



Reframing the 1950s: *Mamlakhtiyut* Through the Lens of October 7th

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Over the past few months, we have been finalizing a research project we began three years ago, exploring the formative decade of the 1950s in the development of Israeli *Mamlakhtiyut*—a concept often described as “Israeli republicanism.” Our study focuses on David Ben-Gurion’s political and educational efforts to cultivate a sovereign national consciousness grounded in national self-determination and a renewed Jewish identity liberated from the exilic ethos of victimhood.¹

In this essay, we offer only a brief overview of our research. Instead, we focus on how the October 7th war has significantly reshaped our approach and raised new questions about *Mamlakhtiyut*, both past and present.

From the October 7th Massacre to New Historical Inquiry

When we began this project in 2022, Israeli society was riven by civil unrest over the proposed judicial overhaul. While opposing camps interpreted the reforms in starkly different ways—some as a necessary corrective, others as an existential threat—both shared a common critique: that contemporary Israeli leaders were acting in an un-*Mamlakhti* manner, privileging factional interests over the common good.

This critique often drew on a nostalgic comparison to the perceived civic-minded leadership of the 1950s. Our research aimed to interrogate this ideal: What counted as *Mamlakhti* conduct in that decade, and who defined it? Who was included—or excluded—from the *Mamlakhti* collective? What mechanisms enforced it?

In retrospect, we see how the October 7th massacre introduced a powerful historical comparison, linking that trauma to the Holocaust and prompting new research questions. Initially, we resisted drawing such a parallel between the Holocaust and October 7th.

1 Ofer Shiff and Adi Sherzer, *The Struggle Over the Boundaries of Mamlakhtiyut: Ben-Gurion, the Others, and the Government Yearbooks, 1949–1963*, under review.

The moral and historical differences are vast. Yet we came to understand it as a response shaped by a deeply embedded Jewish sensibility of vulnerability and persecution. This realization led us to reassess our research framework. *Mamlakhtiyut*, we argue, was not only a state-building ideology but also an ideological response to Holocaust trauma. Ben-Gurion's project aimed not just to forge a sovereign citizen, but to offer a remedy for Jewish fragility.

The Tensions Within 1950s *Mamlakhtiyut*

Ben-Gurion sought to navigate between two extremes. He rejected defining Jewish identity through victimhood, while also opposing the condescension of the “new Jews” toward those with a perceived exilic mindset. His annual essays in the Government Yearbook (1948–1963), which we analyze in our forthcoming book, were key vehicles for this vision. Addressed to the political elite, they defined the *Mamlakhti* “we” against various “others”: Diaspora Jews, the Ultra-Orthodox, new immigrants, Holocaust survivors, and Jews from Muslim countries. These groups were often portrayed as exilic, but nonetheless part of the broader Jewish collective for which Israel bore *Mamlakhti* responsibility.

Admittedly, this vision was fraught with contradictions. Ben-Gurion's commitment to integration was real, but it was shaped by a patronizing hierarchy. This, we argue, raises a vital question for us today: Can *Mamlakhtiyut* speak meaningfully to Israel's increasingly diverse and fractured society? However, in the aftermath of the October 7th massacre and its trauma, perhaps the more urgent question concerns *Mamlakhtiyut* as a response to collective vulnerability. For Ben-Gurion, the challenge after the Holocaust was not to choose between particularistic Jewish victimhood and universalist transcendence—but to hold them in productive tension.

This balance had already defined modern Jewish responses to modernity even before the Holocaust. While Ben-Gurion saw this as achievable only in a sovereign state, other Jewish thinkers envisioned a similar vision also within the Diaspora. Still, they shared with Ben-Gurion a post-Holocaust imperative: that Jews could live full Jewish lives without retreating into isolation.

Reclaiming the Balance?

Today, that optimism is under strain. The trauma of October 7th, the ongoing war in Gaza and other fronts, and the global rise of antisemitism have led many in Israel and the Jewish world to question whether the balance between particularism and

universalism remains viable. Many have grown disillusioned with the 1950s vision of modern integration without cultural assimilation. October 7th has renewed suspicion toward the non-Jewish “other” and cast doubt on the possibility of a Jewish identity that is both rooted and open.

It is in this context that we believe *Mamlakhtiyut* must be reexamined—not as a relic of the past, but as a framework for navigating the tensions of vulnerability and strength, memory and responsibility, particularism and universalism. The pursuit of this balance—central to Ben-Gurion and his Diaspora contemporaries—now stands as one of the most pressing challenges in responding to the trauma of October 7th.

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