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The Battle of the ‘True Believers’: Environmentalism in Israeli Party Politics

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A. Introduction

Environmentalism has been a latecomer to Israeli politics, in fact it is arguable whether it has come at all. While other Western nations were already experiencing heated environmental political debate in the 1970's (Dryzek, 1997 pp. 203-206), this was not the case in Israel. At that time, the terms environmentalism and ecology were relatively unknown to Israeli politicians, nor were they cognizant of the fundamental concepts and grand ideas that lay behind them. In 1965, Israel's Minister of Finance and one of Israel's most influential politicians for two decades, Pinchas Sapir, conveyed the spirit of the times when he asked the then-member of the Israeli Parliament, Yosef Tamir, "what is that ecology *shmecology* you are constantly talking about?." (Greenpeter, 2008; Eldar, 2009). His rhetorical question not only reflected ignorance but also a disdain and alienation from environmental trends. Sapir's sentiment was neither unique nor exceptional. It mirrored the predominant "development" ethos that had governed Zionist-Israeli society and politics from the 1930's (Tal, 2002 p. 24; De-Shalit, 1995).

Even if, since the days of Pinchas Sapir, some knowledge about environmentalism, it is still far from a sweeping concern dominating the various arenas of Israeli party politics. Environmentalism has moved from the obscure to the eccentric, and today sits comfortably as a niche issue, promoted at times by no more than a handful of 'true believers'. Although since the new millennium two green national parties have emerged on the political scene, they have been unable to secure the needed votes to pass the minimal electoral threshold and have been unsuccessful in placing representatives in the Knesset – the Israeli Parliament.¹

¹ See discussion in part E.

This chapter begins with a description of the party and ideological alignment of environmentalism in Israeli national politics. It places Israeli party politics within a wider context of major political processes such as dealignment and realignment, thus creating the theoretical background for evaluating the broader role of environmentalism in Israeli politics. In this context an attempt will be made to answer the recurring question: has environmentalism been associated primarily with left-wing parties? It is suggested that, contrary to the development of environmental politics in many western nations, environmentalism in Israel has not been the sole domain of new (or old) leftist ideologies. Indeed it has not been a party affair at all. Rather, it has emerged as an individualistic agenda beyond partisan divisions, particular to a few dedicated Members of Knesset (MKs) from various and at times opposing political parties. This assertion is made through an in-depth description of some of the exceptional figures that have colored Israeli environmental politics, along with their accomplishments and struggles.

Through the work of individual MKs, concise lessons are learned about a few of the major environmental conflicts that received a degree of attention from the Knesset. These political environmental struggles serve to illustrate the ideological positioning of various actors, predominant discourses, ideologies and interests that prevailed. The chapter also references some of the legislative achievements of the various MKs through which something can be learned about the active role played by individuals in promoting environmental regulation.

Finally, a brief description will be given of a relatively new phenomenon – the establishment of two green parties. These have already participated in national elections and have gained some holding in local-municipal elections. Whether green parties may in the future serve as a possible cure for some of the shortcomings of environmentalism in Israeli party politics remains an open question.

B. An Overview of Israeli National Party Politics

Israel is a representative parliamentary democracy with a multi-party electoral system. The Israeli Knesset is comprised of 120 Members of Knesset who are elected as party representatives on a national platform (Arian, 2005). The Prime Minister is the head of government that is formed by a majority coalition (Arian, 2005).

Since the nascent days of the Knesset, diversity and fragmentation have been key characteristics of the political makeup (Peretz and Doron, 1997). From the first Knesset elected in February 1949 until the 18th Knesset elected in February 2009, there have been, at any one time, no less than nine and up to 20 elected factions represented (Knesset website, accessed May 2010). Parties are usually seen as divided between: right wing – moderate and non moderate; left wing – moderate and non moderate including a communist party; center; religious (both orthodox and ultra-orthodox as well as representing Sefaradi Jews); and minority Arab parties (Arian, 2005).

The first Knesset saw 12 parties and political groups elected, however the ruling party *Mapai*, enjoyed considerable dominance which it maintained until the ninth Knesset elections in 1977 (Peretz and Doron, 1997 pp. 78-79). The official policy of the party was "constructive socialism", based on pioneering idealism coupled with political pragmatism (Peretz and Doron, 1997 pp. 85-86).

The elections to the ninth Knesset (1977) brought about a changeover in the ruling elite. The *Likud*, a right wing party consolidated from several center-right and far-right wing factions (Arian, 2005 pp. 139-150), had formed, for the first time, a right-wing government. The ninth Knesset also saw an increase in the number of factions represented rising to 20 (Knesset website, accessed August 2010). The turnover, dubbed as *Hamahapakh* (i.e. the upheaval), was the outcome of a complex set of conditions, among them: the long-weakening dominance of the Labor party; the legitimacy that the *Likud* had acquired gradually since the late 1960's; a demographic shift with a rise in the number of voters from non-European ethnic backgrounds; the public's annoyance at the shortcomings of previous governments and the perceived failure of the government in the 1973 'Yom Kippur' war. (Arian, 2005). It brought about many changes – in the character of the government, in economic policy, and in the status quo on issues of religion between the government and the ultra-orthodox Jewish parties (Eisenstadt, 2004 pp.139-141).

The 1980's brought yet another political change, as the left and right wings became similar in size, along with a major economic crisis and the First Lebanon War, which drove the *Likud* and Labor to form two consecutive national unity governments. (Koren and Shapira, 1997 pp. 308-331). The 2005 elections saw a significant shift to the center when *Kadima* became the first central party elected to rule and form the government (Shamir, *et al.*, 2008 pp. 51-58). After the 2009 elections a reactionary shift to the political right occurred, when the *Likud* (led by Benjamin Netanyahu) was called upon to form the government, after a majority of 65 MKs was achieved by right-wing and religious parties (Haaretz 20.2.2009).

Even though the government established a coalition with the Labor Party (Haaretz website 31.3.2009), the latter party's severely weakened position in the Knesset (13 representatives, an all-time low) and a lack of clear ideological standing severely compromised its overall political clout (Sternhell, 2009).

C. Dealignment and Realignment in Israeli National Politics

Two major processes, consistent with patterns of electoral change in western politics, can be identified, to some extent, in the Israeli politics of the last two decades. First and foremost is the process of dealignment, the weakening of bonds between voters and their traditional partisan affiliation (Dalton 2000; Dalton *et al.*, 1984). These diminishing bonds have been attributed to several social and political processes. Political parties have lost their centrality in social life, while at the same time better education and increased political awareness has caused voters to abandon previous commitments to a particular party. (Dalton, *et al.*, 1984; Dalton, *et al.*, 2000). Shamir and Arian (2004 pp. 41-47) establish that since the 1990s, Israel's political system has been experiencing partisan dealignment, which is characterized by increasingly inconsistent voting behavior, a decrease in the dominance of large parties and an increased role for civil society.

Realignment has been described as a process concurrent with dealignment. The rise of 'New Politics' divides (such as environmentalism or feminism), and a fundamental change in the balance of power between competing parties, translated in many Western democracies into higher voter turnout rates and increased ideological polarization. (Dalton *et al.*, 1984; Dalton *et al.*, 2000). The rise of New Politics' brought about significant changes in the formally predominant political discourse and priorities in many Western nations (Lijphart *et al.*, 2000). For example, in the recent 2009 elections to the European Parliament, disillusioned left-of-centre parties voters continued to gravitate to the Greens, which, coupled with the collapse of left-wing parties, caused a general rise in Green parties' representation (Carter, 2010 p. 301).

In Israel, while the political system underwent a process of substantial dealignment, realignment did not reach the same level. It has been much slower and had a smaller impact than in other Western democracies (Yael Yishay, 2003 pp. 67-70, 127-128; Van Der Heijden, 1999). Substantive indications of this are decreasing voter turnout rates and the public's general sense that the major parties are similarly ideologically positioned. (Shamir, *et al.*, 2008 pp. 56-58; Arian & Shamir, 2006 p. 79)

A notable attribute of the reduced influence of the realignment process has meant that environmentalism has never been considered a central political concern in national elections. Although individual MKs were aware of environmental issues even back in the 1960's (Tal, 2002 pp. 163-164), the environmental debate has not managed to climb the ladder of political priorities in national elections. The prominent cleavages remained national security and territorial issues. This can be attributed to the fact that since its independence in 1948 Israel continues to be in a *de facto* state of war with many of its neighbors, with recurring hostilities and military clashes. Up to the time of writing (2011) Israel also remains a country without internationally recognized borders, hence the prominence of the ongoing territorial dispute (Peretz and Doron, 1997 pp. 138-140). This situation is exceptional when compared with other Western democracies.

In industrialized democracies, 'green ideas' made their prime entrance into intellectual and political circles as early as the 1970s (Richardson and Rootes, 1995). Along with other 'post-material' issues, people started to notice that industrialism was taking its toll and producing a deleterious environmental impact (Inglehart, 1977). In Israel, as in other developing countries, the predominant notion was that public policy and priorities could not 'afford the luxury' of placing environmentalism and other post-material issues at the top of the political agenda (Lijphart *et al.*, 2000). Israel, even beyond the 1980's, was still a country in construction, pursuing the Zionist 'ethic of development' (De-Shalit, 1995 pp. 75-76).

Although proportional electoral systems (such as the one that exists in Israel) are commonly perceived as favorable towards new and green parties (Richardson and Rootes, 1995 p. 18; Karamichas and Botetzagias, 2003 p. 73), in the Israeli case, the so called 'advantage' of the proportional system has been almost entirely obscured by the dominant cleavages (security and territorial issues) exacerbating other political barriers (Doron, 1989). As a consequence, although between nine and twenty factions were represented in the Knesset throughout the years (Knesset website, accessed August 2010), none of these factions ever placed the environmental agenda as a central goal.

While green parties took advantage of the dealignment and realignment processes, and achieved significant electoral accomplishments throughout Western democracies (Richardson and Rootes, 1995; Dryzek, 1997; Mair, 2001, Carter, 2010), Israel has yet to witness a green party gaining substantial electoral support in national elections. Furthermore, as stated, no elected party has embraced a distinct environmental agenda, as has occurred in many Western democracies, where it is not uncommon for 'grey' parties to purloin ideas from green parties to capitalize on the greens' electoral potential (Dryzek, 1997).

D. Solitude in Political Environmentalism

Although green ideas did not receive a substantial place on party platforms and agendas, environmentally committed MKs have played a significant role in Israeli politics. Notably, environmentally oriented MKs cannot be traced to one segment of the Israeli political landscape. They have been a rather eclectic bunch, coming from as far right as the Russian reactionary *Israel Beiteinu* party to as far left as *Hadash*, the communist Jewish-Arab Party. Many MKs have had flings with environmentalism, while others have boasted a longer standing relationship.

From the mid 1960's to the early 1980's, the *Liberal* party, later aligned to the *Likud* (Arian, 2005), hosted an extraordinarily committed environmental MK – the late Yosef Tamir. During the 1990's, MKs promoting an environmental agenda could be found in *Meretz*, the Zionist leftist party, which received a large portion of environmental activists' votes (Tal, 2002 p. 395; De-Shalit, 1994 pp. 274-276). At the same time, devoted environmentalists were also to be found in the extreme right wing Party *Israel Beitinu*. The late Yuri Shtern a new immigrant with a doctorate in economics, who was a member of the 14th to 17th Knesset, was such an MK (Yuri Shtern website, accessed May 2010; Tal, 2006 p. 549, 551). MK Michael Nudelman, a professor of environmental economics also from *Israel Beitinu* (see Knesset website, accessed May 2010) was also devoted to environmental issues (Adam Teva Vadin, March 2006 – March 2007, website accessed May 2010; Tal 2002, p. 395). Since the mid 2000s, environmentally dedicated MKs are to be found in *Hadash*, the *Labor* party, and also seemingly in the right wing *Likud*. Some of them even received official awards acknowledging their contribution ('Life and Environment' website, accessed May 2010).

The following sections of the chapter will draw on an in-depth description of some of these exceptional figures who have colored Israeli environmental politics, along with their struggles and accomplishments, both legislative and other. The MKs who were chosen for in-depth analysis are by no means a comprehensive list of all prominent Israeli environmental parliamentarians. The limits of the chapter required selection of only a handful, which inevitably excludes many others worthy of mention.² Hence the description by no means

² These MKs include, but are not limited to, Shimon Kanovich (Tal, 2002 p. 62) who was the legislator of the first air and noise pollution abatement statute; MK Yizhar Smilansky a renowned novelist who was largely responsible for passing the landmark legislation that established the nature reserves system (See Tal, 2002 p. 15); MK Yossi Sarid who served as the fifth Minister of Environment and assumed the role of the 'environmental icon' of the 1990's (See Tal, 2002 pp. 297-317).

serves as a complete historical overview, but rather as a means of analysis. Through the stories of a few of these MKs, the chapter seeks to illustrate some of the major environmental struggles that have received attention from the Knesset, predominant discourses, ideologies and prevailing interests. Most importantly, their stories illustrate the non-partisan nature of environmentalism in Israeli politics and the difficulties it has faced in the past and continues to face in the present.

1. First Signs of Parliamentary Environmentalism in the 1970's and 1980's

Renowned in Israel as "Mr. Environment", MK Josef Tamir was an unlikely candidate for carrying the environmental torch. He was first elected to the 6th Knesset in 1965 as the Secretary-General of the Liberal party (Tal, 2002 p. 251). The Liberals, oriented towards the bourgeoisie, gained their support from established landowners and businessmen (Arian, 2005). Many of the first founders and supporters of the party were sons of well-to-do orange grove farmers, part of the veteran Jewish economic elite that resided in Palestine before the independence of the State of Israel in 1948. The party promoted a libertarian world view, much alienated from the predominant socialist philosophy of the ruling *Mapai* (Peretz and Doron, 1997 pp. 99-102). This political home was an improbable place for breeding Israel's pioneer environmental visionary.

Between 1974 and 1978 Tamir presided over the parliamentary Internal Affairs and Environment committee and the State Control committee (Tamir, 1985 pp. 31-36). In 1973 he was among the founders of *Gahal*, the political alliance of the Liberals and the right wing *Herut*, that later evolved into the *Likud*. Renowned for his writing and rhetoric, Tamir was soon appointed as head of the information and organization division of *Gahal* and later the *Likud* (Tamir, 1985 pp. 42-44).

During the late 1960's, while environmental concerns were gaining prominence around the world, the Knesset in Israel was still characterized by environmental indifference. No single parliamentary committee was responsible for environmental affairs. Tamir noticed the void, and in 1970 promoted the establishment of the first parliamentary non-partisan lobby of MKs for the environment, which was quickly endorsed by sixteen MKs from across the political spectrum including MKs from the Communist Party (*Maki*) and the Jewish ultra-orthodox party *Agudat Israel* (Tamir, 1985 p. 32). Later, in 1972, after a concentrated lobbying effort, environmental affairs gained heightened recognition when the first sub-committee for the environment and ecology was formed (the Biosphere, 1982 p. 12; Tamir,

1985 p. 147). MK Tamir was appointed as the sub-committee's first chairman (Knesset website, accessed August 2010).

Finally, two years later, Tamir's advocacy for a permanently binding parliamentary committee ended in success, after the parliamentary Interior committee was formally transformed into the Interior and Environment Committee and was given the authority over environmental affairs. Tamir retained chairmanship of the Interior and Environment committee for the duration of the 8th Knesset (Knesset website, accessed August 2010) Under this formal parliamentary umbrella, Tamir had ample opportunity to promote a great variety of national, and even regional, environmental initiatives through private law proposals, parliamentary questions and appeals to the public.

When asked why he decided to dedicate his parliamentary and later years to the environment, Tamir replied that two actions, taken in the early days of the State by David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, caused a shift in his awareness. "The first was the annulment of the rural councils that were responsible for the conservation of open lands (Tamir during his youth was head of the Rural Council, Petach Tikva). The second was the draining of the Hula "swamp". The Hula wetlands that were vital in preserving the ecological and limnological balance of the Kinneret water basin were drained as part of the Zionist campaign to combat malaria and reclaim additional land for agriculture. The consequences however were disastrous (Tal, 2002, p. 116). Tamir described the decision as "Stalinist in nature" "This was an action of unprecedented cruelty that hurt the natural world and the scenic environment on a global scale. I could not accept the position that perceived nature only as a tool for man's use". (Tamir, 2006, p. 34). The draining of the Hula ultimately proved to be not only a turning point in Tamir's environmental consciousness, but has also been described as a decisive moment in shaping the perspective of the founders of Israel's Society for the Protection of Nature, and later a fledgling environmental movement. As Tal colorfully put it: "A swamp is lost but a society is born". (Tal, 2002 p. 115).

Tamir was one of the only MKs of his time to demand special sessions of the parliamentary plenum focusing on environmental issues. He was the first to raise many environmental issues but was particularly engaged with Israel's ever-growing water problems. In 1971 Tamir brought the issue of: "the risks of contamination and ecological disruption of Lake Kinneret" to the parliament assembly (Goldshtein, 2002 p. 51). The Kinneret (Sea of Galilee), Israel's only fresh water lake supplying some 25% of water consumption, at the time was under threat of contamination, salification and limnological disruption. After giving an ardent speech at the plenum, the Knesset assembly empowered the environmental

subcommittee under Tamir's chairmanship to make recommendations. In 1972 recommendations by the sub-committee were placed on the agenda of the Knesset, which concluded that "immediate action needs to be taken to improve the quality of water in the Kinneret otherwise there is a substantial threat that its waters will become toxic and unsuitable for drinking". Among its operative recommendations, the committee called for an increase in the existing supervision over the various users of the lake waters including the municipalities around the lake basin, requiring them to use their authority to prevent the discharge of wastewater into the lake (Goldshtein, 2002 p. 54; Tamir, 1985 pp. 219-228).

Tamir was also preoccupied with conserving Israel's open spaces and especially preventing urban sprawl onto Israel's agricultural land. As he put it colorfully: "what we are seeing is a crawling extermination of Israel's most prized and irreplaceable asset. Land cannot be imported!" (Goldshtein, 2002 p. 88). As early as 1965 he was among the initiators of an amendment to the Planning and Building law that improved the legal protection of agricultural lands through the establishment of a special Committee for the "Protection of Agricultural Lands" (Goldshtein, 2002 p. 65). The amendment required the approval of a special committee, in addition to the regular planning committees, when changing the zoning of agricultural land to non-agricultural land.

Tamir also recognized another threat to open spaces and sustainable urban planning: namely, unregulated, illegal building practices on public lands (Tamir, 1985 p. 326-337). Consequently one of the first initiatives he took in 1965, as a novice MK, was to propose the inclusion of administrative orders that would allow local planning committees to overcome the legal hurdles otherwise required to demolish illegal buildings. In 1977 the proposal was accepted and the Planning and Building law amended, allowing local planning councils to administer administrative orders to stop illegal building and require the removal of illegal properties (Goldshtein, 2002 p. 95; Planning and Building Law [amendment no. 8] 1977).

Tamir was also among the most dominant political voices in what became the first major, national struggle against urban pollution in Israel: the struggle against the establishment of the "Reading D" power station (Tamir, 1985 pp. 358-367). In 1962 the National Electricity Company first introduced its plans to convert Tel-Aviv's existing, 36 megawatt, "Reading" power plant to a 500 megawatt fuel generated plant on the sands dunes by the Yarkon River in north-west Tel Aviv. It took until 1967 for the plans to be brought before the newly appointed regional planning council, which quickly rejected the proposed site. The Council demanded a prior inquiry and that consent be given by the Ministry of Health affirming that the plant would not pose additional health risks to Tel-Aviv's inhabitants (Tal, 2002 p.

252-256). Tamir, quickly convened a hearing of the Knesset's Interior Committee and discovered broad-based opposition to the site (Tamir, 1985 pp. 361-362).

To circumvent the decision of the regional planning council, the government drafted a bill that authorized the government to grant permission for planning and building of the site without the required consent of the regional and local planning authorities (Tal, 2002 pp. 253-254). The proposed law raised a public outcry. Two hundred thousand people signed a petition opposing the Tel-Aviv site for the plant – the largest public environmental campaign to date. But the effort was in vain, the ruling *Mapai* party enforced strict faction discipline, the coalition voted in favor and the law was passed. In 1969 Reading D was opened. Later Tamir commented: "never have so few decided to condemn so many to pollution for so many years as did Levi Eshkol, the Prime Minister that stood behind Reading D" (Goldshtein, 2002 p. 123).

The campaign against Reading D and other environmental hazards developed in Tamir a sense that a change in Israel's planning and development policy was desperately needed. For the duration of his career, both as an MK and later as founding Chairman of "Life and Environment," Israel's umbrella organization for environmental NGOs, he advocated adopting a mode of sustainable, rather than destructive, development as he noted in 1971: *"The Israeli citizen is perplexed ... He feels that economic growth when unaccompanied by environmental planning and the protection of quality of life is like chasing a dream that is accompanied by ever-growing nightmares. Today there is increased recognition that development and environmental protection do not contradict one another but rather that a balance must be struck between them."* (Mr. Environment, 2000 p. 22).

Tamir spent over a decade and a half in the Knesset promoting environmental awareness. At times he experienced the satisfaction of success, such as in the establishment of the parliamentary Interior and Environment committee or with regard to his campaign for protection of agricultural lands (Tamir, 1985). But he was not oblivious to the difficulties of introducing new concepts of environmental protection to "a Knesset held captive by conventional and inefficient governmental institutions" (Tamir, 1985, p. 150). Tamir recognized the importance of non-partisan action on environmental issues and claimed that "partisan political action would have led to the downfall of his efforts" (Tamir, 1985, p. 150).

Environmental non-partisanship ultimately was not a completely effective solution. It could hardly be said that Tamir's environmental zealotness infected his party colleagues or other MKs of his generation. Ultimately, he remained an anomalous political figure. When asked, he often conveyed the feeling that during his parliamentary years and the preceding

years in the Tel-Aviv City Council he was a lone fighter on the environmental front (Tamir, 2006). He mentioned with some irony that Menachem Begin, acclaimed leader of *Gahal* and later *Likud*, and Prime Minister from 1977 to 1983, often said when asked that in "environmental affairs Josef Tamir represents me" (Paz, 2000, p. 1973; Tamir, 2006). This to Tamir was not necessarily a statement of personal trust, but rather an indication of Begin's indifference to environmental matters and, as a result, a testimony of the unfulfilled potential of his campaign for environmental awareness among the Israeli leadership of the time.

Tamir's dedication to environmental issues did not end with his Knesset tenure. He continued to act as a leader and the 'great grandfather' of the environmental NGO community until his death at the age of 94 in 2009 (Eldar, 2009). After his departure from the Knesset he was active in forming no fewer than four central environmental NGOs, and continued writing and preaching on environmental affairs throughout his lifetime (Goldshtein, 2002).

2. Non-Partisan Environmental Politics in the 1990's and 2000's

Another unlikely story of environmental commitment is that of the Jewish ultra-orthodox MK Moshe Gafni from *Yahadut Ha'torah* (United Torah Judaism – UTJ), who has consistently been voted as one of Israel's most environmentally-aware MKs in the yearly surveys conducted by the Israeli Union for Environmental Defense.³ MK Gafni was first elected to the 12th Knesset (1988) as an MK for *Degel-Hatorah* (Flag of the Torah), that merged with another haredi- hasidic party *Agudat Israel* to form United Torah Judaism in 1992 (Arian, 2005). Since its foundation UTJ has been the most uncompromising Jewish ultra-orthodox religious party with representation in the Knesset. Traditionally, UTJ representation has been determined by the rabbinical council that governs its affairs. Its agenda, dominated by promoting religious education, and other socio-economic interests of the Jewish ultra-orthodox sector (Arian, 2005). With this in mind it would therefore seem surprising that Gafni has shown such steady dedication to the environmental agenda over the years.

His green fingerprint is evident in the UTJ party platform which includes "environmental protection" as one of the only non-religious oriented topics covered. As the party's platform for the 2009 elections states: "In recognition of the importance of environmental protection

³ The Israeli Union for Environmental Defense (IUED) is Israel's leading environmental advocacy organization. Since 2000 it has compiled periodic reports on environmentally related activities of Knesset members and factions. The reports rank environmental leaders and laggards among MKs according to various parameters such as, law proposals, voting records, parliamentary questions and motions for the agenda. For example see IUED, *Summary Report for the Third and Fourth Seats of the 15th Knesset from May 2001 to March 2002*, on file with author.

and out of the concern for ensuring the public's health the UTJ will act to prevent environmental hazards, ecological and aesthetic damage in the land, sea and along the shores of the country, in its rivers and water basins and in the air, and will act to ensure the natural beauty of our sacred land." (Knesset website, accessed August 2010).⁴ Even so, it would be incorrect to assert that Gafni's environmental zealotness has 'infected' the rest of the UTJ members. Indeed, his has remained a singular voice: an unorthodox perspective in this ultra-orthodox party.

MK Gafni has been reelected for seven consecutive terms, including the 18th Knesset elected in 2009 (Knesset website, accessed August 2010).⁵ He chaired the parliamentary Interior and Environment committee during the 15th Knesset from 1999-2003 (Knesset website, accessed August 2010).⁶ During this time he held countless meetings on environmental issues and was instrumental in advancing the preparation of the Private Law Proposal for the Mediterranean Sea (Protection Development and Conservation) 2002. The law evolved and was later accepted in the 16th Knesset as a governmental law, named the Law for the Protection of the Coastal Environment-2004 (Israel Ministry of Environmental Protection website, accessed August 2010).⁷

MK Gafni was also among the initiators of the Clean Air Law Proposal of 2005 (Reshumot, 2005 p. 126).⁸ Following three years of intensive negotiations and political maneuvering, the bill evolved and was confirmed as the Clean Air Law 2008 (*Sidrei Hakika*, 2008 p. 752).⁹ Contrary to what may be considered as the acceptable procedure for such substantive legislation, the law was not initiated by the government, but rather was a private endeavor undertaken by a group of MKs including Omri Sharon, Gafni, and later Dov Khenin, based on a draft received from an environmental NGO: the Israel Union for Environmental Defense (IUED) (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008).¹⁰ The law proposal constituted a major breakthrough. Since its passage in 2008, the Clean Air Law has been

⁴ See: http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections/knesset15/yahaduthatorah_m.htm UJT 2009 platform in Hebrew

⁵ See: www.knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mk_eng.asp?mk_individual_id_t=35

⁶ See: www.knesset.gov.il/mk/heb/mk.asp?mk_individual_id_t=35

⁷ Law for the Protection of the Coastal Environment 2004 see at: www.sviva.gov.il/bin/en.jsp?enPage=e_BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=Object&enDispWho=Articles^13422&enZone=mar_qual

⁸ Clean Air Law Proposal, 111 *Reshumot- Law Proposals- the Knesset* 19.12.2005 p. 126.

⁹ Clean Air Law 2008, 2174 *Sideri- Hakika*, p. 752, 31.7.2008.

¹⁰ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Knesset Approves Clean Air Law, 30 Jul 2008 available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Israel+beyond+politics/Knesset%20Approves%20Clean%20Air%20Law%2030-Jul-2008> (last visited 7 March 2010).

widely considered to be the most important piece of environmental legislation of the last decade (Ivry-Darel, 2008).

Although it would appear that Gafni would not have much to gain from environmental stewardship, in light of his political affiliation and the socio-demographic profile of his voters, Gafni remains committed to this work. He claims his "pursuit and great interest in environmental affairs results from man's obligation to conserve the world in which he lives and prevent its destruction. This obligation has various roots in Jewish sources ...The obligation is both personal and public... As a public figure and representative I have an obligation to deal with environmental issues as an integral part of my work..." Although he feels that poverty and harsh living conditions prevent many ultra-orthodox Jews from noticing environmental problems, "even in this social sector environmental issues are increasingly acknowledged" (Gafni Interview, 2010)

During the 1990's and since the new millennium, the left wing on the Israeli political map bred several prominent environmental MKs, but perhaps fewer than expected, in comparison with leftist parties in Western parliaments (Kitschelt, 1988). Furthermore, until 2006, right-wing MKs led more environmental initiatives than left-wing MKs (Tal, 2006 p. 551). Among the most notable recent green 'leftists' are MK Rabbi Michael Melchior, the leader of *Meimad* who aligned with the Labor Party, MK Mossi Raz and Benny Temkin of *Meretz*, and more recently MK Dov Khenin from *Hadash* and MK Nitzan Horowitz from *Meretz*.

Upon the commencement of the 17th Knesset (2006) MK Melchior was the dominant figure in establishing the first active environmental MKs lobby, which he co-chaired with MK Omri Sharon from the *Likud* and later *Kadima* (son of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon). Melchior continued his work through the lobby in the 17th Knesset and co-chaired it with MK Dov Khenin. The environmental lobby, like other Knesset lobbies, is an informal gathering of MKs¹¹ that seeks to enlist the support of its peers and governmental decision makers to intervene in environmental issues and support pro-environmental policies. It is an interesting fact that in the 18th Knesset the social-environmental lobby was one of the largest lobbies in the Knesset in terms of MK membership, consisting of 20 MKs from across the political spectrum (Knesset website, accessed August 2010). This serves as a possible indicator of the so-called consensual statues of environmental issues that allows MKs from all parties and

¹¹ As such Knesset protocol does not interfere with the work of the lobbies.
See the Knesset website, Lobbies in the Knesset, http://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/lobby_eng.htm (accessed 3.3.2010)

world views, through joining the lobby, to publicly declare their allegiance to environmental affairs, even if this is not acted upon in practice.

Membership in the environmental lobby does not entail any formal commitment or obligation to vote in favor of environmental law proposals. This has allowed the lobby to become a convenient forum for MKs to orient themselves with an environmental world view while retaining their freedom to conform to their party's policies, voters' interests and other expediencies, which might eventually clash with environmental values (Robinson, 1992 ch. 6; De-Shalit, 2000 pp. 214-220).

As to the actual importance and effect of the environmental lobby, Yossi Sarid, a former MK, head of *Meretz* and former Minister of Environment commented: "It is good that there is an environmental lobby, if the alternative is for there not to be one. However if asked whether this lobby has made significant achievements, the answer would have to be that being a member of a lobby doesn't count for much. What matters is the final vote count in the plenary – and there is no necessary link between the two" (Sarid interview, 2009). A different view was expressed by former MK Mossi Raz from *Meretz*, who is convinced of the importance of the environmental lobby in creating a perception of prominence for environmental affairs: "The lobby creates common interests among MKs from different parties. This is an extremely significant achievement. It creates support for the Minister of Environment Protection and in that way helps promote a wide environmental platform" (Raz interview 2009).

Former MK Mossi Raz served as a *Meretz* MK in the 15th Knesset for only a short period, between March 2000 and February 2003 (Knesset website, accessed August 2010). However brief his tenure, Raz achieved an impressive environmental track record and was mentioned consecutively in IUED's list of excelling environmental MKs (IUED, 2000-2001). He initiated several environmental law proposals that he was unable to see through, such as an amendment to the Bottles Deposit Law that was intended to widen the scope of the law and include large bottle containers. Raz is most notably remembered for his success in establishing formal representation of environmental NGOS in national statutory committees relating to environmental affairs. This was achieved through a law proposal accepted as the Law of Representation of Public Environmental Organizations 2002.¹² The law formally required the addition of environmental NGO representatives in public and governmental bodies and committees relating to environmental affairs; previously there had been only

¹² Law of Representation of Public Environmental Organizations- 2002, Book of Laws 1879 (25.11.2008) p. 118, available at: http://www.sviva.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/law/klali33_1.pdf (last viewed April 2010)

government and business representatives. When asked to attest to his greatest environmental achievement MK Raz replied: "It is with no doubt the Environmental NGO Representation Law, which does not compare to anything else I did. The fact that it has not only been successfully implemented, but its scope widened since it was first legislated is the greatest measure of its success" (Raz interview, 2009).

If legislative achievements are an indicator of the prominence of environmental MKs, then MK Dov Khenin holds a place of honor. First elected to the 17th Knesset in mid-2006, as a member of the communist Arab-Jewish Party *Hadash* (Arian, 2005), Khenin entered the Knesset as an active leader in the environmental NGO community. Just weeks before elections he still formally held the position of Chairman of "Life and Environment" – the umbrella organization of Israeli Environmental NGOs. Although Khenin does not believe that dealing with environmental issues strengthened his political support, he stipulates that "dealing with environmental issues is of utmost critical importance and in politics it is necessary to 'swim against the current' if needed" (Khenin interview, 2010).

Since his election, Khenin has initiated numerous law proposals and amendments to existing laws, seven of which were accepted into law by 2010 (MK Dov Khenin website, accessed August 2010). Two prominent examples of laws championed by MK Khenin are the Polluter Pays Law 2008,¹³ and the Law of Local Authorities (Environmental Enforcement – the Authorities of Inspectors) 2008.¹⁴ The first increased the variety of sanctions available to the environmental regulator by amending various environmental statutes. It incorporated financial and administrative sanctions where they were previously lacking. It toughened penalties for polluting facilities without or in breach of a business license and provided a mechanism for authorizing payments by those given a license to pollute. The second empowered the authorities of local government to enforce environmental legislation. In addition to the advancement of several important laws, MK Khenin has played an active role as co-chairman of the Knesset's social-environmental lobby. In this capacity he initiated numerous meetings and discussions on various local and national issues (Dov Khenin website, accessed August 2010) to ensure that the lobby was active and that the public profile of environmental issues was constantly being raised.

¹³ Law for Protection of the Environment (the Polluter Pays) (Law Amendments) 2008, Rules Book 2181 (11.8.2008) p. 858 available at: http://www.sviva.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/law/klali60_1.pdf (last viewed April 2010).

¹⁴ Law of Local Authorities (Environmental Enforcement- the Authorities of Inspectors) 2008, Rules Book 2155 (11.6.2008) p. 534. Available at: http://www.sviva.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/law/klali55_1.pdf (last viewed April 2010).

3. Discussion

The phenomenon of non-partisan political environmentalism distinguishes the Israeli parliament from other western parliaments, where 'green ideas' and green parties are perceived to originate mainly from 'new-left' ideologies (Kitschelt, 1988; Mair, 2001 p. 107; Gemenis, 2009 p. 129).¹⁵ A unique feature of Israeli politics is that it has brought together opponents and helped in the joining of forces, forming a singular nonpartisan effort in the Israeli public domain. This uniqueness has been able to generate unlikely partnerships, such as the one between the communist party (*Hadash*) MK Dov Khenin and the ultra-orthodox party (UTJ) MK Moshe Gafni, who pooled their strengths in advancing the Clean Air Law. Finding such common ground would be unlikely, not only on political and security issues, but also regarding "civilian" issues like education, human rights and even the economy.

This phenomenon is attributable to the convergence of several factors. The first cause is that the Knesset is an extreme example of what is referred to as the *representative democracy* model (Peretz and Doron, 1997 pp. 118-121). The parliamentarians' role is perceived first and foremost as the functional representation of their sector's interests, and not of national interests (Arian, 2005; De-Shalit, 2004 pp. 67-79). At the same time, environmental stances usually represent cross-sectoral interests or are of national importance and rarely do they embody the interests of one particular sector.¹⁶ Hence, political capital that underlies environmental issues is extremely uncertain in Israeli politics. This is due to the coupling of the extreme representation model with the cross-sectoral nature of environmental concerns with the undiminished centrality of traditional cleavages (Shamir, *et al.*, 2008 p. 57).

As to the political capital associated with environmentalism, in the mid-90's Dedi Tzucker, a leftist MK from *Meretz*, when asked why his party had never brought up environmental issues in any T.V commercials before elections, replied: "you are either crazy or naïve! No one will take me seriously if I talk about the environment" (De-Shalit, 1994 p. 272). Less blunt, but conveying no less the problematics of political capital associated with environmentalism, MK Nitzan Horowitz from *Meretz* when asked in 2009 if environmental accomplishments are a "winning ticket" in elections replied: "I can't say green issues are considered as a 'winning ticket'. They are basically considered as consensus and so it doesn't

¹⁵ It is important to carefully distinguish between 'left' and 'new left' ideologies, as a central assertion is that 'green ideas' simply cannot be placed on the conventional 'left-right' spectrum – 'The conventional politics of left, right and centre are like a three lane motorway with all vehicles heading in the same direction... Greens feel that it is the very direction that is wrong...' (Porrirt, 1984 p. 43).

¹⁶ Referring to 'cross-sectoral' interest does not mean that all sectors are hurt equally by environmental deterioration, rather that all sectors are hurt to some extent.

hurt the reputation of a candidate to demonstrate environmental commitment – it may even increase his personal popularity. But winning electoral gains from this is a whole different story. The public does not vote on the environment in Israel. Electoral issues are essentially security, peace, to a lesser degree economics and the nexus between state and religion. But environment is and has always been a non-issue in national elections." (Horowitz interview, 2009). Dov Khanin, put it directly: "Dealing with environmental issues does not to my mind strengthen the political support of those MKs that do deal with these issues" (Khenin interview, 2010). Former Minister of Environment Yossi Sarid bluntly commented: "Environmentalism is not and has never been a "winning ticket". There are MKs who deal with environmental affairs and some of them even do commendable work but their accomplishments and efforts have never gone rewarded" (Sarid interview, 2009).

The nonpartisan effort of individual MKs and the common effort exerted by the environmental lobby in the Knesset have produced important environmental legislative achievements and have been instrumental in enhancing the public profile of environmental affairs. However, environmental legislation often carries with it economic burdens and restrictions, such as taxation of polluting behaviors or placing restrictions on the use of natural resources. These may deter some MKs from pursuing environmental legislation that they perceive as contradicting their voters' narrow interests (Robinson, 1992, p. 169). In conclusion, it seems that the cross-sectoral character of environmentalism has attracted MKs from across the political spectrum, but in small numbers due to the doubtful political capital which it offers.

E. The Rise and Demise of "Green Parties"

There are those who contend the elevation of green issues above party politics has in fact been the downfall of Israeli political environmentalism. "Since they have not been under vigorous political debate, environmental concerns have not succeeded in becoming electoral issues. Tagging them as bi-partisan, has essentially meant that environmental issues have become a non-issue for the Israeli voter. People vote for issues that are under debate – not those that enjoy a so-called consensus" commented Mossi Raz, former *Meretz* MK.

The bleak reality of environmentalism as an irrelevant issue in the political party arena provided much of the motivation for the establishment of two green parties, each with distinct environmental platforms. The 'Greens' was established in 1997, in partial response to the "tragic collapse of the bridge at the opening ceremony of the Maccabiah Games." (the 'Greens' website, accessed Aug 2010). The collapse of the bridge was indeed one of Israel's

notorious toxic-exposure disasters. Sixty-six athletes fell into the polluted waters of the Yarkon River, an event that ended with four fatalities, three of which were attributed to the exposure to the toxic mix in the river waters and river bed (Tal, 2002 p. 4).

One of the party's founders and an active member in its leadership, offered, however, a different account for the party's emergence: "the Greens was established for an almost trivial reason. Peer Visner (the head founder and party chairman), who had no previous environmental experience, had a tree cut down near his office, got annoyed and decided to establish a green party. He placed an ad in the newspaper saying that a green party had been formed." (Lilian interview, 2009).

The Greens ran consecutively in all national elections between 1999 and 2009. In the 1999, 2003 and 2009 elections they received the same mere 0.4% of the total vote count (Figure 1), which amounted to less than 30% of the votes needed to pass the threshold (Figure 1). In 2006 they came closest to reaching the electoral threshold when they received 1.5% of the total votes or 75% of the votes needed to pass the electoral threshold (Figure 1).

While they have failed time and again in national elections, the Greens achieved far greater success in local government elections. In 1998 they won two seats on the city council of Tel Aviv and later, in the 2003 elections, they were able to increase their representation to four seats. At the same time they obtained further representation in 14 municipalities through local associated lists (the 'Greens' website, accessed August 2010). In the 2008 local elections they were able to secure some 50 representatives through 22 associated municipal lists (Blander, 2009), demonstrating a steady increase in local representation between 1998 and 2008.

In 2009 a group of environmental activists decided to form a new party called the 'Green Movement' that would compete against the Greens in the 2009 national elections (the 'Green Movement' website, accessed August 2010). The new party built on the undemocratic image of the Greens and the fact that it had never been embraced by the environmental NGO community and remained alienated from many of its prominent leaders. Justifying the formation of a competing party, respondents from the leadership of the Green Movement invoked several claims. First, and possibly most significantly, the Green Movement would be a transparent and democratically run party of activists with significant previous environmental achievements in civil society (in contrast with the Greens) (Hann interview, 2009; Ben-Yemini interview, 2009; Shanas interview, 2009; Dabush interview, 2009). Some respondents stressed the ideological disparities between the Green Movement and the Greens, saying that the former had a significant focus on a social and economic agenda while the latter did not

(Ben Yemini interview, 2009; Shanas interview, 2009). Most respondents claimed the Green Movement to be part of the Israeli left in the orientation and profile of its members (Ben-Yemini interview, 2009; Bell interview, 2009; Shanas interview, 2009).

In their first attempt at national elections, and just months after the Green Movement had been formally established it formed a coalition with *Meimad* (headed by former MK Melchior) to run in the national elections. The Green Movement won only 41% of the votes needed to pass the threshold (figure 1). Although the rivalry between the Greens and the Green Movement might have impaired their chances, the fact remains that these parties together did not receive even 60% of the votes needed to pass the threshold (figure 1), a figure less than was achieved in the 2006 elections by the Greens alone.

Figure 1: Electoral Outcomes for Green Parties in 1999-2009 National Elections

	1999	2003	2006	2009
The Greens				
# votes	13,292	12,833	47,595	12,378
% of votes	0.4%	0.4%	1.5%	0.4%
% of electoral threshold	26%	27%	75%	18.3%
electoral threshold (% of votes)	1.5%	1.5%	2%	2%
electoral threshold (# votes)	49,672	47,226	62,742	67,470
The Green Movement				
# votes				27,737
% of votes				0.80%
% of electoral threshold				41.20%
electoral threshold (% of votes)				2%
electoral threshold (# votes)				67,470

Indeed after over a decade of green party politics the Greens and the Green Movement were unable to secure the votes needed to pass the electoral threshold in the national elections. Whether the successful results in municipal elections reflect possible trends in future national representation remains doubtful. Blander (2009) claims that the results of the 2008 municipal elections and later the 2009 national elections reinforce the existing trend of the decoupling of local and national voting patterns (Blander, 2009). While voters in municipal elections weigh local considerations, placing quality of life and the environment at the center of their decision, considerations are substantially different in national elections. In national elections the voters are much more likely to be concerned with national security and territorial issues, and the environment remains a marginal issue. At the same time, as ideological identification with

national partisan politics has subsided due to dealignment, national parties have lost their hold in municipal politics (Elazar, 2001 pp. 27-26).

F. Conclusion

Although Israel has seen some exceptional political leaders willing to dedicate their careers to environmental issues, they have remained an exception. These 'true believers' have not come distinctively from parties associated with the left, and have forged unique political alliances and cooperation on environmental issues. They have demonstrated the environment to be a non-partisan agenda capable of producing one of the only consensual goals in Israeli politics.

At the same time the Israeli parliament has yet to see environmental activity by distinctively green parties. Dealignment considerably weakened the two largest Israeli parties (Shamir and Arian, 2004 pp. 41-48), but the realignment process did not substantially improve the prospects of green parties to be elected. The dominance of the traditional political cleavages and especially security and territorial issues, has endured (Shamir and Arian, 2004 pp. 28-32), leaving environmentalism as a peripheral issue at best.

Israel's proportional electoral system has not contributed to the success of green parties as would have been expected (Richardson and Rootes 1995, p. 18). The so-called advantage of the proportional system has been almost entirely obscured by the dominant cleavages and the political barriers they create (Doron, 1989). Consequently, future developments in Israeli environmental party politics will greatly depend on whether there is a solution to the geopolitical conflicts that have characterized the region for over a century. If peace is to be achieved, there may be an opening for environmental issues to become more dominant in the national political agenda of parties and in the minds of the voters, possibly allowing for a green party to pass the electoral threshold in future elections.

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