CHAPTER 3

Thou Shalt Not Deport? Religious Ethical Discourse and the Politics of Asylum in Poland and Israel

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Introduction

In May 2012, following a violent anti-migrant demonstration in Tel Aviv, Yair Lapid, Member of the Knesset, representing the centrist secular Yesh Atid party, declared that while he fully supported the deportation of African asylum seekers, he was convinced that the Israeli state has an obligation to take care of its own citizens first: "I support the arrest and deportation of infiltrators…and preventing their entry to Israel…I think

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human rights organizations should first consider the rights of the [Israeli] residents of Southern Tel Aviv, because the poor people of your city come first" (Somfalvi, 2012).

In 2015, the then Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz of the *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform) party, agreed to accept Middle Eastern asylum seekers as part of the European Union's relocation scheme. The leaders of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) party criticized her decision and argued that Muslims pose a threat to Christianity (see Kaczyński's speech at Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2015). Supporters of asylum seekers, on the other hand, invoked the Good Samaritan parable to justify pro-asylum policies (see Grupiński's speech at Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2015). A few months after the 2015 election, which brought the nationalist Law and Justice party to power, the new Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, put the agreement on hold, claiming that the relocation proposed by the EU threatened Poland's national security. She argued that there could be ISIS fighters and terrorists among asylum seekers (Stolarczyk, 2017). As a result, Poland accepted no asylum seekers. The fact that most asylum seekers were Muslim was an important part of the Polish debate.

These attitudes toward asylum seekers are not unique to Israel and Poland. Indeed, as migrants continue to seek refuge in the Global North, public debates on refugees become increasingly embedded within a religious ethics framework. Public figures—both "admissionists" and "restrictionists"—regularly invoke religious principles to advocate for more-or less-tolerant refugee and asylum policies (Randell-Moon, 2006).

In contrast to studies that use religious ethics to make a normative case for a more compassionate migration policy, in this chapter we explore the use of religious ethical narratives to support both admissionist and restrictionist approaches toward asylum seekers. By drawing on the cases of Israel and Poland, we examine how religious narratives are mobilized to advocate policies for or against the admission and settlement of asylum seekers. Specifically, we show how politicians construct religious narratives to further their pro- or anti-asylum policies commensurate with their political orientations. In doing so, we reveal the malleable nature of religious ethics and its political instrumentalization.

Scholarly interest in the linkages between religious ethics and international migration is hardly new (Plaut, 1996). Indeed, students of migration and religion have long offered Judeo-Christian scriptural interpretations of desired migration policies in Western societies. Plaut (1996,

pp. 24–25), for example, argues that "[From the point of view of Jewish tradition], the ultimate imperative lies with the injunction to treat strangers like the native-born and to open…our borders to them so that they can find a new and sustainable existence." Heyer (2014, p. 725), similarly posits that "[A]n approach rooted in…Catholic commitments must both reduce the need to migrate and protect those who find themselves compelled to do so as a last resort." However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored how religious ethical principles are employed in contemporary political discourse. To begin filling this gap, the current chapter investigates the ways in which religious ethical principles are politicized in national migration discourses. Looking at Israel and Poland, we analyze the ways political actors in both countries use religious principles to legitimize public policies toward asylum seekers.

At a first glance, Israel and Poland may seem like an odd choice. Yet, despite obvious differences—geographical location and population makeup—both countries share similar characteristics. First, they are signatories to the Geneva Convention and Protocol on the Status of Refugees, obligated to admit asylum seekers. In addition, a heated public debate on asylum policies, where religious ethics featured prominently, occurred recently in both countries. The Israeli debate emerged as large numbers of asylum seekers, primarily from Sudan and Eritrea, had entered the country (2007–2012) (Cohen & Margalit, 2015). Poland engaged in Islamophobic discourses despite the absence of asylum seekers (Jaskułowski, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2018). In both countries citizenship is based on blood relationships (*jus sanguinis*). Both Poland and Israel maintain a strong relationship between the state and the (institutionalized) religion, Catholicism or (Orthodox) Judaism, respectively. Finally, narratives of national victimization remain dominant in both countries. Jews, who make up the religious majority in Israel, were persecuted and murdered in the millions by Nazi Germany. Poland was occupied by both Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union. The victimization narrative is prevalent in both countries and it is present also in the political debate that unfolded over asylum policies.

This chapter includes four parts. First, we provide a brief methodological note and necessary background on the perceived migration crises in Poland and in Israel. We then analyze the political discourses in both countries during the peak years of the crisis: 2010–2011 and 2015–2017 in Israel and Poland, respectively. Drawing on secondary data, we show how liberal politicians used religious ethical narratives to advocate for

more open asylum policies, whereas conservative statesmen used them to promote restrictive asylum policies. Accompanied by historical narratives of victimization, the result was a bifurcated discourse, in which religious ethical arguments were selectively used to promote a particular political agenda. We conclude the chapter by drawing key lessons about ways in which ethical religious arguments continue to influence contemporary asylum policies and discourses.

Methods

This chapter is based on critical analysis of state discourses about the admission, integration, and removal of asylum seekers in Israel and Poland. We used two sources of data: (1) National newspapers and online news services from 2015 to 2017 in Poland (e.g., *Rzeczpospolita*, *naTemat*, and *Wirtualna Polska*) and 2010–2011 in Israel (e.g., *Ha'Aretz* and *Yediot Acharonot*); (2) Transcripts of pertinent parliamentary speeches in both countries: in Israel, different Knesset Committee meetings (e.g., Committee of the Interior) and in Poland, protocols of various Parliamentary sessions (e.g., September 16, 2015). We limited our analysis to statements made by local and national politicians, religious leaders, and other elected figures. The statements had to reference at least one religious principle to rationalize a specific policy. We used open coding to identify pertinent themes (Saldaña, 2021). Each author analyzed and interpreted collected data separately, but we discussed our findings to ensure analytical coherence and credibility.

A Brief Chronology of the Asylum Debate in Poland and Israel

In contrast to many European countries, refugees were not a topic of national interest in post-1989 Poland (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2016). It surfaced for the first time in mid-2015, following the calculated political strategy of the Law and Justice party (PiS), which used the European "migration crisis" to launch an anti-refugee campaign in the period preceding the parliamentary election.

In May 2015, the European Union suggested resettling 40,000 refugees across EU member states. In July 2015, the Polish Prime Minster, Ewa Kopacz (Civic Platform party), committed to admitting 2000 refugees. PiS exploited the situation to promote anti-refugee

rhetoric. The anti-refugee stance was later adopted by other Polish populist movements (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Pędziwiatr, 2015). Consequently, refugees began to be equated with Muslims posing a threat to Polish society and its "traditional family values" (Goździak & Márton, 2018). On September 16, 2015, the Polish Parliament debated the issue of refugee admissions. The Prime Minister assured Poles that their country would admit very few refugees. On May 16, 2016, the new Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, declared Poland would not admit any refugees. Though Poland is a signatory to the Geneva Convention and its Protocol (since 1991) and an EU member (since 2004), PiS was not willing to grant entry to even a few refugees. It should be noted that PiS' election campaign was backed up by the Polish Catholic Church, which despite Pope Francis' encouragement to help refugees, presented a wide range of attitudes. Some priests and bishops vehemently opposed the Pope and their position did not change even when Archbishop Wojciech Polak threatened to suspend priests participating in anti-refugee manifestations (Cekiera, 2018).

Interestingly, the heated public debate corresponded neither with the number of asylum seekers arriving in Poland nor with the number of Muslims living there. Between 2007 and 2018, a total of 107,187 people applied for refugee status in Poland. However, only 12,734 asylum seekers were permitted to stay in the country (Urząd ds. Cudzoziemców, 2020). None of them were part of the European relocation scheme. The Polish Islamophobia occurred without Muslims. Around 2000 Muslim Tatars whose ancestors settled in Poland in the fourteenth century live in north-eastern Poland. Another 15,000–40,000 Muslims arrived in different ways in the last 50 years accounting for 0.1% of the Polish population (Goździak & Márton, 2018).

In Israel, non-Jewish migration is not a new phenomenon. Large numbers of labor migrants began to arrive in the late 1980s. As temporary migrants, allowed to stay in the country for 63 months, they seldom elicited strong political reactions (Kemp & Raijman, 2008). In contrast, asylum seekers who began arriving in large numbers in 2007, instantaneously sparked a heated debate. Unlike labor migrants, they were a largely homogenous group of mostly young, Black males who were, initially, unemployed and homeless (Cohen & Margalit, 2015). Despite a host of measures to curtail their entry and restrict their internal mobility and settlement, their numbers soared. By the end of 2009, nearly 21,000 asylum seekers, mostly from Eritrea and Sudan, resided in Israel. The next

two years have witnessed a record number of irregular migrants, with 14,642 and 17,190 new arrivals, respectively (Population and Immigration Authority, 2022). The securitization of the Israeli-Egyptian border slowed down new arrivals in 2012 (10,300). The "Infiltrators" Law of 2013 all but stopped irregular migration from Africa to Israel. In the years since, only a handful of asylum seekers have entered the country through the Sinai Peninsula.

The data analyzed in this chapter concern primarily the years 2010–2012, widely considered the peak years of Israel's irregular migration "crisis." During this period, a political debate over the desired national policy toward asylum seekers unfolded in the Knesset. While liberal politicians advocated a carefully crafted national policy that would guarantee migrants a wide array of rights, including the right to asylum, conservative politicians demanded their incarceration and, subsequently, removal. Interestingly, just like in Poland, both groups regularly employed religious ethical principles as a means to advocate for their preferred asylum policy. In what follows we analyze these narratives, first in Poland and then in Israel.

Religious Ethics and the Politics of Migration in Israel and Poland

When discussing migration policy, students of religious ethics typically focus on two theoretical concepts: hospitality and neighborliness (Schaab, 2008; Yanklowitz, 2019). Hospitality means welcoming strangers as God's messengers or God himself (Pohl, 2006). Neighborliness indicates solidarity with people close to us and distant ones (O'Neil, 2007). Religious ethics scholars argue that these concepts should be the basis for an ethical migration policy in Western societies. However, the public debates both in Israel and Poland do not relate to hospitality. Instead, they center on love of thy neighbor, on one side of the political spectrum, and preferential treatment of one's own group (Christianity's "ordo caritatis" and Judaism's "the poor people of your city come first"), on the other end of the spectrum.

Scholarship on religious ethics typically conceives of Christianity and Judaism as institutional frameworks promoting fair and just treatment of migrants, especially the undocumented (Ahn, 2013). However, as the analyses of public discourses show, politicians in both Poland and Israel have not always used religious narratives to advocate pro-asylum policies.

Rather, some have mobilized religious arguments to do the exact opposite, making strong anti-asylum claims. In Israel, with few exceptions, the majority of politicians opposed granting asylum to incoming Africans, advocating instead their (voluntary or forced) removal from the country. However, since the majority of asylum seekers were citizens of countries that were, at the time, either infamous for human rights' violations (Eritrea) or had underwent prolonged civil wars (Sudan), removal was seldom a viable option. Public discourses therefore focused on whether migrants should receive rights at all, and if so—what kind. Meanwhile, Poland witnessed a fierce political debate between those who were willing to accept asylum seekers and those who rejected the possibility. Not surprisingly, both sides resorted to Christian teachings to support their stance. In the following sections, we illustrate how religion was used simultaneously to argue for and against admission and just treatment of refugees.

Thou Shalt Love Thy Foreigner: Neighborliness and Pro-Asylum Policy

The principle of neighborliness is part of the religious tradition of both Judaism and Christianity. In the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus contains the following commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19: 18). Later, in the New Testament, Jesus invokes neighborliness as the most important commandment (Mark 12: 31). In the Catholic tradition, the idea of "neighbor" is further developed in the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29–37) and Judgment Day (Matthew 25: 3–46) parables. The Good Samaritan is a story about a Jewish traveler who was beaten and left on the side of the road by his co-ethnics. He was saved by a Samaritan, even though Samaritans and Jews were in conflict at the time. The Judgment Day parable depicts a day when Jesus rewards those who helped others; "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was ill and you cared for me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25: 35–36).

Drawing on these religious sentiments, neighborliness and the love of a neighbor (or "foreigner" or "stranger"), featured prominently in the public discourses of both countries. Politicians from the center/left, often used it to advocate for the admission and fair treatment of asylum seekers. Many stated that a humane approach toward them is in line with

Christian or Jewish values; they hoped to appeal to more traditional and conservative constituencies.

In Poland, the presence of the Christian ethic in public debate is not surprising. Historically, religion was important for the preservation of the Polish culture during the partitions, wars, and communism. Following the 1989 transformation, the Catholic Church expected to hold a special position in society and receive legal and political privileges (Żuk & Żuk, 2019). At the same time, the Polish society with its lack of secular traditions was confronted with Western European postmodern values (Inglehart, 1997). The conflict between secularity and individualization (with its support of feminism and LGBTQI rights), on the one hand, and traditionalist and religious values (especially traditional family values and gender roles), on the other hand, entered public political, social, and religious debates.

The current relationship between the Catholic Church and the Law and Justice party is credited with PiS' victory in recent parliamentary elections. However, despite proclaiming Christian values, few PiS politicians embraced New Testament principles when discussing refugee policy. The exception was John Abraham Godson, an MP representing the Polish People's Party (center conservative). A Nigerian by birth, he identified himself and other members of the Parliament as "disciples of Christ":

> [Let us] begin to truly believe and be disciples of Jesus Christ. The Christian attitude requires us to support refugees. And it is very puzzling that we, who boast about our Christian faith, are often the least open to refugees. Finally, I quote the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapter 25, verse 35: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a passer-by and you accepted me' (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2015, p. 17).

However, the directness of his call to respect religious values was an exception among Polish politicians who typically invoked them when referring to their personal motivations. Jan Duda, the father of the current Polish President said in an interview:

> Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, offer hospitality to travelers, dress the naked – when it comes to refugees, this is the philosophy of mercy that guides me. The parable of the Good Samaritan must be remembered. I am Catholic and profess a Christian, merciful approach. We must accept refugees (Wirtualna Polska, 2017).

He used the parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37) and Judgment Day (Matthew 25: 31–46) to present his personal beliefs and his speech contradicts the views of the Law and Justice party that opposed the admission of refugees. Interestingly, Civic Platform members used Christianity to underscore the inconsistency in their opponents' actions. Marcin Święcicki, an MP representing Civic Platform asked:

> We are sitting here in this Chamber under the Cross with Jesus Christ, who was a refugee. (Applause). We heard Pope Francis' appeals to receive refugees and we have seen his actions. (…) I would like to ask why our Chamber, on the 1050th anniversary of the baptism of Poland, distances itself from European solidarity in helping refugees (Sejm Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, 2016, p. 241).

The quote demonstrates the Civic Platform politicians' practice of showing the gap between Christian values and the attitudes of right-wing politicians who successfully monopolized the Polish Catholic identity. They emphasized that neighborliness demands loving strangers without excluding anyone and criticized the current Polish discourse for contradicting the Gospel by constructing the narrative of Muslims as *jihadists*.

In Israel, the majority of policymakers were against granting asylum seekers the right of refuge. Being a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees (1951) and its Protocol (1967) was sometimes dismissed by those who proposed to remove border-crossers from national territory. However, even staunch supporters of this harsh policy typically insisted that the state acted in line with religious ethics and the moral values of Judaism. Prime Minister Netanyahu, for example, declared:

> Even when we wish to remove the foreigners from amidst us, we shall do it respectfully. We shall act in a Jewish and humane way… We shall do it in an organized manner while maintaining their dignity... I ask public figures to express themselves carefully. We shall act towards them [asylum seekers] humanely (Ynet Online, 2012a).

Unlike Poland, where public discourse centered on whether or not to admit asylum seekers, in Israel the situation was significantly different. The public debate ensued after many Sudanese and Eritreans had crossed the then unfenced border with Egypt and were already in the country. Given the human rights violations in their countries of origin, Israel chose not to deport them. Thus, the discourse focused primarily on how to treat

them during their [temporary] stay in the country. In this context, and despite their more conservative and often religious background, centrist and right-leaning politicians refrained from a direct use of the neighborliness narrative. One exception followed a violent demonstration in Tel Aviv where African migrants met with physical attacks and racist slurs. Over the next few days, various hard-liners strongly condemned the perpetrators, invoking both Jewish history and religious values in their speeches. Amnon Cohen of the Ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, which is known for it ethnocentric and anti-immigration stance, noted: "We are a people who went through difficult history, and so we mustn't do disgraceful things." Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party similarly argued against anti-immigrant behavior.

> When I see a *pogrom* in Israel, led by inciting politicians, I wonder where these people get the *Chutzpa* to call themselves Jewish. [They] do not understand what Jewish morality is, what the collective memory of Jews is, or what is the meaning of Jewish existence (Somalfvi, 2012).

Perhaps most vocal was Shlomo Mula of the centrist Kadima Party. An Ethiopian Jew, he was angered by the racially motivated attacks, in which some Israeli citizens of Ethiopian descent, mistaken as asylum seekers, was confronted by the mob. He argued passionately:

> We were slaves in Egypt. We cannot behave this way to these people [asylum seekers]… I'd suggest we conduct public discussion with responsibility, professionalism, without harsh words. We ought to look at a person as a human being, not as a deportable person we can hurt and get rid of (Knesset Committee of the Interior, 2012, p. 16).

Not suprisingly, politicians from more liberal parties drew more heavily on the religious commandment of neighborliness in their attempts to convince the public (and the government) to treat asylum seekers justly. During the early 2010s, when the number of border-crossers—as well as anti-immigrant sentiments—reached new heights, progressive politicians noted the importance of adhering to color-blind compassion and empathy. Ironically, most of these politicians were famous for being avid secularists and strong opponents of Israel's lack of separation of state and religion. Still, in the face of rising anti-immigrant sentiments, these otherwise progressive secularists frequently referred to the said principle. Thus,

Member of Knesset Ilan Gilon, of the secular left-leaning Meretz party, was outraged by local rabbis who called on Israelis to refrain from renting apartments to asylum seekers in South Tel Aviv. Reminding them "of the biblical commandment *Thou shalt love thy stranger*," he said:

> Once again we are witnessing a racial incitement by Rabbis. The very same rabbis, who are supposed to preach the love of [all] men and the love of [the people of] Israel, incite and increase the flames in Israeli society (Goren & Ben Yosef, 2010).

Other members of the center-left opposition similarly mobilized religious principles and victimization narratives, pleading with Benjamin Netanyahu's right-leaning coalition to establish a more humane migration policy. The Holocaust, the most traumatic experience in Jewish history, was occasionally mentioned by politicians who sought to counterbalance the dominant xenophobic public discourse. Member of Knesset Dov Hanin was one of the most vocal critics of the government's anti-immigrant policy. A long-time member of the Communist, Arab–Jewish party Hadash (Democratic Front for Equality), he often used a combination of Jewish ethics and history in his pro-hospitality parliamentary speeches:

> As a state that was founded by refugees and for refugees, we are committed to a humane, Jewish, and moral approach towards refugees just like we expected [other countries] to treat Jewish refugees when they fled for their lives (Knesset Committee on the Problem of Foreign Workers, 2010, p. 29).

Years later, as he protested the government's decision to deport asylum seekers to a "safe" third country, he asked Knesset members passionately:

> Are you familiar with the data that the third country which Israel pays [in order to accept asylum seekers] later deports the very same asylum seekers to other countries? Do you remember… that Jacob, our father, was too an infiltrator in Egypt because of the famine in the Land of Caanan? Do you remember… the commandement thou shalt love the stranger who is in your gates, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt? (Knesset Proceedings, 2018, p. 3).

These quotes suggest that the biblical commandment of *love thy neighbor* was used in a rather flexible manner by Israeli politicians. Centrist and right-leaning politicians, some of whom are religious Jews, mentioned it in their public speeches. However, in many cases these references were no more than lip service, as the very same politicians unequivocally supported harsh policy measures, including refoulment and deportations. Ironically, it was typically left-leaning politicians, known for their secular sentiments, who frequently mobilized the commandment in order to convince conservative constituencies of the need to craft a humane policy—in line with biblical teachings.

Ordro Caritatis or Aniyey Ircha Kodmim: Religious Ethics and Anti-Asylum Policy

Both in Poland and Israel, there were also politicians who wished to remain righteous in the eyes of their electorate but avoid opening their country to strangers. They found a way to maintain these opposite positions by distinguishing between deserving and undeserving poor. Justifying the limits of help is well-researched (Applebaum, 2001; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Sales, 2002). However, our analysis focuses on the use of religion by politicians rather than the qualities of refugees. In Judaism, this approach is represented by the idea that "poor people of your city come first." The concept of an all-embracing love of neighbors is limited by prioritizing the more deserving, namely the weakest individuals among those closest—both ethnically and geographically—to ourselves. In the Christian tradition, Thomas Aquinas called it *ordo caritatis* (Order of Charity). He attempted to prioritize love and responsibility toward different entities: God, thy neighbor, the body, parents, children, relatives, and strangers (Bartoszek, 2017).

Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice party, introduced the concept of *ordo caritatis* in the Polish Parliament to denigrate the loved one's neighbor principle and limit the Polish state's obligation toward "Others":

> (…) the implementation of this principle would lead to the collapse of our civilization (…) we must look for another principle, a principle that moderates this radicalism. Well, such a principle exists, that is, *ordo caritatis*, the order of mercy, the order of love. Under this principle, first there are close

> relatives, family, then the nation, and then others (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2015, p. 14).

The Deputy Leader of the Law and Justice party, Antoni Macierewicz, argued:

> I have the duty to help my own nation first, because this nation elected me and I have to take care of its interests. I cannot reject its needs to act on behalf of other nations and other people (Radio Maryja, 2015).

Both leaders stressed that the assistance Poland could offer to asylum seekers must be commensurate with the country's limited resources and proportionate to Poland's share in the EU's GDP (Kaczyński's speech at Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2015, p. 14). Financial assistance, they claimed, should be provided in refugee camps or in countries of origin to prevent refugees from entering the Polish territory:

> So let's help refugees, let's help immigrants (…) by sharing the burden with other EU countries according to our financial abilities. Our contribution should support refugee camps or be invested in the refugees' countries of origin, so that they do not have to flee from there (Macierewicz at Radio Maryja, 2015).

The *ordo caritatis* concept was used by key Law and Justice politicians, but it did not become part of Polish politicians' vocabulary. Most public figures invoked ethno-religious similarity as a criterion to select those asylum seekers needing assistance. The President, Andrzej Duda, said that he would like to bring to Poland Christians from Syria because they are "culturally close to us and we should be concerned about the fate of Christians around the world" (Gąsior, 2015).

The Polish populist politicians found the principle of "love thy neighbor" too radical. They claimed it was impossible to help everyone and argued that Poland's economic situation justified limited assistance. They also claimed that admitting refugees (who in their narratives were equated with Muslims) would compromise national security. Muslims were presented as both a cultural and a physical threat (see Goździak & Márton, 2018).

Israeli hard-liners refrained from drawing on the neighborliness commandment for similar reasons. Instead, they deployed an alternative principle—*Aniyey Ircha Kodmim* (charity begins at home)—to appeal

to their largely conservative and religiously traditional constituency. This Talmudic value prioritizes locals over foreigners, especially during crises. While the precise definition of locals is debated, it is usually agreed that when resources are scarce, the moral duty of Jewish believers is to prioritize co-ethnics.

This principle was frequently used by politicians when articulating their position concerning the situation in the neighborhoods of South Tel Aviv. This area has been home to some of the country's most underprivileged communities and has seen Israelis and Africans struggling over the use of run-down public space and scarce resources (Cohen & Margalit, 2015). The heated political discourse that emerged oscillated between those who demanded that Africans be deported from the country or transferred (in)voluntarily to other locations and those who advocated the allocation of public resources to reinvigorate the neighborhood, thereby alleviating tense relations between rival groups.

With few exceptions, it was mostly politicians from right-of-center parties who drew explicitly on the *Aniyey Ircha Kodmim* principle. For example, Knesset Member Miri Regev of Prime Minister Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, was a vocal advocate of the removal of migrants. She often used biblical sayings as a way to stimulate her constituency, many of whom hail from traditional backgrounds:

> You have to understand that the lives of [Jewish] residents here [in South Tel Aviv] have become unbearable, Jews and Israelis are afraid of living in their own country... [So] I suggest [that] everybody start worrying about residents of their country, because the poor people of your city come first (Ynet, 2012b).

These sentiments were echoed by local politicians as well, especially those representing jurisdictions directly affected by immigration. Shlomo Maslawi, a member of the Tel Aviv City Council and resident of the HaTikva neighborhood in South Tel Aviv was a major, municipal-level advocate of asylum seekers removal. Appearing before the Council, he proclaimed "the welfare of refugees is important to me, but the poor people of your city come first. The situation here is unbearable" (Ben Yosef, 2010).

In order to depict the situation in Israel as a zero-sum game between old-timers and newcomers, and advocate for restrictionist policies, more progressive statesmen have used religious ethics as a means to call for

a more balanced policy. Chairman of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin of the Likud party, acknowledged the need to treat asylum seekers fairly. He noted that the economic motivation of some migrants does not preclude Israel's obligation to verify whether they are entitled to asylum. Simultaneously, he argued that the state is first and foremost responsible for its own citizens:

> The fact that [asylum seekers], when asked, said they came here to work does not mean that they were not persecuted in their countries and that we shouldn't verify their status as refugees…still, it is clear to all of us that 'the poor people of your city come first,' and that it is impossible that the treatment of these asylum seekers should come at the expense of the Israeli population (Knesset News, 2012).

Knesset Member Dov Hanin also called for taking the needs of both sides into account when formulating asylum policies. While sympathetic to "the real distress" that exists in neighborhoods of South Tel Aviv, he argued that asylum seekers are suffering from it just as much as Israeli residents. He therefore argued that deportation is not the solution. Rather, he claimed:

> There has to be a comprehensive policy, which could begin with the question of border [enforcement], but has to also deal with the question of what happens to [asylum seekers] who are already here. [The policy] has to treat everyone in accordance with international law as well as Jewish ethics and clear logic, which tells us that we don't want to exacerbate the problem (Knesset Committee on the Problem of Foreign Workers, 2010, p. 31).

Unlike neighborliness, the biblical commandment to give priority to the needy in one's own community was used primarily by hard-line politicians. Using a rights-based discourse, it was applied as a means to push for a strict anti-asylum, pro-deportation agenda. However, in some cases, right-leaning politicians were willing to consider a selective, needs-based asylum policy. Not surprisingly, more progressive politicians strongly opposed the notion, calling instead for a more balanced and care-oriented approach.

Conclusions

The chapter explored how religious ethics is employed in public debates about forced migration. Using the cases of Poland and Israel, we showed the dualistic use of religious ethics. The public debates in both countries were surprisingly similar and in both cases religious ethical principles were used to argue both for *and* against the admission of refugees.

The two main principles were "love of one's neighbor" and "ordo caritatis" (Christianity) or "the poor people of your city come first" (Judaism). Whereas the former denotes an idealistic vision of the universal right to hospitality, the latter advocates the prioritization of those closest—and most similar—both geographically and culturally. These diametrically opposing principles featured prominently in the public debates about asylum policies in Poland and in Israel, illustrating the malleable nature of religious ethics. Religious teachings, we submit, are not simply a geo-historically fixed, objective set of parables, but politically motivated social constructs that change across time and space, often in accordance with the changing interests of those expressing them publicly.

Despite these similarities, there were also differences in how the debates unfolded in both countries. In Poland, the debate pivoted on whether or not to admit refugees, whereas in Israel, it centered on the appropriate policy toward asylum seekers already in the country. Consequently, Polish politicians focused on the "love of thy neighbor" principle, with liberals advocating hospitality toward refugees, and hard-liners rejecting refugees. The latter, describing refugees as physical and cultural threats, were hard-pressed to legitimize their choice by employing an alternative religious principle, namely *ordo caritatis*. This allowed them to maintain a dignified position vis-à-vis the Polish electorate, many of whom are devoted Catholics subscribing to the notion of in-group prioritization. Additionally, references to poor economic standing in comparison with other EU members were used to absolve the country from its obligation to provide assistance to asylum seekers.

In Israel, on the other hand, liberal politicians employed "love the foreigner" as a means to push for fair(er) and more just asylum policies. However, they seldom managed to convince the Israeli public, many of whom objected to the asylum system altogether. Hard-liners, who were in favor of a restrictionist asylum policy (e.g., forced removal), employed a Talmudic principle that is the binary opposition of "love the foreigner." Their plea to repatriate migrants, by force if needed, was legitimized by

resorting to the Hebrew version of the well-known "charity begins at home" principle. At times of crisis, so the argument went, it is incumbent to prioritize the needy among the in-group.

The nexus between migration and religion remains a hotly debated topic in both countries at the present time. At the time of writing, investigators of the Israeli Immigration and Population Authority raised "serious doubts" concerning the Jewish roots of some 60 Ethiopian citizens who immigrated to Israel in recent years. Meanwhile, another migration panic is looming in Poland as the country faces a cross-border mobility through its eastern border with Belarus (Grupa Granica, 2021); with migrants/refugees hailing from Muslim-majority countries, like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the Polish state is once again determined to block their entry into the country, quoting irreconcilable cultural (read religious) differences vis-à-vis the local population. Future research ought to explore these religious narratives to better understand how they are (ab)used in crafting national asylum policies.

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