir. The central committee's discussions generally ran along this pattern: the movement leader, Begin, commenced the meetings with a speech, usually describing current political and diplomatic events and providing his political analysis. Members then conducted discussions pertaining to foreign and domestic policy issues. Yet, the central committee was in fact ruled by "total anarchy." Attempts to keep to a set agenda were unsuccessful, and subjects for discussion rose and fell according to the decision of the various speakers. Nevertheless, the central committee did not serve merely as a debating forum, but was a body constantly searching for ways by which to attain power, and it steadily gained strength until it became one of the most prominent bodies in Israeli politics.

This study shows that during the decade prior to the turnover, a new web of relations was formed within *Herut's* central committee. This resulted in the reorganization of what had been a patronizing partnership characterized by ethnic class-relations within the central committee around a competitive partnership, one that did not attribute success or failure to ethnic origin. This partnership enabled the recruitment of a new group of people of *Mizrahi* origin (Jews originating from Islamic countries in the Middle East) to the movement at a time when the demand for affirmative action was advocated against the backdrop of the Black Panthers protest movement. Yet, it did not settle satisfactorily

the following points of friction: between the *Etzel* and *Lehi* veterans and the new recruits; between Ashkenazim (Jews of Central and Eastern European descent) and *Mizrahim*; between the central committee and periphery local branches; between placing the ethnic issue permanently on the movement's agenda and between ignoring it. However, the competitive partnership opened up new areas for struggle, for coalition making, and for more flexible options for integrating new groups in the political game of the movement's central committee.

This process turned out to be one of the most dramatic transformations in the history of the movement: the transition in March 1977 from the format of an "arranging committee" that put together the party's list, which was the practice in all parties in Israel from before the establishment of the State, to a format of maximal autonomy given to the central committee to choose the party's leaders. This change had a long-term effect on the status of the central committee in the political culture of both the *Herut* and Likud movements, and it largely detracted from the power of the movement's leader, Menachem Begin. The central committee changed, therefore, with one stroke, from a powerless debating club into an entity with almost unlimited authority in managing the party.

The three processes described above converge. This convergence is reflected in the two demands arising from the discourse within *Herut*'s central committee during the decade preceding the upheaval. One demand was to balance the political debate, which had a dominant place in the central committee's discussions, by raising in turn also the social, economic, and generational changes taking place in Israeli society. The second demand was to expand the influence of the central committee members. This demand was led by field activists, including many of *Mizrahi* origin. They were not necessarily seeking a place on the list of Knesset candidates – at this stage, at least. However, they did wish to

determine who the Knesset members would be. Thus, besides what was termed the “ballot rebellion” – the protest rejection of the Labor rule by many of *Mizrahi* origin – one should note also the *Herut* “activists’ rebellion,” which preceded the upheaval and which tied between the movement’s organizational reform, occurring in the 1970s, and the desire of the *Mizrahi* activists to increase their influence and role in directing the party standing on the verge of change in rule. This was not a struggle aimed at disbanding the movement, but rather a struggle for attaining greater responsibility. The *Mizrahi* activists who joined the party’s central committee following the organizational reforms asked for partnership in the management of the party. They asked to abandon the old partnership based on cultural representation and sought a new kind of partnership, one that rests on meritocracy, and in its name demanded to take active part in shaping the party’s agenda.

A key person leading the institutional and organizational changes within *Herut*, who directed the movement’s organizational wing in the 1970s, was former *Lehi* commander and General Security Services (GSS) agent, Yitzhak Shamir. In the latter half of the 1960s, Begin and his supporters were frequently attacked for their failure to recruit new target populations and integrate them fully into the movement’s mechanism and central committee, due to their fear that this might harm the ideology upon which the movement was founded. In contrast, Yitzhak Shamir, who was responsible for the ongoing management of the movement in the period prior to the political upheaval of May 17, 1977, introduced a political system that transferred some of the movement’s power to the local branches and in return, rewarded those supporters who succeeded in leading to political triumphs on the municipal level by integrating them within the central committee. The new members of the central committee were not a passive group. Rather, they sought responsibility for deciding on the movement’s leaders and

for influencing its ideological direction. The political self-awareness that developed among these activists was the basis for the long-term partnership between the *Mizrahim* and the *Herut* movement.

Shamir's activity focused on introducing radical changes in the movement's organizational systems. Shamir worked relentlessly to create a closer connection between the party's central committee and its local branches through revival of the latter instead of organizing frequent mass conventions, which he abhorred and avoided. In this way he transformed the face of the eternal opposition movement and generated changes within its power centers. Shamir and his organizational partners are the ones who laid the foundations for the ethnic heterogeneity of the central committee and the weakening of its veteran leadership. They, as well as the new groups that joined in the early 1970s consolidated their "desire for rule," i.e., their strong will to aim for rule as a realistic and desired objective in and of itself. No longer did they view opposition as a common value and cohesive element for *Herut* and *Lehi* veterans. Thus also the basis was laid for steady continuity in *Herut* and the Likud even after the resignation of Begin, and despite the fact that he did not appoint a successor. Furthermore, this activity by Shamir accounts for his future success in securing the party's consent for his appointment as prime minister in October 1983 and in leading the party till 1992.

The demand to replace patronizing partnership with competitive partnership demonstrates the change in the political strategy of class-building in Israel. According to sociologists, the social history of the pre-State period in the Land of Israel is characterized by efforts to build a class society led by the Zionist labor movements. They describe this endeavor as "strategy," i.e., planned and deliberate political, cultural and intellectual work, based on the recognition of the national community not only as a tool for nation-building but also as a tool for creating a new stratified order, which differs from that characterizing

the life of Jews in their countries of origin. However, in the case of *Herut*, the strategy concerned does not regard class building. Instead it is a strategy that serves the building of a national community organized around the renewal of the “Kingdom” ethos, but that is identified with a state project rather than with a party project. This move by the *Herut* movement was reflected both in Begin’s desire for the widest Jewish coalition possible and in the rejection of the call by veteran party activists to be secured placements within the state apparatus along party affiliation lines. Begin, as mentioned, was firm about throwing out this call, but it nevertheless became a line of political building elsewhere – among *Mizrahi* activists.

These took advantage of the desire for rule to move from ethnic organization, which was incompatible with Begin’s doctrine, to *Mizrahi* middle-class politics; a politics that preserves both the essence of the national change as well as the ethnic interests of the *Mizrahim* who are partners in the mobility process in Israel. Acceptance of the meritocratic principle was what served to defuse the ethnic element. This was a window of opportunity that motivated activists of *Mizrahi* origin in the 1980s and 1990s to occupy front-line positions in the Likud headed by *Herut*. Field activists, among them heads of regional councils and towns such as Meir Shetreet, Moshe Katzav, and David Magen, would in future turn this power base into a platform that local activists would use to become political leaders. Besides these, were others whose status in the party’s central committee would lead them to a process of class empowerment: they would serve as the political basis for the expansion and development of the *Mizrahi* middle class into the prominent social force it was to become within Israeli society of the 1990s.