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**In the Shadow of History: Israel-Vatican Relations 1948-1973:  
The Israeli Perspective**

On January 14, 1952, the Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion found time to write a letter to the Research Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointing out that [I quote] "it is strange that you use the term 'Holy See' without quotation marks, as if the term were acceptable in Hebrew. Let us leave that usage to the Catholics. Is there no non-Catholic term for the Vatican?"

Two weeks later, Ben-Gurion said the following remarks in the Knesset, (Israel's parliament):

"There are greater forces in the world that are hostile to us, not necessarily our neighbors alone. There is a great religion in the world that has an historical account with us about what transpired in this eternal city [Jerusalem] 2000 years ago [...] and the delegates of that religion will not forget that we rejected their Messiah, and therefore were decreed to wander among the Gentiles forever. And they cannot come to terms with the fact that after centuries of wandering we have returned to our own land, renewed our independence and Jerusalem is once again the capital of Israel."

These sentences reflect the complex attitude of the leaders of the young state, first and foremost Ben-Gurion, towards the Catholic Church and the Holy See. Until recently not a little research has dealt with the impact of historical relations between Christians and Jews on the attitude of the Vatican towards the State of Israel. In this paper I would like to focus on the other side, the Jewish-Israeli side, asking – following the study by Prof. Uri Bialer – to what degree did the religious-historical relations between Christians and Jews influence the attitude of the leaders of the State towards the Catholic Church and the Vatican in the first 25 years of the existence of Israel?

The leaders of Israel, the land of the Jewish People, which for centuries was a minority dependent on the good graces of Christian and Muslim rulers, found themselves in 1948 in the role of the "Caesar" expected to deal with the affairs of

local Christian communities, relations with international Christian bodies (mainly the Vatican), holy sites and the vast Church property that remained within the boundaries of the young state. Most of the leaders of the state were aware of the influence of religious-historical residue on the attitude of the Christian world towards Israel. However, they themselves were also not free from the influence of Jewish notions about Christianity and the Christian world. The fact that most of the Christians in the country were Arabs, regarding whose loyalty to the State the Israeli leadership had some doubts, increased the problematic nature of the relations between Israel and the local Christian communities. This problem was compounded after June 1967, when, after the Six-Day War, the Jewish state came to rule the most important holy sites to Christianity and the centers of the different churches in the Holy Land.

This study is based mainly on documents from the State Archive in Jerusalem, supplemented with documents from the United States National Archive in Washington, and the National British Archive in London, that I used for my Ph.D. dissertation. I am curious, of course, to know how these matters appeared from the point of view of the Vatican, but for that we shall have to wait until the documents in the archive of the Holy See, here in Rome, are made public.

It is apparent from the documents that the leaders of the Zionist movement, from Herzl to Ben-Gurion were, of course, aware of the theological opposition of the Catholic Church to the establishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land. Already in 1899, after meeting with the Nuncio in Vienna, Herzl, who had the greatest awareness among Zionist leaders of the influence of the Catholic Church and the Vatican on the European powers, wrote the following:

"[...] I said that in my opinion only Rome is a rival. [...] Because only Rome is ecumenical to the same degree as Judaism. Rome is the wealthy brother that despises the poor brother. The other [Orthodox] churches are national churches, and therefore are not in need of Jerusalem as an Archimedean point."

And indeed the confrontation that Herzl anticipated between the Vatican and the young State of Israel did take place 50 years later.

From the Israeli point of view the hostility of the Vatican towards the Zionist enterprise and its opposition to the establishment of the State of Israel was expressed in two actions taken by the Vatican towards the end of the 1948 War: the first was severe criticism of Israel for violating churches and Christian holy sites by soldiers of the Israel Defense Force in its earliest stage; the second, demanding that the international community force Israel and Jordan to carry out the internationalization of Jerusalem, in accordance with the November 1947 United Nations decision on the partition of Palestine. These demands by the Vatican reached a climax in the summer of 1948, on the basis of hard facts: In Jerusalem, and elsewhere, desecration and looting by Israeli soldiers did take place. Nevertheless – from the Israeli point of view – these events were exploited by Catholic propaganda in order to present the young state in the most negative way and to try to force it to agree to internationalization, of which the Vatican became a keen supporter from October 1948. The most important act of the Holy See was drafting its own diplomatic corps, and that of the entire Catholic world to approve the resolution on internationalization of Jerusalem in the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1949. The Vatican saw internationalization as a way to save at least Jerusalem from the fate of partition of the Holy Land and to change the Holy City and its surroundings into a *Corpus Separatum* under U.N. auspices and supervised by the "enlightened" Christian world. The resolution on internationalization was approved, as is well known, by an exceptional coalition, including countries considered "Catholic", the countries of the Communist bloc, led by the Soviet Union, and the Arab and Muslim states. In the eyes of the leaders of Israel it was the Vatican that was the central factor in creating this "unholy" alliance. Looking back it seems that the Vatican's success in December 1949 was exceptional and resulted from an unusual coincidence; subsequently the Holy See never achieved such an international diplomatic success.

At any rate, the decision by the General Assembly was regarded by the leaders of Israel as evidence of the power of the Vatican and the Catholic Church. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion announced, as a counter measure, that he was moving the Government ministries and the Knesset to Jerusalem (in the course of December 1949); Foreign Minister Moshe Sharet joined the Prime Minister in declarations that made it clear that they understood the motives of the Vatican and the dangers they harbored. On December 13, 1949, Ben-Gurion claimed in a Knesset debate that "the

power of world Catholicism, which for very many years had not displayed the power it revealed on this occasion, [drafted] about 30 nations throughout the world, and it is evident that this resulted only from its pressure since there are states that changed their mind in the course of the day." He predicted that the decision to make Jerusalem the capital "will be used as a weapon by the Vatican" because "they have an old account with the Jews for two thousand years." He also expressed his suspicion that the Vatican would demand Nazereth as well, since "that same Jew of 2000 years ago is associated not only with Jerusalem." In a government meeting later, Ben-Gurion claimed that "the Vatican does not want Israeli rule here [because] it has an 1800-year old dogma to which we gave a mortal blow by establishing the State of Israel."

Moshe Sharet claimed that the resolution to internationalize Jerusalem "contained settling an account ever since the crucifixion of Jesus, an event that happened here in Jerusalem, if I am not mistaken 1916 years ago." The Foreign Minister, who took part in the meeting of the General Assembly, testified regarding its discussions that "in the end it was an entirely subjective feeling, but I sensed blood in the hall. I felt as if it was said that these Jews need to know once and for all what they have done to us [the Christians] and now there is an opportunity to let them feel it and that is the whole matter."

The words of Sharet and Ben-Gurion reflect the depth of historical residue felt by the Israeli leadership towards the Catholic Church and the Vatican. Many of the decision makers in Israel attributed to the Vatican nearly unlimited powers, and they seem to have brought this image from their Eastern European upbringing. The Vatican was considered in Israel a central force on the world scene, seeking – together with the United Nations, the Arab states and the entire international community – to make Israel give up its control over Jerusalem and withdraw from much of the territory it captured in the 1948 war. This concept of aggrandizing the power of the Vatican greatly influenced, in my opinion, Israel's policy towards the Catholic Church in the subsequent years. With regards to everything related to the subject of Jerusalem, paradoxically, it was the external pressure from the Vatican and the U.N that drove Ben-Gurion to determine, officially and definitively, that Jerusalem was the capital of the Jewish state. In the 1960s Abba Eban (Israel foreign minister) claimed that UN measures led to the declaration on Jerusalem "as an integral part of the state and its

capital" while many of Israel's leaders regarded Jerusalem as an educational and cultural center, but not necessarily, and perhaps not even ideally – the capital of the state."

These events of late 1949 had, in my opinion, a crucial influence on the relations between Israel and the Vatican in the following years. The adherence of the Vatican to the internationalization plan (until 1967) and the Israeli refusal to discuss the matter led to the failure of any significant rapprochement between the two sides. At Israel's initiative a number of attempts were made in the fifties to break the ice, but the response of the Vatican was a cold shoulder. Two examples elucidate this:

The first incident was the question of the performance of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra before Pope Pius XII in May 1955. The Vatican agreed to the appearance of the orchestra "as a tribute to the Catholic Church for saving Jews during the Holocaust." Eliyahu Sasson, the Israeli representative in Rome, was even willing to allow the orchestra to perform before the Pope on the Shavuot (Pentecost) holiday, claiming that the performance was without charge. Foreign Minister Sharet rejected the idea of performing on the holiday "even before the throne of honor." Finally the orchestra performed Beethoven's Seventh Symphony before the Pope on May 12, 1955. The performance raised hopes in Israel of improved relations with the Vatican, but these were dampened by the report in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, on the next day, reporting that "his holiness met with Jewish musicians from 14 different nations," without any mention of the State of Israel.

Another initiative was the decision to dispatch to the Vatican in early 1957 Maurice Fisher, one of the notable early diplomats in the Israeli foreign service, who was well-versed in Christian affairs ever since his stint as an officer in the Free French army in Lebanon during World War II. On January 1957, Fisher departed, full of good will, for a six-week mission to Rome, in order to try to establish the first direct ties with the Vatican. However, despite his many attempts and efforts, Fisher was unable even to arrange a meeting with a representative of the Secretariat of State. Fisher's failure in Rome found expression in the harsh words against Israel of Cardinal Tardini, the pro Secretary of State, made to the French delegate to the Vatican in November 1957. Tardini said that "there was no real need for this state, the creation of which was a

grave mistake on the part of the Western powers and the fact of its existence is a perpetual cause for dangers of war in the Middle East. Since Israel is a fact, it cannot be destroyed, but every day we pay the price of this mistake." One year later Tardini expressed his fear that Israel would overtake a disintegrating Jordan and rule over all the holy sites of Christianity.

The first buds of change appeared only upon the death of Pius XII in October 1958. The election of the new pope, John XXIII, who was thought to be more favorably inclined towards the Jewish people and Israel and who had close ties with Maurice Fisher from their days of service together in Paris, raised new hopes in Israel. Fisher met with the Pope in February 1959, and held a number of meetings in Rome until the middle of 1962. However it quickly turned out that despite the Israeli hopes even the new pope could not improve relations, while the basic interests of the Vatican (primarily concern for the fate of Christian communities in the Middle East and Vatican ties with Arab countries and the Third World) did not allow this. From here on the subject of relations with Israel became a low priority on the agenda of the Holy See. Pope John XXIII focused his efforts on preparations for the deliberations at the forthcoming Second Ecumenical Council (Vatican II).

The meeting of the council in 1962-1965, and mainly its promulgation of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration in October 1965 (in the formulation of which Jewish organizations and the Israeli embassy in Rome were involved) were the beginning of a long historical process, that brought about a change in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards Judaism and the Jewish people. However the impact of the declaration on relations between the Vatican and Israel in the short term was slight. From the Israeli point of view the Vatican negated entirely the political implications of the document, out of fear of harming its relations with Arab states and the Third World. The visit of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land in January 1964, during a break in the deliberations of the Council, did not constitute a significant turning point in Israel-Vatican relations.

A significant improvement in Israel-Vatican relations took place, in my opinion, only after the 1967 war. Israel's taking control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, in which the important holy sites of Christianity and church centers are found, forced by Israel and the Vatican to adjust themselves to an entirely new situation. Israel's

leaders, who had endured the "trauma" of the Vatican campaign and the internationalization of Jerusalem plan from the early years of the State, suspected that the capture of East Jerusalem and its incorporation into Israel in June 1967 would lead to a revival of the internationalization plan and that it would receive enthusiastic support from the Christian world. However, the different international constellation in 1967 – and mainly the international (and even Vatican) recognition that the plan was no longer feasible – actually led to a degree of rapprochement between Israel and the Vatican. Both local church leaders and the heads of the Vatican understood that Israel was the dominant force in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which could no longer be ignored.

The director general of the Prime Minister's Office, Yaakov Herzog, who had conducted the contacts with the Vatican after the 1948 war said:

And now when I came to them twenty years later [in 1967], the cardinals sat there and held a great debate on the future of Jerusalem. I saw that something had changed there. They tried to convince me that during the world war they had saved Jews [...]; they tried to present a moderate image. They looked for ways to touch our hearts. I sat and wondered at the miracles and marvels, that this enormous fortress in control of 600 million Catholics, whose orders traverse continents and peoples, and now Jerusalem is in our hands – and it does not rise up against us."

On the other hand, the new status of Israel after the Six-Day War enabled the Israeli government to adopt a more tolerant policy towards local and international Christian elements (mainly the Vatican). Against the background of the opposition of the international community to the annexation of East Jerusalem, the Israeli authorities regarded Christian elements as a moderating force and even an ally, in opposition to the Palestinians and the Muslim world, which could provide Israel with a modicum of international legitimacy for its rule in East Jerusalem and the holy places.

This tolerant policy found expression in a number of measures that Israel carried out: Declarations by the heads of state and legislation of the Preservation of Holy Places Law in late June 1967, which promised strict preservation of holy places and non-intervention in their administration; the Israeli initiative to grant generous reparations

to churches (including Catholic bodies operating in Jerusalem) for damage in the 1948 and 1967 wars; refraining from appropriation of church-owned land, return of the Notre Dame complex to the Holy See in 1971, encouraging the opening of Christian institutions in Jerusalem such as the Tantur Ecumenical Institute and others. These steps reflect Israeli self-confidence after the 1967 war, and are a counterpoint to the "defensive" Israeli approach after the 1948 war. It seems that the influence of the religious-historical residue diminished in the years after the 1967 war, and considerations of Realpolitik became predominant.

The change was apparent also in the position of the Holy See and the first measures it took after the war: Pope Paul VI met with the Israeli ambassador in Rome, Ehud Aviel; a special envoy of the Vatican Secretariat of State, Monsignor Angelo Felici was sent for talks with Israeli leaders in Jerusalem; the Apostolic delegate in Jerusalem, Augustin Sepinski, who had refrained before the war from any contact with representatives of the Israeli government met with the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and when he concluded his term even with the President of the State. His replacement, Monsignor Pio Laghi, who arrived in Israel in August 1969, developed close ties with ministers and high officials, who dealt with Christian affairs on behalf of the Israeli government. These ties reflected the change in Vatican policy towards Israel after the war. In fact, from the point of view of the Israeli authorities it could be said there were de facto diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican during Laghi's tenure (1969-1974).

On the interstate level the Holy See and Israel conducted a number of contacts – mainly between Yaakov Herzog and Ehud Aviel with Monsignor Augustino Casaroli, the Deputy Secretary of State. These contacts led to a certain softening in the Vatican position towards the State of Israel and its control of Jerusalem. The new position of the Vatican, the influence of which is felt to this day, emphasized that the holy sites should benefit from a special statute with international guarantees and the need to maintain the special historical and religious character of the city in addition to the obligation to protect the civil and religious rights of the religious communities that live in the city.



In the wake of the new reality and the formulation of the Vatican's new position, negotiations started in February 1968 between Israel and the Holy See on a secret agreement regarding the holy sites. The understanding on the basis of which the negotiations were conducted was that a formal agreement between Israel and the Vatican was impossible as long as the major questions of the status of the territories, Jerusalem and the Israeli-Arab conflict were unresolved. Both sides understood that Arab pressure and primarily concern for the fate of Christian communities in Arab states prevented any formal recognition of Israel by the Vatican and even more so recognition of Israeli control of East Jerusalem. This understanding led to the formulation of a more modest approach that sought to reach an agreement between the parties on the status of the Christian holy Places in Jerusalem for an interim period until a permanent solution would be achieved. In accordance with this approach the Israeli Foreign Ministry, starting in March 1968, prepared the first draft of a secret agreement, at the center of which, was the Israeli willingness to grant the Christian holy places in Jerusalem diplomatic status (which was later changed to "special status"), including full autonomy to the Christian communities to administer them "according to the existing rights and customs." All of this was in addition to granting the status of heads of diplomatic legations to the heads of Christian communities in Jerusalem.

The negotiations that began between Israel and the Holy See revealed that the gap between the two sides was too wide to be bridged even by a secret agreement. The representatives of the Vatican wanted to reinforce the status of the holy places by international guarantees and to extend the special status to include holy sites within the pre-1967 borders of the State of Israel. Likewise the Vatican objected strongly to Israeli actions to "change the character" of Jerusalem and restrict the freedom of action of Christian and Muslim communities in the city by Israeli rule. Since the gap between the two sides was so great it is not surprising that the Vatican decided to freeze the negotiations with Israel in September 1968. However, the "understanding" between the sides that the Vatican would not raise the subject of Jerusalem in international forums and that Israel on its part would maintain its relatively tolerant policy towards the Christian communities and the holy Places remained almost intact.

However, despite the freezing of the negotiations about the holy sites, some signs indicated modest improvement in Israel-Vatican relations without official declarations. Among these were the frequency of meetings between the Israeli ambassador in Rome and the deputy Secretary of State of the Vatican, exchanges of messages between the Pope and the President of Israel and improvement of relations between Israeli authorities and the apostolic delegate in Jerusalem. These signs were first of all the result of the strengthening of Israel's position in the international arena in the wake of the Six-Day War and the inability of the Vatican to ignore this development. At the same time the gradual theological change in the attitude of the Church towards the Jewish People after the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* also had some impact. The visit of the Israeli Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, to the Vatican in October 1969 was a continuation of this process of semi-normalization between the states, without formal diplomatic relations. But simultaneously Vatican identification with the difficult plight of the Palestinian refugees was increasing, leading to closer ties with the Palestinians and the PLO.

In early 1973 both sides initiated another step towards improved relations. On January 15 Prime Minister Golda Meir met with Pope Paul VI for the first time, in a meeting that went on for an hour and quarter. The audience included all of the important topics on the agenda between the two states – the Palestinian refugee problem, the Arab-Israeli conflict, aspirations for peace, the Jerusalem question and the situation of Christian communities in Israel. This meeting reflected the major changes that had transpired in the relationship between the parties since 1967. On the subject of Jerusalem and the holy places the Vatican took a more positive position towards Israel than in the past. However, the issue of Palestinian refugees brought to the fore historical residue: The Pope claimed that "If a solution is not found for the Palestinian refugee problem, the tragedy will continue, not only for them but for others as well" and "the Jews have a special obligation because of history [...]". The response of Prime Minister Meir was sharp and in character: She recalled her earliest childhood memory – the pogrom in Kiev, asserting "when we were merciful and when we did not have a homeland and when we were weak – that is when they took us to the Nazi crematoria." She concluded: "We will not allow another Holocaust to take place," reminding the Pope "that she herself asked the Arabs in November 1947 to agree to

compromises just as we agreed to compromises [...], but the following day they [the Arabs] killed Jews."

Thus the visit demonstrated the great progress in the relationship between the two parties since 1967, but also the complexity of the relationship and the existence of historical residue. The predominant approach in the Israeli Foreign Ministry after the visit was to refrain from negotiations with the Vatican on "small subjects" (out of fear of losing bargaining chips in future negotiations) and to wait until the initiative to formalize relations comes from the Vatican and not from the Israeli side. At the end of September 1973 Michael Pragai, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem, wrote to the adviser on Vatican affairs in the Israeli embassy in Rome that "in our relations with the Vatican it seems the best way to deal with it, is not to sign any partial agreement, but to wait until conditions ripen for a comprehensive settlement.

Twenty years passed, the conditions ripened and in late December 1993 the Fundamental agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See was signed. We shall hear more about this agreement in the coming papers. Nevertheless the complex nature of Israel-Vatican relations, the special bi-lateral ties and the religious-historical issues – as they developed in the first 25 years of the State – remain with us to this day.