

Eli Yishai: Ultra-Orthodox Mutiny Coming

Diplomatic and socio-economic issues were pushed aside during the first week of coalition talks. These matters have become marginalized by the push for “equitable bearing of the burden,” or as the ultra-Orthodox deem it, “the conscription decree.” It’s not just any decree, but an edict that will “tear the nation apart,” or at least that is what those who are bound to be most affected by the change are warning.

Interior Minister Eli Yishai, who also serves as deputy prime minister and who occupies the top slot on the Shas Party list, doesn’t mince words. If there is forced conscription of the ultra-Orthodox, Yishai vows, there will be chaos.

“There will be marches and processions of thousands, tens of thousands, in the streets,” he said. “Thousands of yeshiva students will fill up the jail cells. Military Police officers will be running around aimlessly in Bnei Brak. You’ll have a civilian uprising, pandemonium. Worst of all, those who are enlisting today will refuse to enlist en masse.”

Is this a threat from Yishai? Actually, it is more like a cry of desperation, or even a plea in the direction of Yair Lapid and his cohorts who are insisting on gaining a passage of legislation that would mandate military conscription for all citizens. Yishai is urging Lapid to engage in dialogue. He’s saying, “Yes to reform by mutual agreement, no to reform by dint of coercion.”

One of the reasons that the warnings being sounded by the ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, are growing more dire by the day is the astonishment at the seemingly temporary—and unlikely—alliance that has been formed between Lapid and Naftali Bennett. This is a worrying

development. It was alarming enough to prompt the most senior Torah sages in the ultra-Orthodox community to request a meeting with senior rabbis in the religious Zionist camp. The sages asked the rabbis to remind Bennett that these two streams of Judaism have shared values that are much more potent than the values shared between Bennett's Habayit Hayehudi faction and Lapid's Yesh Atid party.

"I saw the link between Bennett and Lapid," Yishai said. "Then I decided to appeal to the spiritual leadership [of religious Zionism]. The goal wasn't to form a single political bloc or to say, 'You should enter the coalition,' or 'Stay in the opposition with us.' This was motivated by a desire to preserve the world of Torah. There might be a situation in which they will be in the government, and we will be in the opposition. It doesn't really matter, despite the fact that when they entered the government without us, during the second Sharon government, they not only inflicted harm on the world of Torah but also on the Land of Israel by way of the Disengagement Plan."

"Despite everything, I didn't ask for any commitment whatsoever," he said. "I asked them to make sure that the world of Torah is not harmed, and that nobody takes it upon himself to decide who is removed from yeshiva study and who is not. Even if [the religious Zionists] enter the coalition, they best not make any deals that pertain to the world of Torah without our agreement."

Three days before the election, Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef labeled Habayit Hayehudi "goyim" and "infidels." Now you are begging them to help you. It's logical that they are disinclined to stand at your beck and call.

"Rabbi Ovadia is a giant in the world of Torah. He is on a higher plane than the rest of us, and there is no one who could explain him or apologize on his behalf. I spoke with the rabbi, and I heard his pain. He said that there is a party

known as Habayit Hayehudi ("Jewish home"), and that there are people there who want civil marriages and public transportation on the Sabbath, which is why it can't be called Habayit Hayehudi. He made those statements out of a sense of pain, but he didn't talk about the rabbis or the voters. He spoke about the principle of civil marriage and public transportation on the Sabbath. He was very fearful of the harm that could be inflicted on our traditions and Jewish identities," said Yishai.

The ultra-Orthodox' main bone of contention with Lapid's platform is mainly the manner in which it is presented. The semantics and public comments from Lapid's camp are highly problematic. In closed conversations, the ultra-Orthodox are discussing an increase in the number of conscripts for the military and national service. But Lapid's very blunt statement in which he remarked that the army will be the only one that determines who is conscripted into military service and who is not is a powder keg in ultra-Orthodox eyes. In their view, the issue of raising the quotas is potentially explosive, since it could limit their yeshiva students' options in pursuing a life of Torah study.

"The Jewish people have been persecuted for decades," Yishai said angrily. "What haven't we been forced to endure? Expulsion, inquisition, Holocaust. Still, despite all of this, we have an identity, and this is all due to our Torah. If this wasn't preserved in every corner of the world, we would have disappeared, erased just like the empires that disappeared. We came to the State of Israel. Yet, here, of all places, in a world in which there are no rules as to who studies Torah and who doesn't, here people want to put quotas. Such a thing is unprecedented, and it will not ever come to pass."

Yishai shifts the conversation to changes that are already taking place. "This concept of 'the ultra-Orthodox don't serve in the army' is nonexistent," he said. "The figures show that there are thousands who are waiting to enlist in national

service and the haredi Nahal infantry unit. There's even a huge influx of ultra-Orthodox youths going to college. Since the passage of the Tal Law, there's been a steady increase – and the percentages are climbing quickly–of ultra-Orthodox who are integrating into these frameworks. What happened, however, was that the quotas stipulated in the law by the state were never met because the treasury and the defense establishment did not take sufficient action to meet them.”

“The Defense Ministry doesn't want a lot of ultra-Orthodox soldiers in the army because it needs to make the necessary contingency plans and this costs a great deal of money,” Yishai said. “When the ultra-Orthodox public was offered a platform that met its needs as they pertained to kosher food, the presence of female soldiers, and the content of what they are taught, it agreed to go for it. This was mainly because this was done through agreement and consensus, not by coercion.”

Compromise Needed

Yishai goes to great lengths to point out another interesting tidbit. “Unlike the secular community, the ultra-Orthodox community is growing,” he said. “In ten years, the number of ultra-Orthodox and religious soldiers serving in the military will equal the number of secular conscripts.”

Note: The remainder of this article is a Q and A with Yishai.

IH: At the moment, however, you are at a disadvantage. We could have a government without the ultra-Orthodox, one that will approve Lapid's law exactly as it is written. Then what will happen?

Y: “If there is a government without the ultra-Orthodox, but one that finds a solution to the issue of universal conscription that is acceptable to the ultra-Orthodox, there won't be a problem. If this will be a government devoid of the ultra-Orthodox but one that wishes to impose its own solutions

on the ultra-Orthodox, then this will create deep divisions among the people. I've stated my willingness to sit in the opposition or to be in the coalition as a minister without portfolio just for the sake of preventing such a fissure."

IH: Will this fissure that you are warning of really resemble the scenario that you described at the beginning of the interview?

Y: "Yes. There is a likelihood of a civilian uprising, with protest marches erupting after every yeshiva student who is called to enlist is put in jail, jails overflowing with yeshiva students, and Military Police in Bnei Brak. Those who stand to gain from this are the extremists, who will say: 'You see? It's impossible to go along with the State of Israel. We need to oppose it.' Those who either enlisted or are thinking of enlisting will recant."

IH: What about the fissure that exists today? There are people who are obligated to serve in the army and others who are exempt.

Y: "This is our main problem. Because of these waves of incitement, we are unable to explain to people that the core group of Torah students is keeping the world afloat. Once the public gains a greater understanding of the significance of Torah study, it will understand that the students are soldiers in every sense of the word. Most of the public understands this. During the days of the Plesner committee, I met with Ehud Barak. We talked about the proposed conscription law just as we were entering the Prime Minister's Office. All of a sudden, a female worker walked by and told Barak, 'Leave him alone. Let him study Torah, it's no less important.'"

At this stage of the interview, Yishai goes on the offensive by lashing out at Lapid.

Y: "He's unwilling to hear anything we have to say," he said of the Yesh Atid chairman. "They've articulated their

platform, and that's that. They are stubborn. Someone needs to explain to them that the campaign is over, and that means it's time to put an end to the spin and the sloganeering. Now is the time to form a government. This is what distinguishes between a media figure and a politician, or, to be more exact, a politician and a leader. Lapid is the leader of a party that occupies 19 Knesset seats, so he needs to understand that caution is required when one considers the very delicate fault lines that run through Israeli society."

"Lapid needs to draw the appropriate conclusions by considering what happened to Kadima, which had 28 Knesset seats," he said. "Then it decided to bang its head against the wall by trying to attain universal conscription. If Lapid adopts an all-or-nothing approach, he will reserve a spot for himself in the Knesset archives. He'll crash and burn. If, on the other hand, he summons leadership, he will understand that compromise is what is needed, and he will acknowledge the importance of Torah study. Then there's a chance of accomplishing something really grand."

"If only Lapid knew of the real data that is available at the treasury and the Defense Ministry, he would change his mind," he said. "He should know that he is now the leader of a party."

IH: There are those in your party who said that Yair Lapid is more dangerous than his father.

Y: "I don't see any difference between Yair and Tommy," he said. "Tommy Lapid boasted loud and clear, 'I don't want Shas in the coalition.' Yair isn't saying that, but he is doing everything to make sure that this is what will happen. When it comes to his thoughts on the ultra-Orthodox, he is exactly like his father. I don't want to say more about a man who is no longer alive, but I do think that they have the exact same

philosophy.”

Despite the recent developments, Yishai believes that Shas will eventually join the government. “If Lapid refuses to compromise on anything, which is something that isn’t seen in politics, then we will either have a government with him and without us, or a government with us but without him. The prime minister needs to decide. We know that we lack the number of Knesset seats to make real threats. We’re no longer the kingmakers, but whoever wants a stable government needs to have Shas be a part of it.”

“A government without Shas has a short life span. A coalition without the ultra-Orthodox that includes the Likud, Habayit Hayehudi, Yesh Atid, Hatnuah, and Mofaz will fall within a year or two. You need to remember that we are talking about a second term for both [Benjamin] Netanyahu and [U.S. President Barack] Obama, and they will have to decide on diplomatic moves. Bennett will not agree with [Hatnuah chief Tzipi] Livni, so it will fall apart. You also have to keep in mind that Lapid is entering the government as a tactical ploy. He said that his goal is eventually to become prime minister.”

IH: You picked a fight with everyone. The “1800-CONVERSION” video inflicted harm on Lieberman and the Likud. Rabbi Ovadia slandered Habayit Hayehudi. Yair Lapid was your marked enemy from the beginning. Now, you’ve got a problem. You are courting those parties.

Y: “We’re not courting anyone. What happened during the elections needs to stay there. In every election campaign, there is an emphasis on putting your message into clearer focus and going for every vote you can get. Now we are in the stage of forming a coalition, and so there is a need to act accordingly. We apologized to those who were offended by the ‘1800-CONVERSION’ campaign ad. And I say to all the parties: Let’s leave the past behind. We are at a critical stage. Let’s see how we can move forward. This doesn’t stem from a demand

to enter the coalition, but rather it stems from an understanding that there has never been a more controversial issue on the negotiating table that will preoccupy the incoming government.”

IH: Shas officials speak of socio-economic gaps and ethnic discrimination, but the party has been a partner in ten of the past 11 governments in recent years. Still, it seems that there is no change for the better. Perhaps Shas is a part of the problem?

Y: “Shas has made exceptional contributions to reduce the socio-economic gaps that eventually benefited the Sephardi population, but there is still work to do,” he said. “During the only government in which we were not a part of, there was nothing that was left unharmed: single mothers, child stipends, the elderly, the disabled. There was awful devastation, and to this day we have been trying to rectify the damage. All of this happened the only time that Shas was not a part of the government. We are a concrete wall, and we minimize the damage.”

IH: Were you hurt by the return of Deri and the fact that you were removed from your position of party chairman?

Y: “On a personal level, it wasn’t easy. On a professional level, it was also difficult to make the transition from being the only chairman of the party who makes the key decisions on his own, to being one of a troika in which everyone is equal. I am a protégé of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, and this was the decision that he made.”

IH: Did you consider quitting?

Y: “My family told me, ‘This is an impossible situation. You should quit.’ I wouldn’t consider such a thing before talking it over with the rabbi. I came to the rabbi and told him that this was the advice I was receiving. He told me, ‘God forbid you would do such a thing.’ If it weren’t for the rabbi, I

would quit. If I were just 'Eli Yishai the politician,' I would quit. Since I'm a public servant, a servant to the rabbi, I cannot quit. This was my test. Any other politician would have quit in that situation, but I am subject to the opinions of the Torah."

Lapid refused to comment for this article.

"Shas is a natural, loyal partner," Yishai said. "With us, it will be a much more stable government."

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