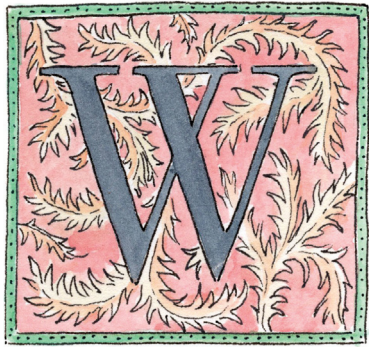


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The Unspoken Language of Israeli Politics

Understanding the Mizrahi vote



Y DO so many Mizrahim—Jews whose families came to Israel from the Middle East and North Africa—so fiercely reject Israel’s liberal Left? Why do voters who might seem to have the most to gain from its promises of equality and individual freedom remain among the most loyal

supporters of Likud and Israel’s broader Right?

The question echoes what the political commentator Thomas Frank, author of the 2004 bestseller *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, famously called the “great paradox” of American politics: Why do working-class voters so often embrace political movements that liberals assume they should reject? In Israel, the question has perplexed academics, social activists, and politicians on the Left for decades. Whoever ends up in the prime minister’s chair after the upcoming election, the Mizrahi vote will have played a decisive role in putting him there.

Long portrayed as a marginalized population, Israel’s Mizrahim

became a driving force in Israeli politics after propelling Menachem Begin and the Likud to power in 1977, an astonishing contrast to Israel's first 29 years, when they stood largely in the shadow of its Ashkenazi-dominated politics. During those initial decades, Israel was governed by the socialist Mapai party and its Eurocentric narrative of the country's founding: a nation rebuilt after millennia of exile and attempted assimilation that culminated in the Holocaust.

What this narrative always ignored — even long before it backfired, casting Israel as a settler-colonial project — was the equally formative story of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who were forced to flee Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Today, Mizrahim constitute the majority of Israel's Jewish population. They are diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, lifestyle, educational attainment, political views, and degrees of religiosity and traditionalism; and rates of intermarriage between educated Mizrahim and Ashkenazim are particularly high. Yet it is specifically the most socioeconomically disadvantaged among them — those living in development towns and underserved urban neighborhoods — who have shown a stronger overall tendency than Ashkenazim to support nationalist and religious parties. This pattern has puzzled and troubled social scientists, many themselves on the liberal Left, for decades. After all, if equality and freedom are universal goods, why would people on Israel's social and economic periphery reject a political agenda that supposedly advances their interests in favor of one that has traded Israel's collectivist principles of wealth distribution for those of the free market?



Much of the academic scholarship has attempted to answer this question in a remarkably consistent and inadequate way. Mizrahi support for the Right is rarely treated as anything other than

a political pathology, and never as a worldview that might reflect a different understanding of tradition, nationhood, religion, or solidarity. Instead, it is explained as a reaction to something else.

Marxist accounts, for example, have spoken of “false consciousness” or “structural marginality.” Mizrahim and Arabs, both concentrated near the bottom of the labor market, were forced to compete over scarce resources; hostility toward Arabs could therefore be understood as the predictable consequence of material circumstances. Another familiar explanation points to the failures of the Ashkenazi Left itself: Mizrahim turned to the Right because a Left that preached equality never truly treated them as equals.

The assumption, then, is revealing: Had the Ashkenazi Left truly opened its ranks to Mizrahim—welcoming them, treating them fairly, and accepting them as equals—disadvantaged Mizrahim would naturally have become leftists. In this telling, left-wing politics is the destination they would have reached under the correct, dare I say, natural conditions; their persistent allegiance to the political Right can therefore be explained only by something having gone wrong along the way. The possibility that they encountered the Left, understood what it stood for, and rejected it on substantive grounds—that they might hold a different conception of the good society—is rarely taken seriously.

Postcolonial scholars have offered a slightly different version of the story, emphasizing identity rather than class. In this account, the cultural dominance of “Ashkenazi Israeliness” encouraged Mizrahim to distance themselves from their Arab past and assert their Jewishness more forcefully. Here too, Mizrahi political choices are characterized as fundamentally reactive, something produced by pressure, exclusion, or the desire to escape a stigmatized identity.

The explanations differ, but they share an important premise: When disadvantaged Mizrahim reject the liberal-left agenda, their

choice is rarely allowed to stand on its own terms. It becomes a symptom — evidence of some deeper social injury, structural constraint, or failure of recognition. Their “real” interests lie somewhere else, visible to the scholar and invisible to Mizrahim themselves.

I was once asked by a journalist at a major newspaper: “Why do Mizrahim in the periphery vote against their own interests?”

“What are their interests?” I asked.

“Their economic interests,” he replied without hesitation.

But Mizrahim are hardly the only people who vote — or live — against their immediate economic interests. Many Jewish settlers, for example, embrace a pioneering ethos that explicitly places national commitments above material comfort. In doing so, they invoke a story Israelis know well: the Zionist pioneers who left comfortable homes in Europe to build communities, work the land, and drain swamps. We may agree or disagree with the values involved, but we generally understand that human beings sometimes place ideals above income.

The same is true, in a different way, of my friends on the Left, disproportionately privileged Ashkenazim who support redistributive policies that could work against their own economic interests. Yet nobody asks what social pathology has caused them to behave in an apparently irrational manner. Their politics are treated as the quintessential expression of an autonomous and unconstrained moral choice. They are seen as the very model of autonomous individuals who have examined the world, formed convictions, and chosen to act on them — and their choice is understood to be the “right” one. Indeed, their willingness to sacrifice some of their own material advantage is often taken as evidence of the nobility of their politics.

Disadvantaged Mizrahi voters are rarely granted the same moral credit. The possibility that they, too, might hold a coherent set of values — and that these values might genuinely differ from those of the secular liberal Left — is too often silenced.



This is more than a disagreement over how to explain voting behavior. It is a long-running chronicle of misrepresentation. One group is granted the dignity of political agency: Its members have convictions, make choices, and sometimes sacrifice their interests for their values. Another group is endlessly pathologized.

And that asymmetry matters. It shapes not only how Mizrahi politics is described but also the boundaries of what can be imagined as legitimate politics in the first place—within Israeli academia, in public debate, and well beyond Israel.

The persistence of this misrepresentation—exhibiting, as it does, the very same infantilizing logic from which it purports to liberate Mizrahim—in the face of decades of electoral consistency suggests that the paradox lies less in the Mizrahi political outlook itself than in the interpretive lenses through which it is viewed. Rather than reconsider their own assumptions about Mizrahim, much of the academic class has decided that the reason Mizrahim vote as they do is to be found in Mizrahim's supposedly skewed perception of themselves, of their core identity and place in Israeli society, of their own interests, and of the values they believe.

This is quite a distance from the truth. Mizrahim know quite well the country in which they live and the space they occupy within it. When presented with data and claims about how they have been marginalized by the very state they hold in such high esteem and to which they demonstrate fidelity, their fidelity does not waiver. Even when they clearly acknowledge past instances of blatant discrimination against Mizrahim, they do not harbor resentment toward the state. Instead, they perceive the injustices they have faced as part of the nation-building narrative of the Jewish people to whom they belong.

The liberal grammar of progressive politics and scholarship — which regards individual autonomy, equality, and universal reason as the sole authentic human values — cannot account for this alternative narrative so engrained in the psyche of Israel's most populous constituency. And the fact that it cannot do so reflects a fundamental limitation at the heart of progressivism: its failure to acknowledge the political power of belonging.

The sense of belonging and rootedness that Mizrahim feel in the Land and the State of Israel is so strong that it overpowers the experience of marginalization some Israeli Mizrahim readily recall. It serves as both the foundation of the Mizrahi collective self and a prism through which to understand the core question animating the Israeli body politic as a whole: Who are we, and what makes Israel ours?

Motti Ohana, one of the most influential members of the Likud Central Committee, the party's internal apparatus, explained it succinctly to *Ha'aretz* in 2024:

My choice of Likud, and my being in Likud, is a whole identity system. Netanyahu never harmed the most important thing, the essence that makes us go with him. If he harms my Jewish identity, which is the most important thing for me, then, thanks very much and goodbye. . . . Netanyahu is preserving the state's Jewish features.

This is what the three political camps (Likud, the National Religious, and the Haredim) of Netanyahu's governing coalition have in common: their preservation of Israel's Jewish character. Each of these camps contains its fair share of Mizrahim, including, of course, Itamar Ben-Gvir, but what they share more fundamentally is a Jewish language, an unshakeable ethos and belief that Israel belongs to the West but also to the Jews, to the long span of Jewish history and tradition. It is this fundamental commitment to Jewishness, more than

to any political platform or policy, that draws Mizrahi political allegiance across socioeconomic lines. To quote Ohana again: “I am not a liberal and I’m not a conservative, but a Jew.”

Ohana’s sentiment is characteristic of Mizrahi Likudniks, most of whom are democrats without qualification, including when it comes to the civil rights of Israel’s Arab minority. They lead largely secular lives while attaching considerable importance to preserving the authority and status of religious Orthodoxy. Even the religiously less observant venerate rabbinic figures such as Ovadia Yosef, a veneration that extends to other Ashkenazi Orthodox rabbis as well, and that reflects a commitment to safeguarding an older, sanctified form of Judaism they don’t strictly practice. They value the existence of a community that maintains religious tradition and Orthodox authority on their behalf, without feeling compelled to adopt an Orthodox way of life themselves. This vicarious religiosity has no true analogue in Ashkenazi secularity and permits great flexibility and openness to changing social realities and liberal ways of life. Consider, for example, Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana, one of Likud’s most popular figures and a powerful force in the party’s Central Committee. Ohana is openly gay and lives with his partner, a Mizrahi high-tech professional. The two appear publicly with their children at official state ceremonies, sometimes broadcast live on national television—to the evident discomfort of Likud’s Haredi partners, who have learned to swallow the “bitter pill.”

Coexisting with this liberality is a profound allegiance to the Jewish people; to an ancient Jewish tradition understood as the historical and conceptual root of Zionism, linking the present to an unbroken chain of Jewish history; and to the State of Israel, seen as the embodiment of the Jewish people’s liberation and return to sovereignty in the land of their ancestors. Their attachment to the Israel Defense Forces, regarded by many with an almost sacred reverence, belongs to the same moral world.

This deeper disposition has largely escaped the notice of liberal scholars, progressive and socialist alike, who have continued to view Mizrahim primarily as a marginalized “minority group,” a category analogous to Arabs or migrant workers, or to Hispanics, Asians, and blacks in the United States: universal citizens competing for equal opportunity within a neutral state. But this framework misses something fundamental about the way in which many Mizrahim understand their place in Israel. They do not see themselves simply as one group among others seeking its fair share from the state; they understand themselves as deeply rooted in the Jewish collective of which the state itself is an expression. The failure to grasp this distinction has produced a long history of misrepresentation, with far-reaching consequences for Israel’s public and political discourse.



Likud-supporting Mizrahim are not the only group within Israel’s Jewish population whose identity can be described in terms of rootedness. Ashkenazi Haredim, for example, also understand themselves as belonging to a sacred Jewish whole. But their rootedness is enclosed within, and bounded by, the religious-Jewish world, with the sacred Torah of Israel and Judaism as the ultimate source of authority. The Jewish whole to which they belong was born in ancient, mythic time; the Zionist moment of national rebirth, by contrast, is regarded as something of an accident along the way.

Religious Zionists, like Likud-supporting Mizrahim, connect mythic Jewish time with Zionist time. Unlike the Haredim, however, they seek to fuse the two—to absorb mythic time into the Zionist present and, in doing so, redefine the political center for everyone.

For many months before October 7, thousands of protesters marched on Kaplan Street in Tel Aviv in response to the government’s judicial

overhaul. These protesters, too, in seeking to reclaim the state as their own, speak in the name of an imagined collective. But theirs is a collective born in Zionist time. Zionism, it is worth remembering, was not only a modern national movement; it was also a project of identity formation. Its dominant secular current sought to create a new Jew in the spirit of the Enlightenment: secular, rational, educated, Western, liberated from the constraints of religion and tradition. He would be the ideal citizen of a Western liberal democracy and free-market society. The secularism characteristic of this group does not necessarily entail a rejection of Jewish identity or a detachment from Judaism. Many of these protesters retain a strong connection to Judaism; after all, Zionism itself emerged from such an attachment. What they have always opposed is the institutionalization of any religious Orthodox authority over matters of state and the public sphere. Theirs is a form of open, republican rootedness, grounded in a civic code of membership in the political community, a social contract, and an understanding of “Israeliness” shaped by secular reason. Its political language is a civic one that finds its clearest expression in an abiding faith in the democratic order and its institutions, foremost among them the institution accorded an almost sacred status: the Supreme Court. This is why the debate over judicial reform was so contentious. To the liberal Left, the judicial reform posed an existential threat to Israel’s civic character.

A particularly stark expression of the divide came in the form of a well-known speech by artist and left-wing activist Yair Garbuz, who disparagingly referred to traditionalist Mizrahi Israelis as “amulet kissers.” The polarization on display here exhibits the inherent tension among competing forms and languages of Jewish and Israeli belonging. Seen in this light, the failure of the liberal academy to understand Mizrahi political behavior is therefore identical to the Israeli Left’s failure to change it: a failure to speak in the same language of belonging.

The upcoming election will be decided in this language and will, in no small part, be a contest for the Mizrahi vote, less between Left and Right but *within* the Right. Netanyahu's governing coalition of the Right is composed precisely of the groups who did not quite fit liberal Zionism's original vision of a secular Jewish identity—the religious and the traditionalist Mizrahim. Beyond being a referendum on Netanyahu himself, as every Israeli election has been for the past decade, this one will center on one matter of public policy, the only issue powerful enough to break a coalition of the political and religious Right: Haredi conscription.

The topic is itself a flashpoint for the competing forms of rootedness and belonging, and for all its supposed sophistication, the Left still fails to address it in terms that will resonate with traditionalist Mizrahim, namely in the language of rootedness. When the Left speaks of Haredi conscription, it does so in terms of social contract, which is to say, its civic language of secular liberalism.

This might appeal to secular voters whose sense of Israeliness accords with the liberal grammar, but it fails to speak to Mizrahim whose connection to the State of Israel and the Jewish people is pre-contractual. Even those who support legislation for Haredi enlistment, who believe that the Haredim should share in the burden of national service, hold reverence for the idea of Torah study and Jewish practice as markers of Jewish identity and belonging, a reverence that the Israeli Left does not share. In the language of rootedness and belonging, the problem is not that the Haredim are breaking a social contract. It's that they are insufficiently involved in the urgent needs of the Jewish people.

The policy question at the heart of this election is therefore a microcosm of a deeper divide running through Israeli society as a whole. Not a simple divide between secular and religious or individual life choices but about the character of the state. Is Israel defined

primarily by a civic code—membership in the political community called Israel—or by a Jewish code that precedes Israeliness and defines the boundaries of the collective self?

In an era of intensifying polarization, in Israel and beyond, these competing anxieties have become increasingly acute. The Kaplan protesters who demonstrated (before October 7) against the judicial reform and (after October 7) for a hostage deal fear for Israel's future as a liberal democracy; Likud voters, by contrast, fear for the future of Israel as a Jewish state. Polarization magnifies both fears, but beneath them lies a more fundamental question that has never gone away: What should ultimately define the Israeli collective—the Jewish principle or the liberal-secular Israeli one?

At the time of this writing, two prominent Mizrahi figures are challenging Netanyahu from the center-Left and the Left: Gadi Eisenkot, the most prominent Mizrahi contender in the opposing camp, and Naama Lazimi, an increasingly influential Mizrahi politician who was elected to the No. 2 position on the slate of Yair Golan's Zionist left-wing party.

But for Mizrahi voters of Likud and the broader Right, the crucial question is not the ethnic origins of these candidates. It is where they locate themselves on Israel's identity map. What matters is not their Mizrahiness as such. What matters is: Which language of belonging will they speak? *

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