

**Views from the Cabinet
Reflections on The Executive and Legislative Decision Making
Process with a Focus on Reforms and Major Issues**

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**A View from the Israeli Cabinet
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with a Focus on Reforms and Major Issues**

Shimon Shetreet

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Foreign Policy and National Security

Rachel's Tomb and Oslo II

The Jerusalem Post, September 12, 1995

Shetreet hints at trade-off with PA if Jews leave Hebron

RELIGIOUS Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet yesterday hinted at a possible trade-off with the Palestinians if, as part of the final status agreement, Jews are removed from Hebron, saying that in return the Palestinians may lose authority over areas such as Abu Dis and Eizariya near Jerusalem.

"The permanent agreement will have to address all the issues of all the settlements," Shetreet said while on a tour of the Machpela Cave in Hebron. "When the borders are defined, then maybe many areas that are now under control of the Palestinians will have to be removed from Palestinian control, and will become only Israeli."

The final status agreement is an "open question," Shetreet said. Hinting at a possible quid pro quo for removing the settlement in Hebron, Shetreet said, "If we move the 415 Jews from here, maybe Palestinian authority will not be maintained in Abu Dis or Eizariya." Shetreet visited Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem together with Chief Rabbi Yisrael Lau, and then went on alone to Hebron where he visited the Machpela Cave and the old Jewish cemetery, the burial site of victims of the 1929 Arab massacre.

Shetreet said that the redeployment in Hebron will be different from that in the six other Palestinian cities, and that "I hope we will find a way where there will not be two governmental and security apparatuses in Hebron. A mixture of the apparatuses in any framework is not good."

He said that under the interim agreement now being worked out in Eilat, the Machpela Cave will remain as it is now, with half open to Moslems, and half to Jews. He would not say whether or not Palestinian policemen would be stationed in the cave, saying that "I don't want to get into the arrangements because they are not formulated, but in my opinion we should not mix the different authorities."

Shetreet said that the holy places in the territories, some 22 of them, should have the same status as settlements. "If a settlement is not uprooted under the interim agreement, all the more so regarding holy sites," he said.

Regarding whether it makes sense to keep the IDF in Hebron to guard 415 settlers, Shetreet said, "When we signed the Oslo agreement, it was a clear principle that there would be no evacuation of settlements during the interim agreement. It doesn't matter if it is 415 settlers, 25, or 30. The principle has to be strictly implemented, because once you start lifting principles, you can lift others as well."

He said the policy of the government is that in the interim stage Rachel's Tomb will stay under full Israeli authority.

One official involved in the negotiations said that although this is Israel's position, the Palestinians are demanding that it be treated much the same as the Shalom Al Yisrael Synagogue in Jericho, where Palestinians guard the site, but Jews have access.

The Jerusalem Post, October 8, 1995

Inside look at what Oslo 2 says

Which areas are controlled by Israel and which areas are controlled by the Palestinian Authority?

The territories are divided into the following areas:

-- Area A: All eight Palestinian cities (with the exception of the Jewish part of Hebron) will be under total control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The IDF will not be allowed into these cities, with the exception of joining a joint patrol led by the PA on the main road traversing the cities. (Joint patrols begin once IDF redeployment is completed.) On maps, this area is colored brown, comprising about 3 percent of the territories.

-- Area B: In virtually all of the approximately 450 Palestinian villages in the territories, the Palestinians will be able to run their civilian affairs. During the last meeting in Taba, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat succeeded in persuading Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to yield some uninhabited rural areas between villages, especially in such areas between Jenin and Nablus and between Bethlehem and Jerusalem as part of Area B. Area B is colored in yellow, and currently comprises at least 27% of the territories. The IDF has "overriding" security authority over Area B, and there are no restrictions on its ability to enter the area if it deems it necessary to combat terrorism.

At the same time, the PA police will be in charge of all issues related to "public order." In coordination with and after achieving the "confirmation" of the IDF, PA police will be dispatched from one of the 25 stations established in the territories to the villages in question. (There will be eight IDF and PA coordination offices in the territories known as District Coordination Offices.)

-- Area C: Any remaining part of the territories not in Area A or B is automatically part of Area C, which is supposed to comprise settlements, military installations, areas Israel deems to be of strategic security value, or otherwise uninhabited rural areas. This amounts to approximately 70% of the territories, which for now will be entirely under Israeli control.

Are any other IDF pullbacks planned?

Yes. According to the agreement, from the time that the 82-member PA quasi-parliament known as the Council is inaugurated (late January or early February) there will be three more unspecified pullbacks known as "further redeployments," at six-month intervals over the following 18 months (See time line).

This could mean turning parts of Area C into Area B or A, or turning parts of Area B into Area A. At the same time, there is no automatic turnover of Area B into Area A.

Since such pullbacks are not specified, this gives Israel discretion. Some negotiators say privately that they expect the final redeployments to essentially dovetail with the outcome of Israel-PA negotiations on the final status negotiations on territory.

While officially the interim agreement does not "prejudice or

preempt" the outcome of final status negotiations, in practice, it is widely assumed that Israel will claim nothing in areas from which it has already pulled back.

During the interim period, who will control the main roads in the territories?

The IDF is in charge of all main intercity arteries in the territories. At the same time, bypass roads are being built so Israelis can drive around Ramallah and Bethlehem.

According to the agreement, these bypass roads are due to be completed by the end of December. Two bypass roads around Hebron are slated to be completed by the end of

March.

According to the agreement, for the most part, Israeli cars will not be stopped by Palestinian police. However, if Israelis are traveling inside Palestinian cities, they could either be stopped by the IDF side of a joint patrol, or could conceivably be stopped by the PA in those cities in the absence of a joint patrol, but for identification purposes only.

If needed, joint Israeli-PA mobile units can be dispatched to Area B.

Does Israel control Rachel's Tomb or the Machpela Cave?

The estimated 460 meters of Bethlehem leading to Rachel's Tomb will be under Israeli security responsibility and the Tomb (as well as the roof across the street and the parking lot) will be protected by Israeli security forces.

Regarding the Machpela Cave, no agreed solution has been worked out. Until an agreement is reached, the status quo remains in effect.

August 30th 1993

Los Angeles Times, August 30, 1993

PEACE PLAN PUT TO ISRAEL CABINET; MIDEAST: GOVERNMENT MINISTERS HAIL PROPOSAL THAT COULD LEAD TO WITHDRAWAL FROM GAZA STRIP AND JERICHO. OPPONENTS SAY SURVIVAL OF THE NATION IS THREATENED.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin will ask the Israeli Cabinet today to approve a far-reaching "declaration of principles" to be signed with the Palestinians laying the basis for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and for Palestinian self-government on the West Bank.

Israeli ministers Sunday hailed the agreement, worked out in months of secret diplomacy with the Palestine Liberation Organization, as a major step toward resolving the Palestinian problem and ending the Middle East conflict.

But the right-wing opposition angrily condemned the accord as treason, warning that it would put Israel's security and even its survival at risk.

"The government is creating a Palestinian state with its own hands," declared Moshe Katsav, a leader of the opposition Likud Party, "and is endangering the existence of the state of Israel."

Rabin, however, made clear to the Cabinet on Sunday his determination to forge ahead and honor his pledge to accelerate the peace negotiations with Israel's Arab neighbors, ministers said after the meeting.

"All in all, we are talking about an agreement that's ready for the signing," Environment Minister Yossi Sarid said. "I believe there is no doubt that the agreement with the Palestinians will be approved."

Israel is also believed close to recognition of the PLO, which it has long denounced as a terrorist group, in return for reciprocal PLO actions, starting with formal recognition of Israel and its right to exist but also including a denunciation of terrorism and an end to the *intifada*, the Palestinian rebellion against the Israeli occupation.

"To achieve real, stable peace necessarily demands mutual recognition," PLO information chief Yasser Abed Rabbo said in an interview on Israeli Army Radio. "Peace between the courageous requires that courageous steps be taken. I don't think that it is impossible

that there will be a meeting between (Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat) sometime soon."

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, who conducted the clandestine negotiations in Cairo and European capitals, was reported ready to fly to Washington to sign the "declaration of principles" and other accords as soon as formal agreement is reached with Palestinian delegates to the Arab-Israeli peace talks.

In Tunis, Tunisia, as the Palestinian negotiators left PLO headquarters for the resumption of the Washington talks Tuesday, Bassam abu Sharif, another top Arafat aide, said: "We think we are now five minutes from the first concrete steps on the road to peace in the Middle East. We have no illusions that it will be an easy road, but we are taking the first steps."

This evening, Rabin will ask Israeli ministers at a special Cabinet meeting to approve Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho and the transfer of administration of the West Bank to an elected Palestinian government for a five-year period.

This is the operative element of the "declaration of principles," which also lays out the basis for Palestinian self-government that Peres concluded with senior PLO officials who were acting on instructions from Arafat.

Rabin will also seek the ministers' endorsement of two other key documents -- one outlining the contentious issues, such as the future status of Jerusalem and the borders of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, that are being set aside for future negotiations, the other obliging Israel and the Palestinians to work together for the economic development of the occupied territories.

Peres, just back from a hurried trip to California where he outlined the developments for Secretary of State Warren Christopher, briefed the Cabinet on his secret negotiations with the PLO and basked in their warm congratulations, according to Israeli officials who attended the meeting; Rabin then put off discussion so ministers could study the documents.

"There are contradictions between the different documents," Economics Minister Shimon Shetreet, a Cabinet conservative, said. "This is a process that was not carried out in the normal way with the usual accepted public discourse. . . . So, the final results will require a very close examination.

"But I think that what we are talking about is a turning point -- (although) it is not clear in which direction."

The buoyant mood of most ministers, however, and the general optimism among the government's supporters reflected the conviction that the accord will prove to be the long-sought resolution of the Palestinian problem and thus a move that could bring to an end the overall Arab-Israeli conflict.

"Not every day does a government sit and discuss a breakthrough that could really be significant in our relations with the Arab states and particularly the conflict with the Palestinians," Health Minister Chaim Ramon said.

Jubilant over the news that Peres brought but clearly awed by its implications, the dovish Ramon called the agreement "a major breakthrough, a historic moment between Palestinians and the Israeli people after 100 years of conflict, bloodshed and violence."

But the government will find itself under an all-out attack from the right even before the Cabinet has formally approved the agreement. The Likud Party has called for a full de-

bate today in the Knesset, Israel's Parliament, and is planning to follow up with a no-confidence vote.

"This is, in fact, an act of national treason," Uri Ariel, secretary of the Council of Judea, Samaria and Gaza, which represents the 125,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "We are not going to call people to a civil war -- we are opposed to that -- but we are going to call people to a difficult struggle, something beyond the struggles we have already seen."

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud Party chairman, who cut short a visit to the United States and returned to Israel, will meet with other opposition leaders to plot a strategy that would force Rabin to take the issue to the country, either in early parliamentary elections or a referendum.

Katsav warned that the "recapture" by the Palestinians of Jericho, and later other West Bank towns such as Nablus and Janin, would bring demands for their return to Israeli cities that once had been predominantly Arab. "This terrifies us," he said. "It is a real danger for Israel's existence."

Although the full accord has not been released, Israeli officials familiar with its terms said that it provides for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho, which would then be run by Palestinians, including PLO officials, and for the election of a Palestinian government to assume administration of the rest of the West Bank for a five-year period.

Israel would retain control of security, foreign affairs and Jewish settlements, ministers stressed, attempting to allay fears that the very words *Palestinian state* arouse here. "Not a single settlement will move from its place during the autonomy period," Ramon pledged.

The agreement also provides, they said, for Israeli control of entry to Gaza and the West Bank, retention of defense lines along the border with Jordan and a phased redeployment of Israeli forces out of populated areas.

Negotiations would begin in two years on the resolution of the remaining issues, including the future of Jerusalem, which both Israelis and Palestinians claim for their capital. Palestinians living in Arab East Jerusalem, however, would be permitted to vote in West Bank elections.

Sarid, a member of the leftist Meretz Party, described the agreement as "autonomy-plus, sovereignty-minus" -- a compromise between Israel's original offer to the Palestinians of simple administrative autonomy and their demand for complete independence.

"This is a package deal with the Palestinian bosses, a package that allows Israel to fulfill its responsibility for security, its responsibility for the settlements and every Israeli in the (occupied) territories," Sarid said.

Moshe Shahal, the police minister, said a key element in the implementation of the plan will be the establishment of a strong Palestinian police force that will take over internal security from Israeli troops as they withdraw.

"If everything goes smoothly," Shahal said, "we are talking about a few months."

Israeli officials cautioned, however, that many issues must still be resolved, that the Cabinet will give the delegation to the Middle East peace talks in Washington a broad mandate to develop the accord but that the negotiations could prove difficult.

The Jerusalem Post, August 31, 1993

Cabinet approves 'Gaza/Jericho first'

THE cabinet last night approved an historic agreement of principles with the PLO, following a marathon session that lasted till after midnight. All the ministers voted in favor, with Interior Minister Aryeh Deri and Economics Minister Shimon Shetreet abstaining. There seemed little doubt the cabinet would ratify the agreement, after a long day during which most ministers read its terms for the first time. The only question was whether any of them would abstain or vote against the agreement.

As the cabinet met, thousands of protesters demonstrated against the agreement outside the Prime Minister's Office last night. The agreement provides for Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho as a first step towards autonomy in the rest of the territories.

"Every change has its risks, but the time has come to take a chance for peace," Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told coalition members earlier yesterday. "We stand on the verge of a great opportunity."

Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu blasted the proposed plan, which he said threatens the nation's existence.

"You are much worse than (former British prime minister Neville) Chamberlain, because Chamberlain threatened the security and freedom of another nation, while you are threatening the security and freedom of your own nation," Netanyahu told Foreign Minister Shimon Peres during a special Knesset session.

"I hope (the plan) will be accepted unanimously," Communications Minister Shulamit Aloni told reporters during a break in the cabinet session. "This is a great day. I don't understand the commotion outside, especially since no one raised the idea of uprooting any of the settlements."

Health Minister Haim Ramon was equally sanguine. "It's a very serious discussion," he said. "Everyone realizes the heavy responsibility, but also the great opportunity to come to a peace agreement with the Palestinians once and for all."

Ramon said the ministers are "well aware" of the dangers involved in the agreement, "but all the other alternatives are worse." He said the other alternatives are the continued control of Gaza, or the annexation of two million Palestinians.

Deri reportedly told Rabin that since he is unlikely to be a minister in a few days, he would have difficulty voting for a policy for which he will not share responsibility.

Absorption Minister Yair Tsaban cautioned against rushing to formally recognize the PLO. He noted that "mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO - based on the PLO's acceptance of Israel and renunciation of terrorism - has always been a principle of Meretz." But, he added, this is not the time for formal recognition.

The ministers began arriving at the Prime Minister's Office at 7 p.m. Rabin briefed them on the agreement, as did Chief of General Staff Lt. -Gen. Ehud Barak, who talked about security problems which might ensue.

Among the issues Barak raised was what would happen if the IDF pursued a wanted terrorist who fled into the autonomous region of Gaza or Jericho. Barak also discussed where and how the IDF would redeploy.

Chief negotiator Elyakim Rubinstein, who has reportedly been on the verge of resigning since news of the agreement of principles broke Sunday, also briefed the ministers on

how the agreement would impact on the talks in Washington, and its likely ramifications on the other partners to the discussions.

Each cabinet member had the opportunity to voice an opinion, and Economics Minister Shimon Sheetret reportedly expressed reservations that the loose ends that are to be tied up in Washington will turn into major hurdles.

In Washington, American officials welcomed the advance toward concluding a declaration of principles, but pushed both Israel and the Palestinians to hammer out an agreement when peace talks resume today.

"We hope and expect that this progress will now be reflected in the next negotiating round, and will lead to an early agreement on the draft declaration of principles," State Department spokesman Mike McCurry told reporters.

President Bill Clinton told reporters he is "very much encouraged" by progress in the peace talks. "The administration has worked very hard to facilitate" the talks, he said, adding that "ultimately whatever happens will have to be done by the parties themselves."

Labor Party Secretary-General Nissim Zvilli said the Palestinians would be given the choice of forming their own state after a five-year period of autonomy

"I think the choice must be made by the Palestinian people itself after the five-year period, during which they will try autonomy in the Gaza Strip, Jericho, and all the territories," he told the French television station TF1.

National Economic and Social Policies

New Guarantors Protection Law

The Jerusalem Post, March 12, 1992

Knesset blows it on mortgage bill

The legislative attempt by MK Shimon Shetreet to force the mortgage banks into the 20th century has failed.

On Tuesday the Knesset voted against the main provision of his proposed law, which would have done away with potential mortgagees' need to provide five guarantors.

The law itself has been returned to the Knesset Law Committee in preparation for its third reading next week. Justice Minister Dan Meridor is so openly opposed to the bill, however, that there is every chance it will not reach the plenum before the election recess. The unusually wide opposition to this bill requires detailed consideration:

* The Mortgage Banks: The present Dickensian system, whereby householders with large mortgages can sit forever in their properties, while their guarantors are imprisoned as a means to force payment, has been shown to be both absurd and patently unfair.

Yet the banks, largely owned but not controlled by the government, claim that without this system, which does not exist anywhere else in the Western world, they could not give mortgages to the lower income earners.

In the UK, however, many householders are offered 95% mortgages by building societies

that seem to thrive. At the very extreme no bank should be allowed to offer mortgages or loans to anyone if it is felt that he/she can not make the necessary repayments.

Banks can make mistakes and a mortgagee's financial position can deteriorate. These are the reasons banks take a lien on the property. The question of its disposal should return to the bank, in most cases, not the outstanding mortgage.

* Manufacturers Association: President Dov Lautman accused the supporters of the bill of pushing through the Knesset "populist laws" that had not been properly considered. This particular proposal was tabled in the Knesset 21 months ago. His voice was not raised loudly when two other populist laws were recently debated - the Gal and Shamai laws. Both of these will cost over a billion shekels each, whereas Shetreet's will not cost a penny.

It seems dangerous in the long run for a democracy to give the word "popular" a derogatory meaning.

* Bank of Israel governor Jacob Frenkel: The stability of the banking system is undoubtedly important, and it is somewhat surprising that he did not feel the need to discuss the proposed changes in the law with the relevant Knesset committee.

However, in view of the small number of defaulters it seems that these changes which will only apply to new mortgagees are unlikely to affect any of the major commercial banks, unless their soundness is much more suspect than we are led to believe.

In any case, the Gal Law - which wipes out a substantial portion of moshav debt - rather than the present suggestions, should have been the cause for him to speak out. The former law retroactively adjusts relations between two commercial parties - not likely to be popular with Israel's paymasters or potential investors. The latter would have brought Israel's mortgage practices in line with those of the Western world.

* The builders: These should be the last to complain. Just imagine if Azorim wanted a loan for a new building project. After being checked out by the bank's credit department and found to be worthy, the bank demands that in order to receive the loan the project will have to be mortgaged to the bank and, additionally, the company will have to provide guarantors from five other construction companies. This may sound crazy, but no more so than the present system.

The impression that one is left with is that the mortgage banks brought pressure to bear on their largest customers, the builders, most of whom have large unguaranteed debts with the same mortgage banks.

Even if the law is passed in its present version, the pathetic demand for guarantors will now remain. What a pity.

The Jerusalem Post, March 24, 1993

BUSINESS BRIEFS

New guarantor protection law takes effect today:

Guarantors will be afforded protection from lenders as the amendment to the law of loan guarantees becomes effective today. The amendment, proposed by MK Shimon Shetreet and adopted a year ago, requires lenders to exhaust all possible means to collect a loan from the borrower before turning to the guarantors for payment. Lenders are required to get a court judgment against the borrower and the court authorization that all reasonable proceedings against the borrower were undertaken, including foreclosing on the property. The new regulations require lenders to distribute proportionately the debt among guarantors. They also require the guarantee to explicitly state a set sum, forbid unlimited guar-

antees and limit the interest on late payments to 4% over the rate of the loan. The new law also applies to loans given out before the regulations became effective.

Grey Market Interest Rate Limits

4. *The Jerusalem Post, February 18, 1993*

Business Briefs

Maximum set for 'gray market' interest rate:

The maximum interest rate on "gray market" loans will be twice the average effective interest rate on unlinked shekel loans given by the banks, the cabinet subcommittee on economics decided yesterday. Average lending rates are published by the Bank of Israel every month. For fixed-rate loans, the relevant average will be the last one published at the time the loan was made, while for variable-rate loans, it will be the last average published at the time of each payment. The committee also decided that late payment penalties will not exceed one-quarter of the actual cost of the loan to the lender. According to a decision by the cabinet subcommittee on legislation earlier this week, the new limits will be put into effect by a cabinet decree immediately while work continues on preparing the requisite legislation.

Law and Religion

Burial Reforms

The Jerusalem Post, July 6, 1995

Shetreet unveils burial reforms

RELIGIOUS Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet yesterday unveiled reforms designed to make burial in the country more user-friendly.

The reforms follow reports last month that Tel Aviv burial society employees make astronomical wages, with the director making NIS 76,000 a month, and grave-diggers grossing NIS 16,700.

Shetreet was speaking to members of dozens of burial societies at a meeting at Jerusalem's Bible Lands Museum. Afterward, the officials renewed their business licenses after signing an agreement to comply with the reforms.

Among the main points of the reform are:

Burial societies, except for those which serve one specific ethnic community or sector of the population, must set aside in their cemeteries a special section for people whose Jewishness is uncertain.

The burial societies will allow gravestone inscriptions in languages other than Hebrew.

The maximum wage of burial society heads and their workers will not be more than three times the country's average salary, currently NIS 4,300 a month.

Every burial society will be obliged to have a public representative on its board of directors.

The Religious Affairs Ministry is in the process of establishing set prices for burial services and special plots, such as plots next to relatives.

In addition to special sections in each cemetery for those whose Jewishness is in question, the ministry is also setting up cemeteries for those who do not want to or are un-

able to be buried in Jewish cemeteries according to halacha.

Shetreet said the ministry is also setting up a 24-hour hot line with burial information, as well as a consumer protection agency for those who have to arrange funerals.

In addition, the ministry is re-evaluating its policy regarding burials of foreign residents.

Shetreet said that one of the possibilities being considered is that these people will no longer be allowed to be buried in public cemeteries, but rather in private cemeteries that will be set up for them.

The reforms were not universally applauded.

Simha Meron, head of Kehilot Yerushalayim, Jerusalem's largest burial society, exchanged angry words with Shetreet, saying he has no legal right to set conditions for burial societies that are not run by the religious councils.

"It would be like a government trying to dictate policy to the Israel Museum," he said after the meeting. "Many of the burial societies are private non-profit organizations, and he cannot dictate policy."

Meron threatened court action if some of the guidelines are not changed.

Meron also complained that Shetreet had drawn up his reforms without first consulting the burial societies.

Shetreet responded, "We do not have to ask the head of every burial society before making a decision. There are people in the ministry who are well versed on the matter."

Marriage Reforms

The Jerusalem Post, June 22, 1995

150,000 Israelis can't marry here

MORE than 150,000 Israelis, who claim to be Jewish, are ineligible for marriage here under Jewish law, Religious Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet reported to the Knesset Law Committee yesterday.

The vast majority are people not considered halachicly Jewish, many of them new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. There are also 3,750 Jews on the blacklist of those prohibited from marrying other Jews, Shetreet said. Shetreet appeared before the committee to explain his recent attempts at reform of that list. He explained that several rabbis, under the auspices of Chief Sephardi Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron, are reviewing it.

In the few weeks since the issue was raised, more than 1,000 names have been already been eliminated, and the list is expected to be reduced further. It contained names of people who have already died, and others who simply did not belong on it.

Shetreet said that for years no one had reviewed the list, which was kept in a computer, until he had insisted on getting a copy of it several weeks ago.

When a couple wanted to marry, their identification numbers would be sent by the local rabbinate to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. A clerk would punch in their identity numbers and if one of them appeared on the list, they would be told they could not.

"They (the Ministry of Religious Affairs) let couples know, on average, two weeks before the wedding," Shetreet said. "If one of the names appeared on the list, the couple would

be forced to cancel the wedding."

There were a few instances in which people committed suicide when they found out they could not marry, Shetreet said. However, he rejected the call for civil marriage. "There is not a national consensus for civil marriage, in addition to the religious problems involved," he said.

At the same time, he repeated his call that the state should pay the expenses of those people who wish to be married abroad. "The minimum of the minimum the state can do is say we'll worry about subsidizing an alternative way to get married," he said.

Committee Chairman Dedi Zucker (Meretz) said many people are finding alternatives to religious state marriages. He noted that the number of marriages per year has remained unchanged since 1974, while the population has almost doubled.

If people are ineligible to marry here, many of them go to Cyprus, while other get a certificate of marriage from Paraguay through the mail.

The Jerusalem Post, September 8, 1995

The job Shetreet was waiting for

RELIGIOUS Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet struck again last week, bitterly antagonizing the religious establishment when he criticized the rabbinate for demanding that potential converts adopt a haredi way of life.

"The rabbis in our generation are making it very difficult for those who want to convert, and are asking them to become haredim," he said. "If someone immigrates from abroad, they (the rabbis) want the children to study in a haredi school. It is not enough to fast on Yom Kippur or keep Shabbat." Statements such as these have not been rare in the seven months of Shetreet's tenure at the Religious Affairs Ministry, a reign some thought would just be window dressing, just an attempt to keep the office chair warm until Shas rejoined the government.

But Shas has failed to rejoin the government, and Shetreet has shown - mostly through declaration, but also through action - that he is intent on shaking up the system.

As a result, his detractors are numerous, with some haredi MKs threatening to turn the minister himself into the subject of a no-confidence vote.

"He should not express an opinion on matters of Halacha," says United Torah Judaism MK Avraham Ravitz. "Conversion is not a simple issue, it works according to principles. You can't make a governmental argument out of it."

Shas's Shlomo Benizri was even more blunt. "What does he have to do with conversion?" he says. "Why is he now making an issue out of conversion? Why does he want to make a sensation now? He is not going to tell the Air Force what requirements to set for entering pilot-training courses, and he should not get involved in what is needed to convert."

Hardly a week goes by when Shetreet is not in the news in his capacity as religious affairs minister, either for proposing ministerial reform, or making a statement about how he thinks religious life here should be managed.

Ravitz, Benizri and a good part of the haredi world that has declared war on Shetreet have no doubt that his bringing up issues such as civil marriages, a marriage blacklist, mismanagement of burial societies and conversion is nothing more than cheap electioneering. The secular public loves to hate the haredim and the religious establishment,

their argument runs, so Shetreet gains popularity points when he "provokes" the haredim.

"The whole thing is a bluff," Ravitz maintains. "The Religious Affairs Ministry doesn't matter to him. He is just campaigning for the primaries."

Shetreet, in an interview, dismisses the criticism. "Anytime I want to do something good, people say it is for the primaries. When I was against the capital gains tax, people said, 'primaries.' But what kind of argument is that?"

"You have to judge whether what is being done is good or bad for the Jewish people, if it is something necessary or not. If it is needed, and it brings me popularity, then let the zealots suffer."

Supporters of Shetreet, such as Uri Regev, head of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, say that the primaries argument is unfair. Over the years, Shetreet has developed a thesis of religious-state relations that he is now in a position to implement, Regev says.

To back up his argument, Regev pointed to a master's thesis Shetreet wrote in 1970 while a student of law at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The thesis, called "Freedom of Conscience and Religion," argues that the state has no right to enforce measures such as making it mandatory for a woman to immerse herself in a mikve before marriage and making kashrut certification dependent on whether an institution observes Shabbat. In addition, he advocated state recognition of conversions performed by Conservative and Reform rabbis both here and abroad.

Regev says that the thesis is an indication that Shetreet is not shooting from the hip, but rather that he has carefully thought out ideas about relations between the state and religion.

Which is exactly what concerns Shetreet's critics.

"The religious affairs minister needs to know his position," says Ravitz. "Compare the position to another ministry, say the Health Ministry. The position of the health minister is to help the world of medicine, not change the world of medicine. The same is the case here. What he is trying to do is comparable to a health minister coming in and saying that a patient should take penicillin once a day, instead of three times a day."

Shetreet says he is not interfering with Halacha, and he is just using his authority to make administrative changes in the ministry.

Among the changes is the new requirement that burial societies be licensed by the government. In order to receive licenses, however, they have to obligate themselves to setting aside a plot of land in the cemetery for people whose Jewishness is questionable, and to allow Latin letters on headstones.

The requirements to set aside land and allow non-Hebrew letters on headstones interferes with Halacha, Shetreet's critics maintain.

"The social reality has changed dramatically as a result of the fact that a large number of people whose Jewishness is in question have arrived in the influx of immigration," Shetreet says.

Shetreet says the state can't keep 100,000, whose Jewishness is in question, from marrying in the country or force them to go abroad - at their own expense - to get married. The state, he argues, must find alternatives, and as such the ministry will help organizations that are being set up to subsidize the trips of these people abroad to get married in

civil ceremonies.

Within 10 years, he estimated, there will be civil marriages available for these people in Israel. "There is no other alternative."

Regarding conversions, Shetreet says the rabbinate is converting about 1,000 new immigrants a year, a drop in the bucket in relation to the number of non-Jewish immigrants arriving, estimated variously at between 15 percent and 35% of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Since the religious establishment is not keeping pace, there will have to be changes in the marriage and burial services provided people who are neither Jewish, Christian nor Moslem. "You can't leave people without those services," he says.

The "critical mass" is being formed "that will dictate major changes. The society is changing before our very eyes."

Funding for Religious Institutions

The Jerusalem Post, April 2, 1995

Shetreet: New criteria soon for yeshiva allocations

NEW criteria for financial allocations to yeshivot are to be publicized within a few weeks, Religious Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet said Friday, following the first meeting of a committee formed to set them.

Shetreet added that the committee had been formed to examine several matters, including the methods used in examining requests for funding, coming up with suggestions about changing this system where necessary, method of payment and the overall monitoring of the system. The minister stressed that the criteria for allocations would be compared with those employed in other ministries, which fund institutions similar to those funded by the Religious Affairs Ministry. Funding of the yeshivot will be handled first, with discussions focusing on payments made per student based on standard criteria such as the student's age, the location of the yeshiva, special services it offers, etc.

The committee has already received several suggestions on how to set the criteria, ways of overseeing the allocation process, and other matters.

1st and 2nd child allowance

The Jerusalem Post, February 11, 1993

5. Child allowance boost in March

ALL families will begin receiving child allowances for their first and second children in March, rather than in April as originally planned, the Treasury announced yesterday.

Currently, families with less than four children only receive National Insurance Institute payments for their first and second children if they earn less than 95 percent of the average wage, or about NIS 2,970 a month. Although the government decided in December to give the allowances to all families, the change was not supposed to take effect until April, to give the NII time to organize itself.

Since the preparations are now finished, however, the Treasury decided to begin payments in March.

According to NII spokeswoman Chana Keren-Ya'ar, the payments will be made automatically - new recipients will not need to come to the NII and register. The institute is now finalizing the procedures, she said, and will publish them next week.

Some 360,000 families will benefit from the change - mainly middle-and upper-class families with one to three children. In most cases, these families' income will rise by NIS 90-NIS 205 a month.

Families with four or more children who earn NIS 4,000-NIS 12,000 a month will see their take-home pay decline slightly, as will families in this income range with no children. Families earning less than NIS 3,000 a month will gain only NIS 7-NIS 11 a month from the changes.

The greatest beneficiaries will be families earning more than NIS 12,000 a month, with one to three children. Their families' income will rise by NIS 239 a month.

About 50 percent of the cost of restoring the allowances will be covered by changes in the tax code, which were approved by the Knesset finance committee this week. The Treasury has not yet determined how it will finance the remainder.

6. Prohibitive Mortgage Rate

The Jerusalem Post, September 19, 1994

7. Cabinet rejects plan to compensate mortgage holders

In a heated debate during which Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin broke his gavel trying to restore order, the cabinet yesterday rejected Economics Minister Shimon Shetreet's proposal to compensate everyone who took out a mortgage between 1980 and 1985 - the years of hyperinflation - for being too costly at NIS 1.5 billion.

Instead, the cabinet reaffirmed the policy established by former finance minister Yitzhak Moda'i and former housing minister Ariel Sharon, which allows for reducing interest payments on mortgages that are more than nine percent a month. However, the cabinet agreed to loosen the criteria on a case-by-case basis.

During the period of 1980-1985, inflation averaged 9% a month, and Moda'i and Sharon established that the victims of the high interest mortgages who paid rates higher than that could qualify for compensation, based on the price of the apartment and on the individual's income.

A joint Treasury-Housing Ministry committee currently deals with severe cases of financial distress due to those mortgages, proposing arrangements to improve their financial situation.

The committee assists approximately 500 families a year. The new criteria are aimed at making it easier to provide assistance on a case-by-case basis.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's spokesman Benny Cohen said the cabinet rejected Shetreet's proposal, since the government has no list of all the people affected and because many of those who took out mortgages during that period have already paid them.

Cohen also said the cabinet approved a 13.5% hike on rent payments for rent-controlled apartments based on inflation.

