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On: 26 June 2013, At: 05:35

Publisher: Routledge

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Contemporary Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccpo20>

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Published online: 21 May 2007.

To cite this article: Omri Shamir & Guy Ben-Porat (2007): Boycotting for Sabbath: religious consumerism as a political strategy, *Contemporary Politics*, 13:1, 75-92

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569770701246245>

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Boycotting for Sabbath: religious consumerism as a political strategy

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Such prosperity, whole emporia dedicated to cheeses, ribbons, Shaker furniture, is protection of a sort. This commercial wellbeing is robust and will defend itself to the last. It isn't rationalism that will overcome the religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails—jobs for a start, and peace, and some commitment to realizable pleasures, the promise of appetites sated in this world, not the next. Rather shop than pray. Ian McEwan, *Saturday*

The advent of the global economy and consumer culture are powerful secularizers of the public sphere that seem to erode the religious hold on economic life. But, globalization also produces new modes of political action that can be used by religious groups to regain their power in the political, social and economic sphere. Religious groups, for example, can attempt to use their purchasing power to reshape the secularizing public sphere and re-enforce traditional values. Israel provides an interesting example of this trend, as the religious who lost much of their influence over the political and public sphere seek new channels of influence to curb secularizing trends underscored by globalization, the market economy and consumer culture.

Consumer boycott campaigns, where citizens act collectively and use their purchasing power to achieve economic, social or political objectives, have become commonplace in recent years. When people engage in boycotts they are said to engage in the act of 'political consumerism', as they choose particular products or producers in order to change institutional or market practices. The steady rise—and effectiveness—of political consumerism suggests that it should be included in the research of civic and political participation.¹ Boycotts have been used to advance environmental concerns, human rights issues and consumer demands, and have been directed against companies and governments targeted for unethical behaviour. This article examines the use of political consumerism in religious–secular struggles, where religious groups attempt to defend the public sphere from the secularizing influence of consumerism. Specifically, we look at the struggles of religious groups in Israel and Britain to prevent commercial

activity on the days of rest (Saturday and Sunday, respectively) and protect existing regulation. We are interested in learning, first, whether boycotts have become part of the religious–secular struggle and, second, to estimate their real and potential impact.

Consumerism is, on the one hand, a powerful force in the secularization of the public sphere and, as such, is part of the struggle between religious and secular forces. However, on the other hand, religious groups, themselves often part of the emerging consumer culture, can use their power as consumers in this struggle. The use of political consumerism, as we argue below, is more likely in cases where religious groups find the political arena ineffective. The religious day of rest, Saturday or Sunday, in the context of an emerging consumer society is often the source of struggle between entrepreneurs who cater to the shopping desires of the public on the day of rest and religious groups that demand the preservation of the special, religious character of the day.

In Israel, our main case study, significant changes have occurred in patterns of consumption and culture, as over the past three decades it has gradually turned into a western-type affluent society, with more ‘hedonistic’ values, open to foreign cultural influences and deeply engaged in consumption. The proliferation of consumerist behaviour and values in Israel has also influenced secular–religious tensions as it has undermined previous arrangements that regulated the public sphere. If in earlier years, for example, commercial activity on Saturday was restricted, since the early nineties shopping centres located outside city centres cater to the desires of a growing secular public. A recent survey estimated that an average of 600,000 people participate in commercial activities on Saturdays.² Similarly, restrictions on non-kosher meat products are defied by large numbers of non-kosher restaurants and shops across the country.

The public sphere, therefore, is secularized by consumerist demand and behaviour that changes the character of the Sabbath. For the religious public, the commercialization and secularization of the public sphere constitutes a significant threat resilient to their political power in the parliament, traditionally used to protect their interests and what they define as the ‘Jewish character of the state’. In the attempt to use their power as consumers, the orthodox public in Israel seems to follow other examples of boycotts used elsewhere and, consequently, allow a theoretical-comparative examination of this strategy.

The dilemmas described above are not unique to Israel, as in several other countries the ‘blue laws’ that regulate the days of rest are challenged by commercial entrepreneurs interested in extending the hours and days of operation. In the UK, another example used in this paper, the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, was formed to curb entrepreneurial demands. Unlike in Israel, however, this campaign is waged primarily in the political arena. The purpose of this study is to examine the commercial-economic strategies employed by the religious public to fight commercial activity on days of rest. We find that the use of consumer power is a relatively new development, as in earlier struggles over the public sphere the religious public combined large-scale demonstrations with intensive political lobbying against what it perceived as breaches of the status quo. However, as elaborated below, the growing independence of the economic sphere, on the one hand, and the

weakening of the political sphere, on the other hand, have forced religious leaders to seek different strategies.

As these developments are rather new, this article is exploratory in nature and based on documentation of struggles in the media and open-ended interviews with political entrepreneurs involved in the campaigns in Israel. We begin with a general theoretical discussion of consumer boycotts as a political strategy. In the second part, we analyse the changes in Israel and their implications for the religious public. In the third part, we describe the British Keep Sunday Special Campaign and the attempts of religious groups in Israel to use their consumer power as a political tool in the struggle over the Sabbath. Overall, we find that, to date, religious consumer politics has been able to create a market for products designed for the orthodox public, but has had limited influence and has been unable to curb the commercialization of the Sabbath.

Politics and consumer power

Political consumerism is an emerging, if at times neglected, form of participation as traditional forms of political engagement are losing ground.³ The study of consumer involvement in politics is related to the relationship between the consumer, citizenship and the state as it establishes both the extent to which the state can intervene in issues of consumption and the extent to which the consumer is active in the political process.⁴ The choices consumers make between products can extend beyond tastes, prices and values to moral-political considerations. Indeed, consumers are often called to make the right choice to prefer certain products for the way they are produced, environmentally and socially. In 1997, some 800 products, not to mention countries and states, were targeted for boycotts world-wide.⁵

The ability of consumers to act collectively and prefer, for different reasons, one product over another can have important implications for companies, influence their policies and force 'corporate responsibility'. Thus, consumers can use their purchasing power as a kind of a vote that is capable, among other things, of 'educating' corporate giants.⁶ Consumption and the self-reflexive consumer are part of what Giddens describes as 'life-style politics', characteristic of late modernity.⁷ The political and ethical choices consumers make as they use their 'purchase votes' attempt to shape the society of which they want to be part and are considered an alternative form of political participation. This is the case because, as on the one hand citizens increasingly develop a lack of trust in government and political parties⁸ and, on the other hand, states lose control over the authoritative allocation of values in society, new arenas for political participation are sought.⁹ Critics of this approach, however, argue, first, that consumerism weakens the genuine or the idealized rational discussions of the public sphere and, second, that consumer struggles are usually single-issue campaigns that do not translate into wider struggles.¹⁰

Theorists of marketing contend that in the global economy market power has shifted from producer to consumers. Accordingly, the use of boycotts has been found to be on the rise in recent years, though their specific impact on firms is hard to assess.¹¹ The business press appeared to agree in the nineties that consumer boycotts were effective and were increasing in number, as *The Economist* concluded: 'consumer boycotts are becoming an epidemic for one simple reason: they work'.¹²

A consumer boycott was defined as 'an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace'.¹³ Boycotts are an instrument for consumers to demonstrate discontent and increase corporate sensitivity to their economic, political and social concerns. Boycotts constitute an organized, collective, but non-mandatory refusal to consume a good. This effort can aim either at changing marketing practices such as lowering a price, or coercing their targets toward specific ethical or socially responsible actions.¹⁴

Boycotts can be divided into 'economic boycotts' typically aimed at lowering consumer prices (or improving services) and 'political boycotts', more relevant to the current study, that are directed at social change.¹⁵ Consumer boycotts, therefore, are marketplace means to what may or may not be marketplace ends.¹⁶ To achieve political ends through market means, consumers can also use a positive approach of organized action and engage in 'procotts' or 'buycotts' to support the production and purchase of goods and services they find ethical and to promote groups and issues with which they identify. Consumer buycotts attempt to induce shoppers to buy the products or services of selected companies in order to reward them for behaviour that is consistent with the goals of the activists. Calls for buycotts can either direct consumers to a specific product or publish lists or seals of approval that identify recommended products, services and firms.¹⁷

The study of political consumerism has to take account of actual behaviour, motivation and frequency¹⁸ and, consequently, raises several questions: Who are political consumers? What are their values? And what groups are more likely than others to participate in boycotts or buycotts? Like other instances of collective action, boycotts (and buycotts) are vulnerable to free-rider problems that limit the incentive for participation.¹⁹ Research indicates that consumers who find a company's action to be egregious are more likely to boycott, but there are other important variables such as the boycottter's desire to change the world, feeling of guilt or satisfaction for consuming or not consuming a boycotted product, the rationalizations available for not participating and the costs of participation.²⁰ Garret hypothesized six possible factors for boycott participation: the awareness of consumers; the values of potential consumer participants; the consistency of boycott goals with participants' attitudes; the cost of participation; social pressure; and the credibility of the boycott leadership.²¹ Klein *et al.* found self-enhancement and need for consistency to be one explanation for boycott participation.²² Sen *et al.* described the boycott decision as a social dilemma in which individual interests are at odds with the collective interests.²³ People are likely to take part in the boycott if they truly identify with the cause, if they believe others will do the same, if they hold the cost of the boycott as not too high and if they believe that the boycott will succeed.

Research suggests that people's consumption decisions are strongly influenced by their reference groups. Consequently, their decision to boycott is influenced not only by their identification with the boycott's objectives, but also their identification with the group itself.²⁴ One assumption is that social capital, the embeddedness in voluntary associations, is likely to help overcome collective action problems involved in boycotts.²⁵ Stated differently, the trade-offs consumers make between individual incentives and group commitments are likely to hinge significantly on the social pressure they feel to comply with the behaviour

of relevant reference groups. Thus, the size, identity and interdependence of the group, the amount and nature of communication and commitment within groups and the identifiability of group members are all factors that influence the decision to participate in boycotts and, consequently, their success.²⁶

Consumption norms include formal and informal rules that constrain the range of choices. They provide a shared frame of reference and a common ground for communication.²⁷ This could affect individuals 'positively' by directing them to certain commodities or 'negatively' by prohibiting others. Religions often promote a framework of ethics that influences consumption.²⁸ Because boycotts mean individuals have to make some sacrifices in favour of a common good or goal, it is logical to assume that religious groups in general would have an advantage in promoting such campaigns. The religious commitment to shared values, and often their commanding leadership, can reduce uncertainties and defections and, consequently, make co-operation and compliance with boycotts more likely. Religion provides its followers with a coherent and stable set of norms and values that underscore their identity, and individuals with religious beliefs can use consumption to express their commitment to religion.²⁹

Religious values and norms often clash with hedonistic consumer culture as the market economy frees itself from earlier constraints, religious arrangements among them, in favour of rules of demand and supply. Shopping, noted Benjamin Barber in his study of globalization, 'has little tolerance for blue laws, whether dictated by pub-closing British paternalism, Sabbath-observing Jewish Orthodox, or no-Sunday liquor-sale Massachusetts Puritanism'.³⁰ The struggle to change restriction of retail hours is an example of this debate as these public policy initiatives involve a debate on several registers. Restrictions were used to protect employees, small businesses, family values and religious norms. However, longer working hours, the entry of more women to the labour market and changes in consumption habits, on the one hand, and competition between entrepreneurs, on the other hand, created demands to extend the hours of retail activity, including the weekends.³¹

In Israel and in Britain, commercial activity, or its potential, threatens to undermine the character of the day of rest, to the dismay of religious groups. Considering the economic incentives to operate on days of rest, the political arena and the use of state regulation and enforcement to protect the day of rest might be a better option. But, if the political arena does not yield the desired results, political consumerism might be an alternative. The current political situation in Israel, we argue in the next section, encourages the religious sector to organize as ethical consumers against the secularization of the public sphere and to protect the special character of the Sabbath. This action can be described as an 'instrumental boycott' that is designed to coerce the target to change a disputed policy. The success of a boycott depends on the following conditions: (a) consumers care about the boycott issues and objectives; (b) it is successfully executed; and (c) its execution is likely to lead to the desired consequences specified by the boycott objectives.³² Studying the prospects of the boycott for the Sabbath in Israel, we propose that it satisfies the first condition, but less so the latter two. Thus, while the religious sectors care deeply about the Sabbath, their ability to boycott effectively remains limited. Also, considering, the economic incentives to operate on the Sabbath and, in contrast, the economic

limits of the religious groups (one of the poorest sectors in Israel), achieving the desired consequences is difficult.

Keeping Sunday special

Since the 1960s, British society has been secularizing, as different indices show the decline of the importance of religion in public and private life. 'Across the board, the British people started to reject the role of religion in their lives—in their marriage, as a place to baptize their children, as an institution to send their children to Sunday school and church recruitment, and as a place for affiliation'.³³ These changes have also had an important impact on the status of Sunday, as church attendance declined and, conversely, shopping has been on the rise. The relation between the two trends is not entirely clear, as it is possible that (some) people attend church on Sunday morning and visit the shopping mall in the afternoon. Thus, there is no necessary correlation between secularization, defined in declining levels of religious participation, and the increasing incidence of Sunday trading.³⁴

The issue of commercial activity on Sunday, however, turned into a controversy between retailers who deliberately flouted the Sunday restriction and were aided by the local authorities who were reluctant to prosecute, and religious groups that struggled to 'protect Sunday'. The Trading Act of 1994 allowed small shops (280 square feet) to open freely on Sunday and large shops to open for six continuous hours between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. Since 1994, there has been steady growth in the number of retail outlets, large town-centre and out-of-town stores. Major retailers and shopping centres located outside city centres pressured the government to lift all restrictions on trading on Sunday and allow more 'consumer choice' in the matter. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) conducted a review of the Act in early 2006 to consider whether to extend opening hours to 9 hours or to remove restrictions entirely.

Opposition to the commercialization of Sunday was raised by several groups and included an organized campaign, 'Keep Sunday Special' (KSS), that was launched in 1985 to prevent the opening of shops on Sundays in the UK. The opening of shops on Sunday, according to the campaign, has adverse consequences for workers, families and society at large. While the campaign is closely related to the churches, the arguments against the extension of Sunday trading hours examined by the DTI were indirectly related to religion, if at all. The arguments focused on workers' rights, family life, protecting small businesses and tolerance—allowing people to maintain their (Christian) faith. Overall, the campaign stressed the necessity of a day of rest for individual health, family life and social capital.³⁵

Against the claims of the KSS that shopping on Sunday erodes family life, business organizations (whose campaign was titled 'My Sunday, My Choice') argued that shopping centres provide a space for leisure and that the extension of shopping hours is something that both consumers and shop workers want. Both campaigns presented polls that supported their claim for or against business operation on Sunday.³⁶ The KSS campaign primarily took the form of traditional politics, with petitions signed by supporters and appeals made to members of parliament on behalf of their constituencies.

Eventually, the DTI concluded that the current Sunday hours would not be changed.

Israel: church and state

The Jewish religion prohibits work and commerce on Saturday—the Jewish Sabbath. The sacredness of the Sabbath is mentioned several times in the Bible, in Exodus (20: 8–10), for example:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

These commandments were translated into a variety of prohibitions of travel and work on the Sabbath that in modern times often defined levels of religiosity, separated observant Jews from non-observant Jews and, under Jewish statehood, underscored many secular–religious debates.

In the early years of statehood, tacit agreements between the religious and secular communities known as the ‘status quo’ regulated the relationship between the groups. These agreements were designed to maintain unity among the Jewish groups in pre-statehood, which was perceived as necessary for nation and state building. The observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest was one of the issues related to the disagreement over the status of Jewish law (Halacha) and its relevance for public policy and national identity. The status quo as a conflict-neutralizing mechanism ‘froze’ early arrangements established in the pre-state period to ensure the co-operation of the orthodox population. The arrangements included keeping public institutions kosher (Jewish dietary rules), and orthodox domination over matters of marriage and divorce and the observance of the Sabbath as the official day of rest.³⁷ According to the status quo, ‘secular’ practices on the Sabbath and holidays, including commercial activity, were restricted.

The Working Hour and Rest Law authorized the Minister of Labour to permit work on rest days ‘if he is convinced that ceasing work . . . is liable to inflict major damage on the economy, on an ongoing work project, or on the provision of a vital service to the public or to a part of it’.³⁸ Naturally, the law was interpreted differently by religious and secular groups, and its implementation was often decided by the political affiliation of the Minister of Labour. These differences were resolved by informal agreements and local arrangements between orthodox and secular communities or, at times, brought to the Israeli Supreme Court for adjudication. Overall, under restrictive economic conditions and a dominant culture of collectivism and a simple way of life, commercial activity was a relatively minor issue in religious–secular relations.

With the globalization and liberalization of Israeli society and the economy in the nineties, the question of commercial activity on Saturdays became more pertinent as the operation of businesses became a striking example of the crumbling status quo. Two interrelated developments underscore the commercial activity on

Saturdays: a demographic change caused by the mass immigration of mostly secular Jews from the former USSR; and the rapid development of a consumer society influenced by global economic and cultural changes that transformed the life-styles and leisure habits of many Israelis. The status quo was established in the pre- and early years of statehood when Israel was a developing society, relatively closed to world influence and ideologically committed to nation and state building projects. In this context, the non-commercial character of the Sabbath was hardly a sacrifice for the secular majority whose collectivist ideology disdained hedonism and its consumption was limited by available income; but, as Israel has gradually turned away from austerity towards affluence, secular perceptions, interests and demands have changed so that the status quo was rejected ideologically or in practice.

In the nineties the economy experienced a wave of growth resembling that of the East Asian 'Tigers' and living standards were within the reach of the rich OECD democracies. Economic growth in Israel was matched by an 'Americanization' of Israeli society that included the introduction of consumerist behaviour and values, leisure activities and entertainment patterns and life-styles into Israeli society, which had been relatively closed. By the nineties, the cultural change in Israeli society was striking. US fast food and retail chains had been established across Israel, a new language imbued with English words and slang was used, rock music and other (mostly) US musical influences and a multi-channelled commercial television became the norm. The affluence, openness to foreign cultural influences, 'hedonistic' values and consumerism were attested by the increase in the number of motor vehicles, electrical appliances and, later, cellular phones and internet access. By 2001, many sorts of outdoor shopping malls had sprung up throughout Israel. Entrepreneurs and urban planners tend to give names such as BIG and Mega to these sites and generally refer to them as 'power centres' since they represent large national and international businesses and big money. Blind to the constraints of religiosity, ethnicity or family connections, these shopping centres speak to modernity and link Israelis of all sorts to the wide, western and mainly the US world of plenty.³⁹

The demand for shopping on Saturday has quickly found its supply with business entrepreneurs who discovered a way to attract more and more consumers, to the dismay of the seemingly helpless religious public. Revenues of the shops open on Saturdays were reported to be three times greater than on weekdays and, therefore, a great advantage for the shopping centres outside city centres that are open on Saturdays.⁴⁰ The growing consumer demand, a result of the developments described above, is the force behind the changes and the growing number of shopping centres outside city centres. As one store manager explained:

These are the facts of life. In Israel, Saturday is the only day for family time. Some go to synagogue, others go to the swimming pool, and many prefer to spend the day shopping.⁴¹

Religious parties' demands that the government enforce the law and shut down businesses that operate on the Sabbath led to some political controversies, but because limited budget is allocated to enforcement agencies, and many stores circumvent the laws by hiring non-Jewish workers, and finally because the revenue

from operating on Saturdays is greater than the potential fines, the commercialization of the Sabbath continues unabated.

Politics, law and the Sabbath—the rise of ‘alternative politics’

Paradoxically, in the years that the religious parties increased their political power, they lost their grip on the public sphere, which became increasingly secular. Changes in the Israeli political landscape since the late seventies have placed the religious parties in a powerful position. The inability of either of the two large parties (Likud and Labour) and of the related ideologies (Hawks and Doves) to obtain a dominant majority has made the religious parties central to any coalition formation. This political leverage enabled the religious parties to preserve the orthodox monopoly over marriage and Jewish conversion, maintain the privilege not to be drafted into the military and channel more resources for religious education and institutions; but, the growing religious power that angered many secularists, on the one hand, and the commercialization described above on the other hand, led to a secular counter-reaction that rapidly transformed the public sphere.

The political power of the religious parties in the Knesset largely prevented changes to the existing laws concerning church and state. However, the growing dissatisfaction of secularists with the existing arrangements was channelled into two types of initiatives. The first attempts to use the Supreme Court and its commitment to liberal values to challenge existing church–state relations. Thus, appeals to the Supreme Court include demands to draft ultra-orthodox men into the military, to import non-kosher meat and to recognize gay marriage. The second type of secular initiatives simply finds ways to circumvent—legally, semi-legally or illegally—rules. Thus, for example, secular Jews who refuse to be married by the orthodox establishment register their marriage abroad and, relevant to our study, business entrepreneurs who operate on Saturdays. Officially, the regulation of the Sabbath has not changed, but in practice various entrepreneurial initiatives have significantly transformed it. While, in the political arena, religious politicians were able to counteract many secular political attempts to change the status quo, they found themselves rather helpless against the developments in the economic realm and in the public sphere.

In terms of policy studies, these secular initiatives can be described as ‘alternative politics’, in which citizens dissatisfied with the government’s performance and sceptical of the regular democratic means of protest take a proactive course of action and attempt, at times illegally, to supply a public good (or what they perceive as a public good) or governmental service they find lacking.⁴² Eventually, these initiatives are either officially recognized by the government or continue unabated as the government allows their operation. Alternative politics were found to be a central feature of the political culture in Israel and a significant explanatory factor of political processes, domestic but also foreign.⁴³ As the public gradually despaired of its ability to wield influence in democratic, legal ways, this *modus operandi* has spread into different areas of public life whether in private payments to physicians in public service, in the pirate cable industry or in the commercial activity on Saturdays.

During the eighties and nineties, the religious public continued to struggle against the secularization of the public sphere by public-political means.

In struggles that involved the closing of roads near religious neighbourhoods on Saturdays, or the status quo on issues of divorce and marriage, the religious public was relatively successful, but struggles related to commercial activity on Saturdays were far less successful. One famous landmark struggle was against the decision to open a cinema in the town Petach Tikva on Friday nights in February 1984. Political attempts to persuade the mayor to prevent the opening of the cinema failed to change the decision and appeals to the court fared no better. As a result, religious leaders called on their public to demonstrate against the decision. About 10,000 demonstrators responded to the call and came out on the first Friday night of the cinema's operation to protest; but neither this demonstration nor those that followed changed the decision. The demonstrations against the cinema lasted for 3 years and at times turned violent, but eventually the orthodox community lost this struggle and the cinema (and others that followed) continued to operate on Saturday.⁴⁴

The struggle against McDonald's operation on Saturdays was another example of the limits of religious politics. In the nineties, McDonald's was one of the leading brands that entered Israel shortly after the peace process began. Since December 1993 when McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Israel, the company has opened over 80 new restaurants throughout the country. The company opened several kosher branches where there was a consumer demand, but chose to serve non-kosher food in many of its branches and to keep most of them open on Saturdays. In 1997 the Minister of Labour, Eli Ishay of the Shas religious party, invoked a law rarely used until then regarding work on the Jewish Sabbath to try to force McDonald's to close its branches on Saturdays. Omri Padan, McDonald's CEO in Israel, explained that he would continue to operate on Saturday and sell non-kosher food despite the minister's attempt to enforce the law.

The state should stop telling people what to do or what to eat. This is my cultural and philosophical worldview, and I will do everything to win this struggle.⁴⁵

In a first ruling in a series of trials in June 2000, McDonald's was fined NIS80,000 (about \$20,000). McDonald's CEO ran a campaign against the Ministry of Labour that warned that 'Israel would turn into Iran', but failed to organize a lobby to change the law the Ministry of Labour used against McDonald's. The struggle between the international company that was an emblem of globalization and a local religious party was highly symbolic of the secular/global-religious/local cleavage of Israeli society. While the struggle against McDonald's was well covered, the religious parties lost the battle. McDonald's failed in its attempts to challenge the fines in the courts, but was largely unaffected by them so that the operation on Saturday continued. The McDonald's and Petach Tikva conflicts described above were early indications of the limits of traditional religious politics, neither religious demonstrations nor the initiatives of religious politicians (even those holding office) were enough to protect the Sabbath from the growing commercialization and secularization of Israeli society. The constraints of religious politics were demonstrated again in the nineties, when shopping centres on the outskirts of towns began operating on Saturdays and drawing large crowds.

Research indicates that shopping on Saturdays is popular not only among those who define themselves as non-observant, but also among traditional Jews. Shopping on Saturday is independent of a secular belief system and from liberal values and is practised by people who observe other traditions, perform religious rituals, maintain religious beliefs and hold non-liberal values.⁴⁶ The prevalence of consumer practices among different sectors of society makes the struggle of the orthodox community all the more difficult and as in the case of McDonald's, the attempt to enforce existing laws has proven futile. Store-owners have repeatedly either circumvented the law by hiring non-Jews allowed to work on Saturday or decided to continue operating because revenues were greater than the potential fines. The religious public initially chose to ignore the operation of commercial centres located out of town, but the growing popularity of shopping on Saturdays was difficult to ignore and threatened to spill into the town centres, where shop-owners expressed concerns over the loss of revenue to the out-of-town centres.

Religious consumerism—power and strategy

The ultra-orthodox (Haredi) market is estimated to be worth about \$1.5 billion a year.⁴⁷ Its consumer power, as a form of collective action, is supposedly enhanced, first, by the 'social capital' of the community and, second, by the obedience to religious authority. The use of consumer politics, we argue, is further enhanced by the limits of traditional politics demonstrated above. Examining the religious use of consumer power in Israel reveals two types of initiatives taken in recent years. The first attempts to create services or products designed for the religious public as alternative to 'secular' ones. These products or services take advantage of new technologies but attempt to avoid the 'secularizing threats' of their use. The second type of initiative is more ambitious and aims to use consumer power to shape the public sphere itself, influencing both religious and secular populations and is, consequently, more difficult to implement.

The liberalization of the Israeli economy and growing privatization enabled the religious community to demand products and services that cater to their needs. The opening of bus routes to competition, for example, has led to the creation of services for the ultra-orthodox public in which men and women sit separately and have to dress appropriately. The spokesman of Egged, the largest company that lost its monopoly, explained:

15–20 years from now, we will continue to be the leading company, but we will also professionalize and cater to some sectors. Handling the ultra-orthodox will be one of our main goals, as hundreds of thousands of them use our buses.

The 'kosher bus lines' were criticized for inappropriate discriminatory practices, particularly after some incidents where secular women were not allowed to ride the buses. Egged, the critics claim, is still subsidized by the state and therefore cannot discriminate, but the company, explained one satisfied (religious) customer, 'has its own logic, the economic logic'.⁴⁸

Another example of a struggle for a niche market, but one that did not evoke such a negative response, was the demand for 'kosher' cellular phones. Several years ago, Haredi religious leaders identified computers and the internet as a

threat to the community. The ability of men and women to communicate freely without supervision, to obtain information or even to view pornography caused religious leaders to declare war on the internet. The problem was exacerbated when cellular phones, extremely popular with the ultra-orthodox population, began providing internet services that could expose users to inappropriate information. Religious leaders, somewhat helpless against the popularity of cellular phones among their public, concluded that the only way to prevent exposure to 'indecent' material was to limit cellular phones to conversation and prevent the use of third-generation technology and the three Gs—gaming, gambling and girls—they enable. The cellular companies that had invested significantly in the new services were reluctant to yield to these demands.

The strategy employed by the religious community was a combination of boycotts and buycotts to force the cellular companies to change their policies. A committee of rabbis was formed to lead the struggle, and a high-profile lawyer was hired to conduct negotiations with the cellular operators.⁴⁹ The religious leaders instructed the Haredi newspapers not to accept advertisements from cellular operators and began to require yeshiva students not to have cellular phones. The three big companies were reluctant to co-operate with the religious demands, but a smaller company, Mirs, perceived an opportunity to capture new clientele.⁵⁰ In March 2005, the company launched a 'kosher' cellular phone—with only services approved by religious leaders, who demanded that the public replace its cellular phones with the 'kosher' Mirs phone.

The decision to boycott the cellular companies (and buycott Mirs) was a test case for the ability of religious leaders to control the consumer practices of their followers and, consequently, for the consumer power of the religious community. Less than a month after Mirs launched the 'kosher' phone, the other companies responded with their own initiatives. There are now three large cellular companies that offer 'kosher' phones, explained the ultra-orthodox newspaper:

many have done what they had to and exchanged their cellular phones. The official mark of the rabbi's committee has turned into a symbol. He who has an approved phone—belongs. He who does not—God have mercy on him.

The newspaper concluded:

From now on, there are no more excuses. There is no reason to use an unauthorized cellular phone. It is forbidden, strictly forbidden by the spiritual leaders.⁵¹

A year after it began, the 'kosher' phone battle was described by the ultra-orthodox newspapers as a great success:

Innocence has won. The commitment to our goals and the following of the words of spiritual leaders against all odds and in spite of the difficulties [have proven successful], the cellular companies are now supplying cellular phones for talking only.⁵²

Although a niche market was created, many members of the religious community have not switched to the new phones. The demand to use only 'kosher' phones was especially difficult for those who worked outside the community and were

either users of short message service (SMS) and other services now prohibited or were provided with mobile phones by their companies.

The Sabbath—changing strategies

Commercial activity on Saturdays is rapidly expanding as competition forces more and more businesses to operate on Saturdays. The failed attempts of the religious leadership to persuade the government to enforce the laws that protect the Sabbath led to the emergence of new activists, ideas and strategies seeking to change the pay-off matrix for business operation on the Sabbath. The use of consumer politics to protect the Sabbath is based on the belief that a committed religious public can employ boycotts and buycotts to persuade businesses not to operate on the Sabbath and do what government regulation has thus far failed to achieve. This struggle, however, as was explained earlier, is structurally different from the struggle for 'kosher' phones or bus lines. While the latter encourages companies to create a special product that meets the needs of the religious public, the religious consumers' struggle against commerce on the Sabbath essentially forces businesspeople to choose between religious and secular customers and, consequently, is a far greater challenge.

Store-owners who do not operate on Saturdays reported that their businesses were hurt by the developments. Some of them, located in the cities where operation was more difficult, declared their intention to open their businesses or demanded to be allowed to do so, and others, determined to observe the Sabbath, complained of unfair competition. The economic consequences of the commercialization of the Sabbath encouraged religious businesspeople to take the lead in a new campaign. The opening of the new airport terminal in 2004 and the tender for shops that included operation on the Sabbath, thereby effectively preventing religious businesspeople from competing, was an important trigger for the new initiative. Religious businesspeople protested against the decision, including in the courts, but also blamed the religious public for not taking action. One businessman explained:

A religious person, will not enter a non-kosher McDonald's even to buy a drink, but he will buy clothes in a shop that operates on Sabbath . . . the religious only threaten but do not do anything.⁵³

The new struggle for the Sabbath incorporated the support of spiritual leaders, but left the politicians outside. Eli Holander, the owner of a chain of watch stores, who described himself as a 'graduate' of the Petach Tikva events in the 1980s, argued that previous struggles that demanded law enforcement failed to change the developments and only deepened the rift between the religious and secular communities. This campaign, he explained, does not attempt to enforce the observance of Sabbath by laws, but by using positive (economic) incentives for businesses to do so.⁵⁴

In January 2005, thousands of orthodox Jews gathered to protest against commercial activity on the Sabbath. Rabbi Raphael Halperin, the owner of a large optical retail chain who organized the event, described the current status of the Sabbath as a 'cancer in the nation's body' and called for strict enforcement of the laws. He urged his listeners to take the initiative and not count on law enforcement: 'We are a strong economic force of half a million people'. So he informed

his audience of about 324,000 Jews, who signed a petition declaring they would not set foot in stores that operate on the Sabbath. He continued by saying:

We will unite all the religious people of Israel, and they will get discounts in all places that observe the Sabbath [and] . . . will know not [*sic*] enter any shopping mall or gas station that do[es] not display the 'Sabbath observant' sign.⁵⁵

It is a struggle over the Sabbath, he explained elsewhere: 'we will boycott and prove to store owners that it is better for them to close on Sabbath'.⁵⁶

Religious websites were built to promote a boycott and advertise businesses that observe the Sabbath so that religious people would choose them and encourage more to follow. The 'Shamor' (observe) website allows businesspeople to register their business on the site after they have declared that they observe the Sabbath. Another website, Shabbaton, sends updated information to its subscribers and informs them of discounts and new businesses that have joined the list. In one city, the religious community produced stickers to be displayed by businesses closed on the Sabbath so that religious customers could select their shopping venues accordingly. Two major credit card companies in Israel agreed to produce special cards for Sabbath-observant consumers. The cards cannot be used on the Sabbath and provide cardholders with special discounts in several stores that agreed to join the campaign.⁵⁷

The campaign, as mentioned above, attempted to send a positive message that emphasized the rights of the religious minority to observe the Sabbath and the overall importance of a day of rest. The opening of businesses on Saturday, the campaign argued, is unfair competition that forces businesspeople to operate on the Sabbath and discriminates against religious employees who observe the Sabbath. The observance of the Sabbath, explained the campaign, is a universal rather than a religious interest and a social right rather than a religious commandment. Accordingly, one of the credit cards planned was intended for the general public:

The credit card will operate at different levels. It could either be entirely blocked to use on the Sabbath or alternatively operate as a regular credit card that would benefit people who shop in businesses closed on Sabbath. The ultimate goal is to make people appreciate and prefer businesses closed on Sabbath, in the best interest of everyone. We want to reach the point where even a non-observant person who wants to buy shoes will be encouraged to buy them in a shop closed on Sabbath.⁵⁸

Overall, therefore, the campaign for the Sabbath combines boycotts initiated by the committed orthodox public and boycotts of a wider public that together would encourage businesses to cease operating on the Sabbath, something that religious lobbying, political pressures and demonstrations failed to achieve.

Religious boycotts—prospects

The religious public and particularly the orthodox community have the advantage of a strong commitment and the social capital that enables collective action. However, the religious public is one of the poorest sectors in Israel, and its buying power is therefore limited. Shopping on Saturdays, conversely, appeals to large numbers and is practised not only by people who describe themselves

as secular, but also by wider groups who define themselves as 'traditional'. The operation of businesses on Saturdays caters to about 600,000 people in Israel who shop on the Sabbath, most of them in shopping centres located outside city centres, and spend about NIS48 million (approximately \$10 million) each Saturday.⁵⁹ The revenues of shops open on Saturdays were reported to be three times greater than on weekdays, and therefore a great advantage to the out-of-town shopping centres open on Saturdays.⁶⁰ The incentives for businesses to operate on Saturdays, therefore, remain high. Even the large supermarket chains, closed on Sabbaths largely because they are afraid of losing their kosher certification, estimate they may be losing approximately \$100 million annually to shops open on Saturdays and are reportedly contemplating a change of policy.

So what are the prospects of a religious boycott or buycott? To understand the limits, a comparison with kosher stores and restaurants can be useful. The laws of kashrut (Jewish dietary laws) are relatively well defined and institutionalized. An orthodox Jew will not shop or eat in a non-kosher establishment. The kashrut certificate is granted to establishments by the local rabbinate. These establishments are also continuously monitored by kashrut inspectors on behalf of the rabbinate, who ensure that kashrut is strictly maintained. The kashrut system, therefore, signals to religious people where to shop and eat and forces entrepreneurs to make a clear choice with respect to whom they are catering. Large numbers of Jewish Israelis keep kosher, including many of those who shop on the Sabbath, so the cost of being non-kosher is supposedly higher. The large supermarket chains have chosen to maintain their kosher character as have most of the large food manufacturers, but the demand for non-kosher food (meat and seafood) creates its own supplies. Tiv Ta'am, a chain of some 16 non-kosher supermarkets that caters to the large immigrant population and many local Israelis, is growing rapidly, as are many other small non-kosher supermarkets across the country. The proliferation of restaurants over the past two decades in Israel has generally followed the same trend, as most of the exclusive restaurants have chosen to remain non-kosher and respond to what they perceive as a large consumer demand.

Thus, while kashrut is observed in public (state) institutions, the market creates many alternatives for those interested in non-kosher food. The power of secularism in terms of demand and supply is one reason why many in the religious public remain sceptical of the ability of religious consumerism to influence the public sphere. Religious politicians, aware of the limits of traditional politics, bureaucracy and the legal system, also doubt the viability of political consumerism. As one of them explained:

the use of boycotts is relevant to the religious orthodox communities and much less for the traditional sectors who are in favor of closing business on Sabbath, but will continue to shop in stores that operate on Sabbath . . . it can work in areas where there is a large orthodox population, but will not work in other places.⁶¹

Conclusion

Religious–secular relations in Israel have changed significantly over the past two decades. First, the development of a western-type consumer culture and the immigration from the former USSR have rendered the early arrangements known as the

'status quo' unacceptable to the growing secular public. Accordingly, a growing demand for shopping and entertainment on Saturdays has undermined previous arrangements. Second, secular entrepreneurs, as in other cases of 'alternative politics', established facts on the ground and began operating on Saturdays. Third, the religious public's attempts to curb the changing status of the Sabbath through legal and political means have failed as commercial activity on Saturdays continued to grow.

In the UK and Israel, commercial activities on Saturdays and Sundays raised the opposition of religious (and other) groups that demanded that the government prevent them. In the UK, the struggle took the form of 'traditional politics' as the campaign galvanized public opinion to encourage the government to curb business activities on Sundays. In Israel, because of its political culture and the development of 'alternative politics', the battle for the Sabbath in Israel was waged not only in the political arena, but also in the economic arena. Struggles in the political arena have not yielded the desired results, as despite the political leverage of religious parties, they have been unable to influence the developments in the public sphere. New initiatives have therefore attempted to shift the struggle into the economic sphere and use the consumer power of the religious public to restore the status quo.

Boycotts and buycotts operate simultaneously in the initiatives of the religious public to take action in the economic sphere to curb the secularization of the public sphere. These initiatives, as described above, can be divided into two types: attempts to create specific products and services for the observant community; and attempts to shape the public sphere itself. Companies, due to sufficient economic incentives, catered to the orthodox demands and created the desired services and products. The use of consumer politics to shape the public sphere, where the religious public is encouraged to prefer business establishments that close on the Sabbath, is too recent to assess its overall success. These initiatives, however, indicate a growing belief among some of the religious community that the political arena is blocked and, therefore, the religious public must use its economic-consumer power instead. Judging by the high economic incentives for operating on Saturdays, a result of the social and economic changes described above, we estimate that this campaign has limited potential. Thus, while the religious public can wield local influence on the operation of business on the Sabbath in areas with a large religious population, its ability to coerce businesses in other areas and, consequently, to restore the status-quo, is unlikely.

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