

NEWS REPORT

NRP shake-up spells end to Labour illusion

LAST WEEK'S vote in the National Religious Party, which made the Sephardi religious fundamentalist and political hardliner, Avner Shaki, number one in its list of candidates for the forthcoming Knesset elections in place of Ashkenazi fence-straddler Zevulun Hammer, was not a particularly revolutionary event.

Rather, it was a mere reaffirmation of the trends that have been guiding the erstwhile mainline Orthodox party for the past 11 years and more. The major changes that have altered the face of the party occurred in the early and mid-1970s.

Throughout Israel's first 20-25 years, the NRP was the main party representing Israel's Orthodox minority in the Knesset, and the only one representing its religious interests at cabinet level. Its traditional leaders were masters at the game of intelligent small-party politics.

During the first eight elections to the Knesset, the results made it unfeasible for anyone except Labour — or its predecessor, Mapai — to form a government coalition. There was thus simply no possibility of a religious party playing off Labour against the Likud.

The alternatives available to the NRP were either to go along with Labour or to stay out of the government altogether, for the right-wing opposition was still too small during those long years to form an alternative coalition government.

In that strategic situation, the NRP opted for the sacred principle of never staying outside the government, as the more fundamentalist, ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael had done since 1950.

Instead, it made sure that its coalition demands were concentrated entirely in the religious sphere. The NRP became acceptable as the most convenient coalition partner for Labour by never making demands in the fields of diplomatic, military, or economic policy.

Even in the field of religious policy, the pragmatic NRP leadership played a double game. It insisted on far-reaching concessions from Labour during coalition negotiations, but never put too much pressure on the resulting coalition government to ensure that Labour actually kept all, or even most of its promises.

In that sense, the old NRP was a fitting partner for professional Labour politicians such as Levi Eshkol, among whose many notable quips was: "True, I promised; but I never promised to keep my promises."

It was not an approach that was likely to ingratiate the pragmatic, compromise-prone, NRP leadership in the eyes of a more true-believing party rank and file, and certainly not in the eyes of a younger generation of Bnei Akiva youth movement graduates, who grew up chafing under the demeaning perception that their elders were selling out cynically to the Labour Party.

It was an approach, however, that was largely responsible for keeping religious-secular tensions during those early years from reaching boiling point, as they have been threatening to do in recent years.

One of the main results of the internal upheaval in the NRP may well be to aggravate those tensions, which were beginning to loom as one of the country's most serious domestic problems before the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in December.

From the early 1970s onwards, the NRP abandoned its original strategy, and made the issue of the

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Yosef Goell

eventual annexation of the occupied territories of the "Greater Land of Israel" and their settlement by Israelis a central tenet of its platform.

One of the conditions it squeezed out of Golda Meir for participating in her last coalition government was a promise that no territorial concessions would be made in Judea and Samaria without previously submitting the issue to a national referendum or going to early elections.

By 1977 the NRP's stand on that issue had brought it around to swapping its 42-year alliance with Labour

for a partnership with the Likud. It is usually forgotten today, but it was that decision by the NRP, and not merely the election results, which made Menachem Begin and not Shimon Peres prime minister in 1977.

The NRP remained loyal to that new alliance even after Begin was replaced by Shamir in 1983. But that alliance did not serve the party well. Over the last three elections it was cut down from the 12 seats it held traditionally to a demeaning four. Many of its voters went over to Abuhatzra's Sephardi Tami in 1981, and to Tehiya and the Likud itself.

In the Likud coalitions, too, the whittled-down NRP was relegated to playing second fiddle on religious issues to the Aguda and the new

upstart, Shas.

There is little chance that under the new leadership of Shaki, Gush Emunim's Hanan Porat and the number five in the NRP's list, the militant Sephardi, Yitzhak Levi, the NRP will recoup any of its electoral losses of the last few elections.

It is doubtful whether many religious voters motivated by issues of religious fundamentalism will choose even the new NRP over Shas or Aguda; or that those who are moved primarily by the single issue of the future of the Greater Land of Israel will choose the NRP over Tehiya.

The NRP has apparently been relegated for quite some time to being a small sectarian party, as the Aguda has been all along. Despite

much of the political commentary, last week's triumph of Shaki, Porat and Levy over Hammer and Yehuda Ben-Meir does not create a new problem for the Labour Party. The problem was there all along. For, despite Shimon Peres's pandering to the religious parties over the last 10 years they are as firmly ensconced as ever in the Likud orbit.

Yosef Burg and Zevulun Hammer clearly opted to have their party counted in the Likud camp in the political stand-off that emerged from the July 1984 elections.

The belief among some Labour leaders that the NRP was prepared to return to its historic alliance with Labour was an extreme example of wishful thinking in politics.

FORUM

The great battle for ownership of 'Hotel West Bank'

The 20-year 'weekend'

Jonathan Immanuel

TEN MONTHS after the Six Day War drove off Hebron's traditional tourist trade, local hotelier Faye Kawasmeh took a phone call from a man inquiring about a three-day vacation. It was a call he wishes he had never answered.

Within two days of the Levinger family's arrival on April 9, 1968, nine other families and many more singles joined them for the Pessah seder at the graceful, flower-decked Park Hotel on the outskirts of Hebron.

Although they could not eat the hotel's food, they liked the place so much that they booked for another three days. On the sixth day Minister Yigal Allon visited and told them they were "privileged to be the first to revive the Jewish community of the city of the Patriarchs, the cradle of the nation."

Kawasmeh, who was used to receiving VIPs in pre-Six Day War days, thought Allon's visit would be good publicity. But Kawasmeh feared the Israeli occupation of his hotel was becoming more than a holiday jaunt when his guests moved in desks and chairs on the ninth day to set up a schoolroom for their children. "I cut off the electricity and water and demanded that the Israeli military governor throw them out."

In retrospect the battle of the Park Hotel can be seen as the beginning of the great battle to decide who will be proprietor of the Hotel West Bank-Judea and Samaria. Kawasmeh's closure of the Park Hotel to tourists since 1969 might be considered the longest-running commercial strike in the administered territories.

Rabbi Levinger never left Hebron. The 10 families were transferred to the compound of the Israeli military governor and fought from there for the undeniable justice of their demand to live in a city in which Jews had lived continuously until Arabs massacred 65 and chased out the others in 1929.

In 1968, Levi Eshkol's government favoured retaining the Hebron area, but there was no established Israeli settlement policy. The Allon Plan was in its first draft and Gush Emunim came into being only six years later. To prevent a confrontation in Hebron's old Jewish quarter where Arabs now lived, the government built Kiryat Arba. In September 1971, Rabbi Levinger left the military compound with his followers to move into the first permanent Jewish housing there.

Today, Kiryat Arba is a 4,000-strong community with its own winery and its own hotel. The Jewish quarter has been restored and Gush Emunim has been instrumental in setting up 125 new communities in Judea and Samaria, housing 65,000 Israelis.

But as Amos said: "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria."

AS PALESTINIANS enter the fifth month of their *intifada*, the settlers are beginning to feel insecure and in the hard, dry confrontation, a spark can ignite a blaze as the attack on hiking youths from Eilon Moreh showed. In Beita, 14 houses were destroyed. Yet the guilt, or stupidity, of a settler will not be punished. Another village will be radicalized. Yet there are differences among the settlers, which Palestinians hope to

exploit, as there also are differences among the Palestinians, as the Beita incident showed, which Israelis seem to exploit so poorly.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, spiritual leader of Efrat, a community of 2,000 in the rocky green hillside of Gush Etzion between Bethlehem and Hebron, believes it is now necessary to reaffirm in this land of all lands, that the true owner is neither Jew nor Palestinian, but God. "It is a divine command and a historical necessity that we live here. But we have to reach out to the Arabs and to live in the land as their cousins, perhaps even as their brothers, certainly not as their rulers," he says. Politicians must translate this religious insight into a political solution.

Efrat stands out from a distance as a prosperous cluster of red-roofed houses. Its housing is among the



Levinger: from hotel guest to 'proprietor of Hebron.' (Zamir)

most expensive in the West Bank which undermines its moral authority in the eyes of more militant settlers. In Kiryat Arba, Efrat is considered too laid back, almost as ignorant of Arabs as shopkeepers on Dizengoff Street.

In Ofra, where the seat of Gush Emunim is located, in Sebastia near Nablus, where the first settlers slept on the floor of an ancient synagogue, or in Kiryat Arba where the first settlers slept in army barracks, the name of the game is not coexistence, but ownership. With the best will in the world, Gush Emunim supporters are unable to recognize Palestinian claims as equal to their own.

"The Palestinians have to be patient," says Arie, a soft-spoken tailor aged 57 who has lived in Kiryat Arba from its inception and like so many Gush Emunim settlers prefers to keep his last name from journalists.

"They have problems, but I tell them Israelis have problems too. The older generation know it's good here, better than in other Arab countries. That's why they stay. If the younger ones are not satisfied they can demand change, within the law. If they break the law they should be rehabilitated in prison."

IF ARIEH were an Israeli talking about Israeli Arabs, his statement would be sound. But, he is talking

about a non-democratic military regime with its different laws for Israelis and Palestinians as though it is perfectly reasonable and democratic. He has accepted political inequality as a norm.

The new management does not understand why the Palestinians who partly managed a three-star hotel called the West Bank with Jordan until 1967, should be impatient with the Jewish management which is turning it into a five-star hotel called Judea and Samaria in which Palestinians will be honoured guests with every right to place their complaints in a little suggestion box if they feel uncomfortable.

To Gush Emunim, the Palestinians are guests who came long after Hebron was sold in perpetuity to Abraham. "If you don't like it here no one is forcing you to stay," is true enough, but a callous remark to make even if you are a hotel manager.

Arie is proud of the service he provides. "I had six Arabs working for me in a stitching shop here. Now they all have their own shops and their own villas," he says.

Faye Kawasmeh has also adjusted and done well. He started a bus line which takes hundreds of Arab guest workers to Jerusalem every day. Many of them help to maintain Jerusalem's new hotels and restaurants which have taken tourist business away from Hebron.

His business helped to finance a fine home he built five years ago behind the Park Hotel. He is many times wealthier and more leisured than Arie in his three-room Kiryat Arba apartment. In the Judea and Samaria Hotel there are more colour TV sets than there have ever been.

Yet the wealthiest Palestinian has fewer rights than the poorest Israeli there.

Kawasmeh said he was administratively detained in 1969 for six months on unspecified charges of sympathy for the PLO. His younger brother Fahd was expelled after terrorists shot dead six Israelis in May 1980. Fahd had been elected mayor in 1976 and had established his home in the Park Hotel.

Levinger, the former Park Hotel guest, now the proprietor of Hebron and host to government ministers, demanded Fahd's expulsion. Since then, the Park Hotel has been empty and neglected.

When Fahd Kawasmeh was shot dead by Syrian agents in Jordan three years ago, Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who bewails the absence of Palestinian leadership in Judea and Samaria, would not even allow his body to return to the West Bank.

One thing is sure: Faye Kawasmeh will sooner hope that the devout and opulently wealthy Arabs from the Gulf Emirates who patronized his hotel before 1967 will return to his hotel, than sell it to Jewish settlers. He will continue to make a living bussing guest workers to Israel, but he will never accept those whom he believes breached the rules of Arab hospitality. He suggests more snobbery than fear when he says "they are the worst people, these settlers. They don't want to live in peace," as though he is afraid they will smash the crockery if allowed into his hotel again.

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