More Divided than United: Israeli Social Protest during Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020

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Abstract: The Covid-19 epidemic that struck Israel in March 2020 found Israel in the midst of an ongoing political crisis. The connection between a health crisis and a shaky political system (mainly because of indictments against the prime minister) has created three protest movements against corruption, dysfunction of the central government and severe feelings of discrimination in the population. Each protest sought to achieve different goals. The “Black Flags” protested over government corruption demanding the resignation of the prime minister; ultra-Orthodox Jews demonstrated against the hardline policy that the police adopted against them, including restrictions on religious rituals and on Biblical and Talmudic study; and the self-employed protesters demanded financial compensation from the state – once they received it, their protest dissipated. There were no common goals or coordination among the three protest groups. By analyzing through a combination of three approaches – contingency, functionalism, and relative deprivation, the 2020 protests in Israel were more divided than united. Without an agreed-upon leader, it failed to achieve any social-political goals.

Subjects: Conservatism; Human Rights; Citizenship - Political Sociology; Human Rights; Judaism; Worship

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1. Introduction
It would not be presumptuous to claim that the year 2020 will be remembered in history as a year in which humanity changed its way of life. The outbreak of the Covid-19 virus became a global epidemic. Two hundred thirteen countries were infected, more than 12 million were sick and more than half a million died. In Israel, a tiny state in the Middle East region, the first patient was
discovered on 27 February 2020. By the end of 2020, 4200 patients in Israel had died – out of a population of 9.1 million persons.2

Like other countries, the Israeli government decided on a series of measures aimed at flattening the morbidity curve and preventing the collapse of the health care system. The most significant decision was to impose closures on the entire population (from the beginning of April to mid-May, in mid-September and in 27 December 2020).3 The first closure ended on May 17, when the government decided to open the Israeli economy too quickly, as Prime Minister Netanyahu admitted (9 July 2020).

One of the most significant consequences of these decisions was a drastic increase in unemployment rates in Israel—from 3.8 percent in 2019 to 25.1 in the first half of 2020.4 The Israeli government response was to formulate plans to rescue the Israeli economy from the crisis it had encountered. On March 30, Moshe Kahlon, the former finance minister, announced a New Israel Shekels (NIS) 80 billion plan (around $23 billion), but after two months it became clear that less than ten percent of it had been passed on to the unemployed public.5 When the highest political echelon realized that bureaucratic barriers prevented carrying out the public assistance, a new plan was introduced for the Israeli population (July 9). Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and Yisrael Katz, the new finance minister, described it as the “Economic Security Network 2020–2021” – which included a package of measures that would provide certainty and economic security for one year to employees, the self-employed, and businesses during the Covid-19 period.6

While this plan was being introduced, unemployment rates were climbing again. In Israel, a second wave of Covid-19 morbidity began, prompting the government to make decisions on a renewed and partial closure of the economy, which was eventually implemented on 18 September 2020. The result was protests on social media against government moves, mainly by the self-employed, employees obliged to take unpaid vacation, and students who warned of a social earthquake if the central government did not resolve the economic crisis. A large-scale protest at Yitzhak Rabin square in Tel Aviv was scheduled for 10 July 2020.

It is important to mention here that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic caught Israel in a middle of the longest political crisis since its establishment in 1948. This crisis had several dimensions: (1) a poor health system which for years has suffered from low government funding; (2) The Prime Minister’s ongoing effort to weaken the law enforcement system in response to the criminal suspicions against him (for example, when the pandemic broke out, the police have not had a Inspector General for 14 months). From 9 April 2019, to 2 March 2020, three general elections were held, which ended with the formation of a unity government – defined as an emergency government to take care of the pandemic. This Covid-19 government lasted no longer than seven months. One of the major issues that led to the political crisis was a criminal investigation against the prime minister on suspicion of offenses of breach of trust, fraud, and bribery. Thus, when the Covid-19 crisis began there was already an ongoing protest over political corruption in Israel.

This background leads to this study, which seeks to trace the characteristics of the protest in Israel during 2020 and to offer a theoretical framework for analyzing this protest. The first section will present a suitable theoretical basis for social protests and political violence. The second part will delineate the Israeli political-social climate on the eve of the pandemic outbreak, and the third part will analyze the different types of Israeli protest and violence in 2020.

2. Theoretical framework
Social protest has been discussed by scholars for decades. Over the years, scholars have tried to define social protest movements by focusing on various aspects of them. Some emphasized the developmental processes of the movements, while others focused on the external circumstances that were used as platforms for the emergence of these kinds of movements.7 Other scholars paid attention to the crystallization process, which involved the sharing of
identity among the group’s members and the methods that the movement adopted in order to promote its ideas. In any case, with these different approaches in mind, scholars generally agree that social movements are informal networks based on solidarity and on beliefs that provoke political confrontations with the regime — and that aspire to change the socio-political status quo and the dominating rule of the state, just as the political process approach argues.

The 2020 social protests in Israel fit this definition, because the protestors did not have formal representation (except the ultra-Orthodox) within the Israeli establishment that could promote changes they wanted to achieve. These protests, though still amorphous, required several elements that had already been suggested by various scholars: collective behavior; different kinds of resources; collective identity; and political opportunity.

2.1. The collective behavior theory

This theory is defined as the behavior of aggregates whose interaction is “affected by some sense that they constitute a group.” This approach advances the belief that a social movement is one that acts outside of the establishment, looks to change the current situation, and seeks cohesiveness among its members regarding the goals. This approach can explain what, why, when, and how people coalesce. Alberto Melucci characterized the social movement as a special form of collective phenomenon comprising three components: (1) a collective action based on solidarity; (2) the existence of an opponent who claims ownership of the very same values; (3) a social frame that underlies the norms and conventions without changing the society. In contrast to previous scholars, Melluci did not see political conflict as necessary for the existence of a social movement. His theoretical perception fit partially for describing and analyzing the social protest in Israel in the summer of 2020. His first components can be useful for explaining the situations of many Israelis who shared the same feeling of solidarity as a result of their economic difficulties, which worsened because of the pandemic: The self-employed, employees who were on vacation without being paid, and students shared the same hardships, although not necessarily the same values and norms. They pointed the finger of blame at the central government as responsible for the deterioration in their economic situations. This factor of Melucci’s theory corresponds with the sense of relative deprivation (see below).

2.2. The resource mobilization theory

This theory focuses on conditions that may provoke social movements to act, and stresses that the odds of changing reality increase if: (1) there is an identified and agreed upon leadership inside the movement; and (2) if this leadership has had previous political experience. Zald and McCarthy developed the resources mobilization theory, arguing that no social movement can act without several components. They both defined a social protest movement as an array of beliefs and ideas which aim at changing the social structure. Their theory discerns between five different types of resources: material, moral, organizational, human, and cultural. For the purpose of the Israeli case studies of protest, three out of the five are relevant. Material resources are the time, money, and space where people can protest, and the people themselves, who need to act in order to achieve goals. Moral resources refer to identification with the ends that are connected to moral and normative values in society, particularly among two of the three protest groups. Organizational resources refer to maximum exploitation of the resources; what is important here is the strategic effort and coordination between the members of the movement in order to utilize their collective abilities so that the necessary joint activity around a shared purpose can be carried out with full coordination. Resource mobilization theory asserts that the strategic targets of a social protest movement serve to change the regime’s policy and to recruit public support. The ways to achieve this are through organizing demonstrations, signing petitions, and sometimes even through instigating violent action. Obviously, this theory lined up with some of the activity of the Israeli protests following the Covid-19 outbreak of the year 2020: People had resources and high spirits, morally, when they took to the streets from March to December.
2.3. The theory of collective identity
Collective identity theory emphasizes socio-psychological aspects and focuses on beliefs as the key to persuading people to participate in a protest or a violent action. This can be achieved through shared symbols, languages, or stances in respect to an idea. When collective identity is being crystallized, people act together—in this case, protest together— if the regime allows it. Identity consists of the combination of the emotional, moral, and cognitive connections that an individual has with a certain group, community, or movement. Eventually, whether the contexts of these connections are real or imagined does not matter. The group's identity is expressed by shared values, a common language and customs, agreement upon cultural symbols and signs, ceremonies, and even identical dressing styles. When this collective identity is solid enough, members of the group may consider protest activity against an incumbent regime, especially if they express dissatisfaction with the political and social order within the state. These theoretical arguments reflect the situation of the protesters in the Israeli case study: They all share an identity of people in economic distress, the same political culture and language, and they all believe that it is the responsibility of the central government to resolve their problems and troubles.

2.4. The political opportunity theory
This theory explains how, when, and where social protest movements—amorphous or formative and expressive—can act and concentrates on the question of whether the regime permits people to gather in the streets (or other central public places such as squares or public gardens) or not, for protesting. Four main dimensions of what constitutes political opportunity have been stressed: the relatively open or closed nature of the institutionalized political system; the stability or instability of the broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; the presence or absence of elite allies; and the state's capacity and propensity for repression. Some scholars believe that this theory is the dominant paradigm in the study of social movements and contentious politics. Discussing political opportunity, it is important to remember that when a group of people seeks to protest, the opportunity it must do so differs from country to country. Beyond that, even in any given country, the scope of the opportunity to protest varies from time to time. In the Israeli case, since 2018, attempts have been made by the central government to reduce protests, and specifically for this study—as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic— the police restricted the number of protest participants in order to maintain public health. Nevertheless, the political opportunity to protest in Israel still exists; despite high rates of people infected by the covid-19 virus, during 2020, people continued to protest every weekend.

My assumption is that the case studies of three protest groups in Israel in 2020 meet all of these theoretical components: they have characteristics of shared behavior; resources; collective identity; a space that allows protest to be physically supported; as well as symbolic recognition. Following this theoretical platform for analyzing the main features of social protest, the next part of the discussion deals with relevant theories for violence, which has developed in quite a few protests in Israel during 2020.

(a) The Contingency theory argues that every case study of political protest or violence depends on unusual developments which create a potential for significant change compared to the current situation in any given society. This theory seeks to understand both the factors and the circumstances that led to certain developments such as war, revolution, economic crisis, earthquake, or pandemic. A group uses protest or violence in order to ensure interests, after considering nonviolent actions and internalizing the idea that only confronting through protest or violence will achieve the goal.

(b) Functionalism theory sees human society as an orchestra, meaning that every institution, like a musical instrument, knows its role. When everything is functioning properly, it’s like a finely tuned system in which each component knows what to do and how to act. Food companies take care of a steady supply of sustenance and beverages, banks are responsible for money, a system of medicine is busy with its duties, and so forth. When something goes
wrong, due to an earthquake, bankruptcy of the state, or severe political crisis, for instance, and the state institutions and mechanism cannot solve the problems, political violence may break out. For functionalists, lack of balance is a necessary condition for protest, not to say, collective violence.¹⁶

(c) **Relative deprivation** defines the gap between the present state of an individual or a group and the desired situation, the one they strive to achieve. It emphasizes the dissatisfaction of a certain group, and argues that such a feeling can be translated into protest or violence, when members of the group believe that there is a gap between their current situation and what they are entitled to in their collective mind. The potential for using violence increases if members of the group perceive an external factor, usually the government, as responsible for and guilty of creating their situation.¹⁷ Feelings of deprivation on the part of any individual or a group are always compared to three different situations:

a) What “we” as a community have compared to what we had in the past.

b) What “we” have compared to what we could have achieved.

c) What “we” have, or our status, compared to another group. Perceptions of deprivation can be real or imagined, and they can be related to political, social, or economic status. Enhanced feelings of discrimination increase collective identity among members of the group, whether it is homogeneous or heterogeneous. Here we can mention poor and rich people, national minorities, excluded communities, or worker unions.

This qualitative study—conducted by analyzing media reports and ground theory (interviews) offers a combination of all three theories to analyze Israeli protest in the summer of 2020. Based on these three theories, the hypotheses are:

(a) Most of the Israeli protest (except the protest over political corruption) was an outcome of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, which is a coincidental event. Had it not been for the outbreak of the plague, a large and significant part of the protest in Israel would not have taken place.

(b) The Israeli protests were a response to the dysfunction of the central government, which did not provide the protesters with the services they expected to receive from it.

(c) Relative feelings of deprivation, if not complete deprivation, caused people to turn to protest and even violence, hoping to change their social-economic situation.

3. The analysis
Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has faced three cases of social protest: (1) the Wadi Salib/ Haifa riots of 1959; (2) the Black Panthers protest in Jerusalem in 1971; and (3) the summer-fall 2011 middle class protest under the slogan: the people want social justice. All three episodes ended with partial, if not limited, achievements for the protesters. The social protest of summer 2020 broke out while Israel was still struggling with the longest political crisis ever. It started with the resignation of Avigdor Liberman from his office as minister of defense (November 2018), continued with three rounds of general elections (April 9 and 17 September 2019, and 2 March 2020), and with the formation of the new Covid-19 government (17 May 2020). Moreover, the new government, a coalition of two rivals – the Likud and Blue-White parties – failed to survive, and new general elections (for the fourth time in two years) were scheduled for 23 March 2021.

This crisis exists in an Israeli society whose demographic structure is heterogeneous. It has a Jewish majority group and a minority group that includes Muslims, Christians, Druze, Circassians, and others. In addition, within the Jewish majority group there are subgroups that represent various communities of Jews from different countries (such as Ethiopia, Russia, Arab countries,
Eastern and Western European countries). The Jewish majority can be divided into four sub-groups: ultra-Orthodox, religious, traditionalists and seculars.18

Over the last seven decades, this heterogeneous texture has been the platform for different types of cleavages within Israeli society. In 2017, a survey of a representative sample of Israeli society (1,189 interviewees) was conducted at the request of Benny Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi, who head the Blue and White Party. It concluded that the characteristics of Israeli society are alienation, division, and hatred. Politicians, according to most of the participants, do not allow the population to crystallize, and that population, by virtue of being sectorally politically, produces a form of thought such that its very splits bring more seats to parliament.19 This short introduction of the Israeli political and demographic situation is useful for mapping the 2020 protest, when in fact three different and divided protests can be pointed out.

4. The “Black Flags” protest
The “Black Flags” protest started during the first half of 2020 (March 19). Its main demand was to protect the Israeli democracy and to fight political corruption. Four brothers from the Schwartzman family decided to protest in response to the refusal by former Knesset (Parliament) Speaker, Yuli Edelstein, to vacate his seat, despite a parliamentary majority against him and a Supreme Court ruling. They said: “We feel that we need to fight and ensure that there is a democracy. We intend to demand from the people we vote for the Knesset to take their mandate, to back up the judicial system and make sure that judges here (in Israel) will not be afraid. That a Knesset operates, that Knesset committees operate. That a democratic state will operate here, and forever. We are law-abiding people. We sat quietly for many years.”20 As time went on, the scope of the protest increased, as did the number of protesters, which reached thousands, who every week stood in front of the prime minister’s residence in Jerusalem not only in defense of democracy but also to call for his resignation. They claimed that a person against whom three indictments had been filed, on counts of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, could not serve in the most important public position in Israel (prime minister), and accused him of mis-managing the medical crisis.21 On July 14, 5,000 people assembled near the prime minister’s residence in Jerusalem calling for him to resign. This protest turned violent, partially, as some of the demonstrators confronted the police and attacked journalists. Fifty people were arrested.22 In the days following this demonstration, the black flag protest continued and expanded to other places in Israel calling for the prime minister to resign. At the peak of this protest (the last week in August), people across the country protested on 315 bridges, in addition to more than 20,000 in Jerusalem.23 This protest, against government corruption and damage to the foundations of democracy, continued regularly even during periods of closure imposed on the citizens of Israel due to the pandemic. Attempts by government ministers and Knesset members to cancel demonstrations against Netanyahu were thwarted by other elements in the government (Blue and White Party) and by the court, on the grounds that demonstrations are a fundamental right in democracy.24 In June 2021, the protest movement of the “Black Flags” announced the end of its activities: “We have won, we have achieved our goal.”25 The announcement came about two weeks after the government in Israel changed, and Netanyahu, against whom a criminal trial was being held, stopped serving as prime minister.

Looking at the hypotheses and the theoretical framework, the following is a suggested analysis of the “Black Flags” protest: Demonstrators for the preservation of democracy and moral purity and in opposition to government corruption had both material and moral resources. They managed to hold protest activities over a long period—beginning before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic — and to gradually increase the number of participants and become the “Black Flag” protest movement. They also held a collective belief that democracy in Israel was in danger. Both theoretical approaches of political opportunity and collective identity are a necessary condition for protest, but not a sufficient one. The complementary explanation requires two more theories: contingency and functionalism. Contingency in this case study refers to the criminal investigation that had been conducted for several years against a prime minister, Netanyahu. Although this was
5. The ultra-Orthodox protest

Historically, the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel, which numbers more than a million people, protests when its leadership, which consists of rabbis, believes that the state is harming the status of religion (such as the sanctity of the Sabbath). During 2020, the ultra-Orthodox protest took place in a number of localities: Jerusalem, Bnei Brak (in the vicinity of Tel Aviv), Beit Shemesh (20 km west of Jerusalem), Ashdod (southern Israel), and Beitar Illit (8 km southwest of Jerusalem); and it comprised two different phases: On the first leg, the ultra-Orthodox sought to achieve two goals: one, to prevent the closure of their localities where the Covid-19 disease rates are high; and the second, to reduce the scope of violence by police against ultra-Orthodox demonstrators. In Jerusalem, for example, hundreds demonstrated (July 11–12), demanding that the state not impose a closure on ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in the city. During the demonstration, a police officer beat one of the activists who remarked to him that he was not wearing a mask, as required by law due to the pandemic. In another event, a police officer pushed an ultra-Orthodox photographer. The allegations made by protesters against Prime Minister Netanyahu about the use of excessive force by the police, and especially the use of cavalry and water hoses, increased the sense of discrimination felt by the ultra-Orthodox public, which had become accustomed to controversial police actions.

The ultra-Orthodox protesters, as well as journalists within this community, criticized as incompetent the ultra-Orthodox elected officials – ministers and Knesset members – who did not pressure the prime minister to cancel decisions that harmed the ultra-Orthodox. Similar feelings were expressed by the ultra-Orthodox in Beitar Illit, accused the government of making arbitrary decisions, without checking the morbidity data. Severe criticism was leveled at the ultra-Orthodox ministers who did not help the ultra-Orthodox population in times of distress.

The second phase of the ultra-Orthodox protests started in September 2020, which coincided with the Jewish holidays, when a new resentment arose among the ultra-Orthodox. They opposed the Israeli government’s refusal to allow their departure to Uman, Ukraine, for a traditional ceremony at Rabbi Nachman’s grave. The ultra-Orthodox protest on this issue was divided into two: Thousands left early for Ukraine before the borders were closed; others, who did not make it out, announced that they would come to terms with the prime minister in the next election and not vote for him. It is obvious that these ultra-Orthodox felt that the government’s attitude towards them constituted relative, if not absolute, discrimination.

The protest over Uman traditional ceremony was the preface for protests over religious rituals during the Tishri holidays (October 2020) and later from December 2020 onward, for the protest and violence that occurred in ultra-Orthodox localities over the closure of religious educational institutions. Rabbi Haim Kanievsky (born 1928), a spiritual leader and the rabbi considered the leading authority within the ultra-Orthodox Jewish world, decided to keep the Haredi educational system open, despite the government’s decision on total closure. Attempts by the police to enforce state instructions, which were opposed to Kanievsky’s decision, were the trigger for harsh clashes in several Haredi cities and vicinities. In Bet Shemesh (12 January 2021), a policeman fired into the air after feeling threatened by dozens of Haredi youth during enforcement activities to close an ultra-Orthodox educational institution. A week later the Haredi riots spread to Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, where hundreds of ultra-Orthodox Jews threw stones, set garbage cans on fire, tried to damage police vehicles, and blocked the main streets of the city. According to police data, 20 policemen were evacuated to hospitals for treatment after being injured in the ultra-Orthodox
riots. According to resource mobilization theory, this protest had spiritual-religious leadership. Rabbi Asher Doitch confirmed that he ordered the protest in response to “these criminal moves of the police and announced that the voice of the Torah and prayer among the people of Israel could not be silenced.” Doitch’s declaration reflected a lack of order in the priorities of the Israeli establishment that seeks to close ultra-Orthodox educational institutions and prevent the younger generation from engaging in sacred studies.

Theoretically, the ultra-Orthodox protest can be explained through contingency, functionalism, and the relative deprivation model as follows: Contingency is relevant for this case study because the protests at this time were a response to régime policy because of an unusual event – the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition, some of the ultra-Orthodox leaders claimed that the central government failed to carry out its duties as a regime—in this case to allow people to fly safely to the city of Uman. Their accusation that the prime minister prevented them from flying to Uman represented, in their eyes, a dysfunction of the government system. Haredi society also felt deprived compared to other sectors in Israeli society, accusing the government of ignoring their call to evacuate the Covid-19 patients among them to special guesthouses, while other sick civilians, not ultra-Orthodox, were in fact evacuated.

Relative deprivation theory can also explain ultra-Orthodox complaints that police officers acted against them with greater violence compared to demonstrators from other groups. Indeed, in some of the ultra-Orthodox demonstrations, police officers were documented beating Haredi demonstrators for no reason, including children. These testimonies by the ultra-Orthodox indicated their sense of being discriminated against by the central government, as well as their conviction that the police had a worse attitude towards them than towards other groups. These sentiments were accompanied by strong allegations that the way in which the government made decisions regarding the Covid-19, as well as their treatment by the police – an executive arm of the government – were wrong and reflected the dysfunction of government institutions. For instance, the deputy mayor of Elad (an ultra-Orthodox city with 50,000 inhabitants in central Israel) claimed that the central government refused to evacuate verified Covid-19 patients from the city to reduce infection rates and that this was a sign that the functioning of the government was failing.

This motif of deprivation was repeated in late 2020 and in early 2021, when the police were required to enforce the closure of educational institutions. The violent incidents described above once again evoked feelings of relative discrimination among ultra-Orthodox elected officials. Deputy Minister Uri Maklev condemned the conduct of the police, saying that “there is no violence under violence, and there is no collective punishment in the face of a disgruntled minority.” The Bnei Brak mayor demanded that the police leave the city, allowing his staff to work at deescalating the situation.

6. Self-employed and independent protest
The attempts to create a different reality for the self-employed in Israel are a classic story of constructivism. In October 2019, Abir Kara, an Israeli citizen, decided to open a protest group on WhatsApp that sought to change the country’s economic policy and regulations vis-à-vis the self-employed sector. They called the group “I’m Shulman,” a nickname for a person who pays for services he receives. Half a year later, the group numbered over 200,000 members. The leaders of this group tried to advance their goals through dialogue with Knesset members and ministers before protesting; and when the pandemic broke out and their economic situation deteriorated rapidly, they decided that protest would be the most effective tool to put pressure on the government.

This protest began on 31 March 2020. On that day, representatives of six self-employed sectors (around 5,000 people) gathered and demanded that the government return the money they had lost because of the decision to impose a general closure on the population to curb the spread of the virus. This gathering was in response to the decision of the prime minister and minister of
finance to allocate a sum of NIS 80 billion to compensate self-employed people who lost income. As time went on, it turned out that only NIS 30 billion was allocated to this sector. In addition, the Ministry of Finance determined a set of criteria that, in practice, created a situation where many business owners are not entitled to compensation. One protestor said: “They praise the program that supports small and medium-sized businesses with grants of NIS 6,000 and NIS 8,000 per month, when in fact they were thrown to the dogs. What business owners are not told is that very few businesses fall within the definition of this compensation, and that a business that earns about NIS 12,000 net a month is no longer entitled to compensation.” Other shared the same position, calling for unifying their force to achieve their goal. This protest continued, and reached its peak on July 11, when more than 10,000 gathered in the center of Tel Aviv and held a protest that became partly violent. They damaged public property and confronted police forces. They shouted, “We want the money, and we want it now. Netanyahu, go home.”

All groups that participated in this protest demanded that the central government compensate them financially, but they disagreed as to their course of action. Some of them had a direct dialogue with the Israeli minister of finance, hoping to extract promises from him for assistance. Others responded to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s call (July 10) to meet him in his office in Jerusalem before the large-scale July 11 rally. Other members of this protest group rejected Netanyahu’s invitation and stressed that the government had made promises that it had failed to fulfill (dysfunctioning). After a week the split between the members of this group became clearer: in a demonstration held (July 18) in Tel Aviv, thousands of people from industries such as entertainment, tourism, transportation, and food gathered and were unable to formulate an agreed-on list of speakers. At the same time, the government’s decision to close restaurants met with opposition from restaurant owners who announced that they would not abide by the decision. In response, the government postponed the implementation of the decision by four days (from July 17 to July 21); during this period, the government was trying to drive a wedge between the restaurant owners, when the prime minister summoned some of them to his office. Also, no self-employed people from other sectors, demanding financial compensation, stood up to the restaurant owners and expressed support for them.

Despite the effort to put pressure on the government, the internal split between this group’s members over patterns of activity – a unique phenomenon that has not been seen in the two other groups of protesters, “Black Flags” and ultra-Orthodox – was harming their interest in presenting a united front for their struggle. This protest was shared by self-employed sub-sectors, in areas such as food, clothing, footwear, tourism, aviation, art, theater, and music, which sought to work together to achieve a common goal; but it turned out that their activities were uncoordinated. And there was more: Some of the protesters objected to the violence that occurred during the demonstration in Tel Aviv (July 11), and claimed that this was not the way to achieve their goals.

The pattern of the self-employees’ protests that developed in Israel during 2020 is sub-sectorial. Each sector in the private economy market took care of its own narrow interests, and there was no single agreed upon leadership that represented the demands of the protesters vis-à-vis the government. This pattern of protest had two consequences: one, each sector that received a response (monetary or other compensation) from the government to its claims, stopped protesting. Second, the protest failed to create a common denominator of a broad collective identity in opposition to government policy and was therefore not a unified protest.

The participants in the self-employed protest were characterized by a collective sense of being a deprived sector, which claimed that the government discriminated against it relative to public sectors. In this respect, a compilation of three theories explains their protest: The outbreak of the Covid-19 (contingency) led to the governmental measure of closing the economy. Further, in the eyes of the protesters, the government was not fulfilling its role – in this case to take care of citizens who have lost income due to government policy, and to compensate them (dysfunctional). In addition, when the government was required to deal with them, they felt deprived in relation to
other sectors. Therefore, contingency, functionalism, and relative deprivation form a solid theoretical framework for analyzing this protest. Despite criticism of the establishment and the common sense of discrimination, the protest by the self-employed has dissipated and some of the leaders of the struggle have chosen to join the political arena and to give up protests taking place outside the establishment. 45

7. The potential tipping points
In mid-July 2020, it seemed that self-employed protest had the potential to merge with the Black Flag’s movement. On July 21, thousands of restaurants owners demonstrated in Jerusalem, demanding financial compensation following the government decision to close restaurants. Mor Harel, restaurant protest spokesman, said, “Today I realized that first and foremost we want a lawful state. We cannot accept that a man accused of bribery, fraud and breach of trust is prime minister”. 46 Peter Sabo, one of the protesters, told the Israeli radio (July 24) that since mid-July more people had joined the protest after making the linkage between political corruption and the deterioration of their standard of living, which occurred as a result of the government policy during the Covid-19 crisis: “When a person is charged with three indictments, he is preoccupied with his private affairs and not with public concern. This is the moment when this person (Netanyahu) turns from an asset into a burden. More people are realizing this now.” 47 Here, again people protested over dysfunctions of Netanyahu’s government and felt that the prime minister tries to weaken the enforcement system.

This trend continued towards the end of July, as the number of the protests increased, as well as number of participants. On July 25, nearly 6,000 people gathered in front of the prime minister residence in Jerusalem, calling for him to resign. David Frankel, a restaurant owner from Tel Aviv, told the media that he decided to protest in Jerusalem because the establishment’s failed policy in dealing with the pandemic began with the prime minister. Another protestor, who was arrested a week before joining this cause, explained that the source of the injustices, which included killing civilians and not caring for the citizens, was the prime minister and the junta around him. His colleague adds: “This is a civic mission. In this world there is no place for a leadership that takes care of itself and is not for the citizens, there is no place for corruption and government greed, there is no room for the divisive, bullying and messy nature of the government.” 48 Simultaneously with the demonstration in Jerusalem, tens of thousands of demonstrators went out and deployed on 250 bridges throughout Israel, calling for Netanyahu to resign. Shimon Russo, a regular protestor, explained to me during a protest demonstration that Netanyahu was wrong when he tried to dismantle a united front of self-employed people who were in an economic crisis, and when he ordered the police to act harshly against the protesters. These decisions provoked the area and caused a significant increase in the number of protesters against the prime minister’s policy. 49 A week later, on 1 August 2020, I joined a similar protest demonstration on the same bridge, which was attended by about 300 protesters. One of them, a mother of three little girls, told me, “We came to protect democracy. We are here because we oppose corruption and teach our girls what the rule of the people is. We are tired of government corruption.” 50

These protesters represented a constructive process of seeing reality from a different perspective. At first, they all obeyed the instruction to stay at home striving to reduce the number of ill people. Then, they all had expectations that the Israeli government would provide them with financial compensation. The last stage was disappointment, after the protesters realized that there was a gap between their expectations and the central government’s performance.

8. Conclusions
The 2020 protests had three separate leadings different goals: one for the “Black Flags”, one for the ultra-Orthodox, and one for the self-employed. The lack of cohesion between the three groups, and internal disagreements within the self-employed protest group over methods of protest led to several conclusions.
(1) The lack of an agreed leadership among “the Black flag” and self-employed groups made it difficult to make maximum use of the resources available to protest groups such as time, money, deployment in the field, selection of speakers, and mobilization of protest support. In the case study of the self-employed group, there were many sub-groups, a lack of resources, and many speakers who sought to advance narrow sectoral interests rather than representing a group of over 200,000 people.

(2) The protesters failed to coordinate and to find a common denominator for cooperation. Each group defined the government’s dysfunction differently (loss of morale; failure to provide freedom of action for the ultra-Orthodox; failure to provide compensation to the unemployed).

(3) The Black Flag’s protesters and self-employed demonstrators did not participate in the protest of the ultra-Orthodox Jews. In the opposite direction, ultra-Orthodox discerned themselves from other sub-groups within the Jewish majority and did not participate in non-religious protests as in the cases of the “Black Flags” and the self-employed activities.

All this leads to the conclusion that the protest was more divided than it was united. It was not a protest of the Israeli people, as some of its partners claim. The split between the three protests (and the internal splits within the groups themselves) allowed the central government to reduce the scope of the protest and dissolve it through divide and rule.

Finally, regarding the theoretical aspect, the study proposes a model that connects three approaches to explaining social protest in Israel. The contingency approach can explain why people protest if they face a health crisis such as a pandemic, which made them change their routine (restriction on movement, wearing a mask). The functionalism (or dysfunction of the central government) theory can explain why people are disappointed and ready to take the streets, since the regime does not provide them answers, solutions, and services due to the crisis. The relative deprivation approach is the theoretical framework for analyzing why people use protest (or violence) to achieve their demands from the government, which, they blame for the discrimination they feel because government policy impacts their quality of life. All three groups shared this feeling. A combination of all three theories provides a conceptual framing for the analysis of 2020 protest in Israel. To establish the reliability and validity of the model, it is worth examining it in terms of group protests in other countries and societies.

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**Notes**

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