

EARLY INCIDENTS OF RELIGIOUS-SECULAR CONFLICT

THE “TEHERAN CHILDREN” AFFAIR

About seven years prior to the appointment of the Frumkin Commission, during World War II and the Holocaust, the attention of Jews in Eretz Israel and abroad was engaged by what came to be known as “The Teheran Children Affair.” Who were the “Teheran Children”? As a result of the Stalin–Sikorski agreement signed in 1942, it was hoped that several thousand Jewish orphans from Poland who had fled to the Soviet Union during the early phase of the war would be able to leave the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), via Iran, and be brought to Palestine.¹

On the eve of the children’s arrival in Eretz Israel, the Mapai Secretariat discussed where they should be absorbed. Arye Bahir, a member of Kibbutz Afikim, proposed that “the children first of all be divided among the workers’ collective farms [i.e., *kibbutzim* or *moshavim**], because we need to attend to the social character of the operation; these are the young vanguard of the Diaspora in Eretz Israel.” Pinhas Lubianiker (Lavon) added: “The main role of the *Histadrut** and of the party [i.e., Mapai] is organized absorption of the children, which will allow for supervision of their education and provide hope for their full absorption into the life of the country.” Ya’akov Uri, of Moshav Nahalal, was of a similar opinion: “For me these children are not only an object for rescue, but also one of the cornerstones of our future.” Not everyone shared his view. During that same discussion there were those who thought differently, expressing fear of what the future might

hold. Yona Kosoy said: "We should not monopolize. . . . There will be a political complication of the first order. . . . General registration within the entire *Yishuv** [all of whose sectors will wish to adopt the refugee children] is essential."² About two weeks later, Ben-Gurion, at the time chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and leader of Mapai, once more raised the question of the anticipated problems related to the children's religious education. In a second discussion of the issue in Mapai, he said: "It will be difficult to obtain the agreement [of religious circles in Eretz Israel and abroad] that they be immediately brought up as atheists. On the other hand, we cannot forego having them educated in our settlements. This confronts us with an extremely serious question. We have seen how the [nonreligious] settlements resolved the problem of their own [religiously observant] parents by establishing synagogues and kosher kitchens. . . . We must find a solution by which the children will go to our settlements, while simultaneously meeting the demands of religion."³ I shall discuss below at greater length the policy adopted by Ben-Gurion, who did not compromise on educating toward the values of the Labor movement, but at the same time refused to enter into a head-on confrontation with religious circles and their values.

The first 1,228 refugee children from Teheran arrived in Palestine on 18 February 1943.⁴ Of these children and youth, 719 were placed in various frameworks of *Youth Aliya**—primarily secular settlements—and it was this that gave rise to the protest that later became an "affair."⁵ A delegation appeared before Henrietta Szold, then head of Youth Aliya, demanding that education of the Teheran Children be entrusted entirely to religious circles. Its members threatened that should their request be rejected, the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog would turn to "all those who put on phylacteries daily, to all women who light Sabbath candles, and even to those who attend the synagogue only on Yom Kippur" to launch a struggle for religious education of these children. Rabbi Herzog hinted that he would not hesitate to address international bodies as well to pressure the Jewish Agency Executive to alter its policy.⁶

After a few months, in the wake of the harsh public controversy between religious and secular circles, Ben-Gurion and his colleagues were forced to agree to the appointment of a commission of clarification to deal with the Teheran Children issue. The commission was initially composed of Yitzhak Gruenbaum, Dr. Werner Senator, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fishman (Maimon), and members of the Jewish Agency's Immigration Department. However, after a further public uproar and complaints that it was inconceivable that those responsible for immigration "investigate themselves," a new commission of three was appointed by the court of the Zionist Congress in the spring of 1943, consisting of attorney Shmuel Ussishkin, Dr. Yeshayahu Wolfsberg (Avida), and Dr. Shmuel Friedman. The commission was charged with collecting testimony about whether acts of anti-religious coercion had in fact been committed regarding these children and pre-

senting the leadership of the Jewish Agency with its conclusions regarding a suitable educational framework for the Teheran Children. In the summer of 1943, after about two and a half months, the commission presented its report which concluded, in brief, that the severe accusations regarding treatment of the Teheran Children were unjustified, though nevertheless noting that “the majority of the youth leaders were not religiously observant. They showed no interest in developing a religious aura and lifestyle in the children’s house, and did not evince any initiative in this direction.” Furthermore, there were youth leaders who interfered with the prayers of their charges, did not bother to provide them with kosher food, and more.⁷

Even as the commission of clarification was being appointed, attempts were made by the Jewish Agency Executive to arrive at compromises regarding the practical problems of educating the children who had reached Teheran, particularly regarding educational frameworks for those who had already been brought to Eretz Israel. In the spring of 1943, Youth Aliya set certain guidelines according to which “each child should be educated in a manner compatible with the atmosphere in his parents’ home.” It was likewise stated that “children from the age of 14 up will be afforded the right to decide for themselves the kind of religious education they wish to receive.” Actually, 124 of the first group of Teheran Children had been orphaned of both parents.⁸ For them—especially the younger ones—it was difficult to remember their family background. In other cases, there were those who were “convinced” to transfer to a secular framework; in practice, the guidelines set down were not really strictly observed. Actually, there were dozens of cases of children from religious backgrounds who were transferred to secular educational frameworks, especially in secular kibbutzim. In the final analysis, even Youth Aliya officials admitted that “in 93 cases there were appeals concerning the place [of absorption], and it turned out that there had been mistakes. In 27 cases the appeals were justified.”⁹

It should be noted that the Teheran Children affair involved tension not only between the religious and secular camps but also between the two religious movements, *Hamizrachi** and *Agudat Israel*.¹⁰ Agudat Israel strongly protested the transfer of children from religious families to Hamizrachi institutions, demanding that half of the children be educated in their own institutions.¹¹ In fact, 278 of the Teheran Children were sent to Hamizrachi institutions, while only forty were transferred to ultra-Orthodox ones.¹² Hamizrachi, for its part, accused Agudat Israel of attempting “to seduce children among those who came from Teheran and others to switch over to Agudat Israel,”¹³ protesting against such attempts and warning that “we cannot under any circumstances accept such interference with our work.”¹⁴ Meeting with Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levin, the political leader of Agudat Israel, Ben-Gurion openly told him that it was incumbent upon himself and all Zionists to safeguard good relations first and foremost with Hamizrachi, since

that movement supported Zionism, while other religious circles opposed it. Ben-Gurion emphasized that he wished to tighten cooperation with Agudat Israel as well—but not at the expense of Hamizrachi.¹⁵

Rabbis Isaac Herzog and Ben-Zion Ouziel (the Ashkenazic and Sephardic *chief rabbis*,* respectively) were very much involved in the “Teheran Children affair,” and it was they who to a great extent fanned the fires of conflict. Rabbi Herzog was the more insistent of the two. At a meeting on 24 June 1943, between representatives of the Jewish Agency Executive and the Chief Rabbinate, he said: “It is incumbent upon the people of Israel to care for those children who have come here without parents. They are a pledge entrusted to the people; they do not belong to one party or another. . . . The Israelite nation is a religious nation. . . . There is no suitable education for these children other than a religious one, such as we received from our fathers.” His unequivocal conclusion was that, “There is one absolute authority in matters of religion, namely, the Chief Rabbinate, and it is the Chief Rabbinate that is responsible for religious education.”¹⁶ About a week later, Rabbi Herzog sent a personal, handwritten letter to Ben-Gurion, in which he condemned secular education as being “heretical and rowdy . . . that will ultimately dry the roots of our national life from within, and deny [the nation] those powers by virtue of which it has existed for thousands of years.” Herzog demanded that Ben-Gurion apply the full power of his influence and acquiesce to “the voice from above,” and “make tremendous efforts to save, at least, those tens of thousands of refugee children who are yet to come . . . that they not be caught up in the surge of secularism, but grow up as a healthy and health-giving element, in the spiritual and moral sense.”¹⁷

Ben-Gurion’s files do not contain a reply; one may assume that none was written, perhaps to not stir up further controversy. Since Ben-Gurion expressed his own principled position in all of the discussions, he felt no need to respond directly to the religiously zealous letter of Rabbi Herzog. His position contained several basic principles from which he was unwilling to back down: (1) There are different beliefs and principles within the Jewish people. “I have no common language with those who claim that the Israelite nation is only the Jewish religion.” (2) A non-religious Jew is not a “deformed Jew.” Secular circles also have principles and are prepared to fight for them “to their very souls.” (3) One must avoid fraternal warfare, because “Judaism cannot exist without Jews.” (4) The way to prevent fraternal warfare is acceptance by all of the rules of mutual respect and the principles of not imposing either secularism or religiosity. (5) Every decision must be reached by a majority. One must emphasize “the rule of the people and not the rule of the rabbis.”¹⁸

Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ouziel, somewhat less militant than Rabbi Herzog, stated: “We have not said that we specifically wish to raise the children in the *yeshiva*;* we will send them to religious kibbutzim. We do not insist that they

come and pray like us every day, but that they should observe the Sabbath, that they should know that there is such a thing as prayer, that a Jew prays to God, and does not turn away from his God.”¹⁹ When dealing in a later chapter with the controversy over the education of children who came in the mass immigration of 1948–1951, we shall once again encounter the forcefulness of these chief rabbis and again distinguish between the more powerful demands of Rabbi Herzog and the more moderate position of Rabbi Ouziel.

When all of the controversies had ended, it turned out that far fewer children than had been anticipated were rescued via Teheran. The great hope of saving a myriad of refugee children from the Holocaust was not to materialize, and the debate over their education remained an open wound, mainly ideological in character.

From then on, the affair of the Teheran Children was to become a symbol for the ultra-Orthodox public. Years later, one of their members would write that “like the *Cantonists** in their day, these children too will serve in the history of Israel as a symbol of terrible spiritual and physical destruction.”²⁰ “Teheran Children” has since then become a concept and slogan for ultra-Orthodox Jewry in its struggle with secular Jews who, it was claimed, wished “to distance the nation from the authority of the Divine Torah.”²¹ It was repeatedly argued in ultra-Orthodox circles that these children “were forcibly stripped of the ornaments of their faith in the God of Israel and His Torah; they were forced to deny their Judaism and educated to a life of lawless impiety.”²²

THE AFFAIR OF THE YEMENITE CHILDREN DURING WORLD WAR II

From the very beginnings of immigration from Yemen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was claimed that the veteran Yishuv was “spoiling” the Yemenite immigrants and interfering with their religiosity.²³ In late 1943 and early 1944, various religious personalities complained of “a new affair involving immigration, worse than that of the Teheran Children.” This time the issue was the absorption of some 4,500 immigrants from Yemen, who had arrived during the period 1942–1944, and acts of anti-religious coercion committed against them.²⁴ Religious circles demanded an “authorized examination and investigation by the Jewish Agency Executive whose conclusions will be made public.”²⁵ As early as November 1943, Moshe Glickman-Porush, of Agudat Israel, wrote in the ultra-Orthodox *Kol Yisrael*: “When the ‘Teheran Children’ arrived in the Land of Israel a great row was aroused concerning them, and everyone felt that an extraordinary injustice had been done to these children, in that they were given over into unreliable hands. This week [the Yemenite children] came to the Land of Israel . . . and thus far no one has heard of any effort on behalf of these

children.”²⁶ In January 1944, an instructor in a Yemenite *yeshiva* wrote in *Hatzofe*, the newspaper of Hamizrachi, that an instructor in an immigrant camp “between Karkur and Kfar Pines” had mocked the prayer of the Yemenites, that he “conducts anti-religious propaganda among them,” and that he “shaved off their *payot* [sidelocks] with a razor . . . saying: ‘in the Land of Israel one needs to be clean like soldiers, and it’s not fit to grow *payot* as in the Diaspora.’”²⁷ *Kol Yisrael* quoted the report from *Hatzofe*, adding: “A second edition of the ‘Teheran Children affair’ is in the making. . . . This is not a matter of ‘affairs,’ neither of the ‘affair’ of Teheran or that of ‘Yemen,’ but of a systematic uprooting of what is most precious and sacred to our people from our holy land, of a war against religion, an anti-religious inquisition.”²⁸ About two weeks later *Hatzofe* reported in a similar vein that there were those in the immigrant camp near Karkur who “strive to completely uproot the religiosity of the new immigrants,” and that the camp had “become the site of inquisition for immigrants from Yemen.”²⁹ The religious press became filled with headlines and news stories phrased in an extremely pained, aggressive style, such as: “Abuse of the Religious Sentiments of the Immigrants”; “He Who Goes to Prayer Is Expelled”³⁰; “Insulting and Offensive Attitude to Religious Immigrants Regarding *Kashrut** at the Karkur Camp”³¹; “Youth Leaders from *Hashomer Hatzair** Snatch Up the Souls of the Olim Like Beasts of Prey”³²; “Histadrut members must be clearly told. . . . Do not ensnare innocent and ingenious youngsters in order to distance them from religious life and observance of the Torah and the commandments. This is a shocking crime [tantamount to] kidnapping. ‘Do not harm My anointed ones!’”³³; “Oppression of Yemenite Children”³⁴; “They Cut Off *Payot*, Don’t Allow Them to Pray, Feed Them Non-Kosher Food”³⁵; “Parents [who wished to send their children to a kindergarten of *Hapoel Hamizrachi**] were threatened that their furnishings would be taken away, and they would even be denied work”³⁶; and “The Scandal of the Oppression of Jewish Children.”³⁷

In February 1944—following political pressure by all of the religious circles—an investigating committee was sent to the camp in Karkur. Its members, who belonged to the Association of Yemenites—a movement that had officially joined the Histadrut one month earlier—declared: “Rumors and published accounts that . . . [the Yemenites] have been coerced into shaving off their sidelocks or have been fed non-kosher meat are completely unfounded.” The committee, however, noted that the Yemenites “are in great need of a spiritual mentor who will visit them regularly to teach them and encourage them [to live] in the spirit of religion.” Its members also stated that there was a need for a Yemenite cook, holy books, and religious artifacts.³⁸

In April 1944, Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan), leader of Hamizrachi, demanded of Ben-Gurion that the investigating committee’s conclusions refuting charges of anti-religious coercion in the immigrant camps be made public, but

Ben-Gurion evaded this call, and in fact refused their publication.³⁹ Apparently Ben-Gurion was aware of the fact that despite the report exonerating those involved with the immigrants from all guilt, there was nevertheless at least some partial basis to the claims. A letter written on his behalf to those engaged in the absorption of Yemenite immigrants at the same period read in part: "Comrade Ben-Gurion wishes to know who appoints the instructors for these camps. Is it not possible nevertheless to provide them [the Yemenites] with instructors in their own spirit?"⁴⁰ This is another instance of the policy that would characterize Ben-Gurion several years later: he did not want to exacerbate the conflict between the religious and secular public, but he wished to attract the new immigrants to his party and its ideology by friendly means, as much as possible without coming into conflict with their basic lifestyle.

Religious circles, however, did not cease to complain about the absorption of Yemenite Jews. On 20 April 1944, Rabbi Yihya Netanel Alchech wrote to Ben-Gurion: "Does not your hair stand on edge when you hear the cries of the immigrants, who are upset and agitated by what is being done to them in the spheres of religion and education?"⁴¹ Ben-Gurion does not seem to have replied. On the other hand, the Histadrut published responses to complaints of religious coercion on billboards throughout the country. Thus, for example, the Secretariat of the Workers Council of Herzliya informed that city's residents: "It has been brought to our attention that certain circles have begun inciting against the Histadrut . . . regarding the handling of the Yemenite immigration. . . . The immigrants from Yemen, both veterans and newcomers, know very well who truly cares for them and who exploits their distress to stir up controversy and conflict."⁴²

The fact that the wave of immigration from Yemen was limited and came to an end in mid-1944 while the religious camp was divided and limited in influence enabled the Labor movement to ward off the charges. The fact that all of this was happening during World War II, when there was great public concern for the fate of European Jewry, likewise affected matters. Notwithstanding the complaints, the absorption process of the religious immigrants from Yemen—conducted mostly by secular Jews, almost all of whom were members of the Labor movement—did not change as a result of the criticism and controversy. Some of these Yemenite immigrants remained in the camps until after the establishment of the State of Israel, and the policy of cultural absorption remained unchanged: to try to integrate them into the Land of Israel "melting pot."