

RESERVED SEATS

Religion, Gender, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Israel

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: A NARRATIVE GLOSSARY

Reserved Seats offers insights about women who belong to one of Israel's many cultures—Jews who themselves, or whose parents or grandparents came to Israel from the countries of the Islamic world. In Israel, members of this group are referred to as **Sephardim (sing. Sephardi)** or **Mizrahim (sing. Mizrahi)**, and both these terms are used interchangeably in this book.

While the text offers explanations of Hebrew terms and of Israeli cultural phenomenon, readers will be able to appreciate the book better if they begin with some basic knowledge about the society under study. This narrative glossary's purpose is to offer a quick survey of the background against which Prof. El-Or is writing.

The author did her field work in **Pardes Katz**, a section of the city of **Bnei Brak**. Most of Bnei Brak is populated by **Haredi (pl. Haredim)** Jews. Haredim are often referred to as ultra-Orthodox Jews. The Haredi community is further divided into three groups. **Hasidim** generally stress ecstatic worship and devotion to a holy man, called an **admor**. **Lithuanians** (who do not necessarily come from Lithuania) place more stress on formal observance and study (the **Ponivetz Yeshiva** in Bnei Brak is widely considered the most prestigious Lithuanian institution of learning). They have had a seminal influence on the third group, the **Sephardi Haredim**. Haredim of all types differ from **Religious Zionist Jews** (sometimes called **National Religious**), who participate fully in the civil sphere of the state and society alongside their religious observance.

Furthermore, the Haredi lifestyle and life path differs from those of religious Zionists and of non-religious, secular Israelis. The typical Haredi boy attends a school called a **Talmud Torah**, and then goes on to a **yeshiva**, or religious seminary for high

school. After high school he will generally continue to study at a **higher yeshiva** and, after he is married, at a **kolel**. Such a student is called an **avrech**.

Haredi girls attend separate schools; **Beit Ya'akov** is the largest system of Haredi girls' schools. After eighth grade, girls continue in an institution called a **seminar**, which offers high school education and a postsecondary program (confusingly, Haredi women sometimes use the word "seminar" to refer specifically to the postsecondary program, and sometimes to refer to the entire high school plus postsecondary institution).

Education for Haredi boys and men is almost exclusively religious. Girls' schools and seminars also focus on religious education, but offer a larger and wider range of secular education than boys' schools do. However, for the most part, neither boys' or girls' schools in the Haredi sector offer enough secular studies to qualify their students for a full **bagrut** certificate, the high school diploma, based on a battery of national graduation examinations, that is a requirement for university studies in Israel. Instead, they offer bagrut exams based on their own curriculum, which earn students a lower-level diploma.

Haredi schools receive some public funding, and some of them, organized under the rubric of the **Independent school system**, are supervised by the Ministry of Education. (The Independent school system operates in parallel with the two official school systems, the **State** [non-religious] and **State-Religious** [religious Zionist] systems.) Other schools are run by Haredi organizations of one sort or another, many of them under the sponsorship of a particular rabbi, sect, or community.

The Haredi community in Israel was once overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, as were its institutions and schools. Sephardim who identified with the Haredi community and sought Haredi schools for their children were welcomed by some in the Lithuanian

Haredi community, but there was much segregation between the two ethnic groups. Chafing at this discrimination, and seeking to protect and promote their own Sephardi heritage, in the early 1980s a group of Sephardi leaders led by **Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef** broke with the Ashkenazi Haredi political parties **Agudat Yisrael** (Hasidim) and **Degel Ha-Torah** (Lithuanians) (which run for the Knesset together under the rubric **Yahadut Ha-Torah**) to found a Sephardi political and social movement called **Shas**. Rabbi Yosef, widely considered one of the great Jewish legal authorities of modern times, tapped a reservoir of Sephardi resentment against the paternalistic treatment the community received both from the state and from the Ashkenazi Haredi leadership, as well as a longing by many Sephardim to return to their religious roots. While the party's top echelons are exclusively Haredi, it attracted huge support from many tradition-minded but non-religious members of the community. The party quickly gained so much support that it became one of the largest party's in Israel's parliament, the **Knesset**. Its best showing came in 1999, when it won 17 of the Knesset's 120 seats. In reaction to that victory, non-religious Israelis alarmed by Haredi political power flocked to the secularist and centrist **Shinui** party, led by Yosef Lapid, which in the subsequent election in 2003 won 15 seats, while Shas dropped to 11. In the next election, in 2006, however, Shinui disappeared, while Shas retained its strength. Many secularists on the left vote for **Meretz**, a small party led until 2006 by Yossi Sarid.

A Shas subsidiary, **El Ha-Ma'ayan** (or **Ma'ayan Ha-Chinuch Ha-Torani**), established a network of Sephardi Haredi schools; some rabbis associated with Shas established their own school networks. These schools proved to be extremely popular with the Sephardi rank-and-file, since they offer clear moral and religious messages, free

busing to and from school, hot lunches, and long school days, none of which state-sponsored education can match. Shas's political power has enabled it to obtain partial government financing for its schools. Groups associated with Shas have also founded a plethora of **holy radio stations** that offer religious programming in the spirit of the party. These are pirate stations, operating without a license, so they are occasionally shut down by the authorities.

If Rabbi Yosef provided Shas's spiritual and ideological inspiration, the party's political and organizational wizard in its early years was Aryeh Der'i, a young activist who was appointed director-general of the Ministry of the Interior at the age of 27 when Shas first entered the government in 1986, and then minister of the interior two years later. In 1993, however, Der'i was accused of bribery and financial irregularities. His relations with Rabbi Yosef worsened, and later that year his indictment forced him to resign his cabinet position. He was convicted in 1999 and sentenced to prison. He remained immensely popular on the Sephardi street, however, where most believed that he had been framed.

Pardes Katz, the research site, is a mixed neighborhood. It retains much of the poor Sephardi population, with its myriad social problems, that originally gained it a reputation as a slum and a center of organized crime. However, the influx of Haredi families, and the return to religion that has become a trend in the Sephardi community, under Shas's influence, has given it a more religious character. Furthermore, a government project called **Project Renewal** has funded home renovation and educational and social activities in this and other needy areas in Israel. Jews who return to religion are called **hozrim be-teshuva** or **ba'alei teshuva** (sing. m. **ba'al teshuva**, sing. f. **ba'alat**

teshuva) (returnees in repentance or masters of repentance, respectively). In the Sephardi community in particular, sometimes the term **mit'hazkim** (self-strengtheners) is preferred (see Chapter 2, note 4).

A note on transliteration: I have preferred in nearly all cases to represent the Hebrew letter *het* by the Latin letter "h," rather than with "ch" or "kh." The Sephardi women who speak in this book pronounce this letter as a throaty aspirated "h," in contrast with the harsh guttural Ashkenazi pronunciation that "ch" and "kh" imply. (In the word *mit'hazek* I have inserted an apostrophe to indicate that the "t" and "h" represent two separate sounds.)

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