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# Understanding Leadership in Disadvantaged Peripheral Areas: The Case of Mayors and Local Leaders in Israel

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## Abstract

Researching local leaders who must function under difficult circumstances, in disadvantaged peripheral areas, is both complex and challenging topic. Theoretically speaking, one may argue that such peripheral places, by nature, are forced into a negative dynamic (being far from a metropolitan area, having low-level public services, selective migration, and so on). Such a situation may limit these local leaders' opportunities to realize their visions and goals, to apply their personal capabilities and biographies in the public sphere. The present article rejects the above logic, suggesting a more humanistic perspective. In support of the suggested approach, this article summarizes the findings of a series of empirical studies that describe a wide range of leadership modes exercised by Israeli local leaders functioning under demeaning peripheral conditions from 1983 to 2017. The study shows that, despite their similar circumstances, these Israeli leaders were highly distinct in many ways. Different leadership typologies are discussed that were observed in the Israeli peripheries during those years: hierarchical vs. egalitarian, reactive vs. proactive, transactional vs. transformational, radical vs. pragmatic-reformer. On a broad theoretical level, the findings clearly indicate the need for explanations that go beyond the mere geographical-political context, delving into the humanistic sphere to study each leader's unique personality and biography.

**Keywords:** community leadership, spatial periphery, mayors, urban leadership, disadvantaged towns, biographical resources, Israeli society, structuralism versus humanism, radicalism, transformational leadership, culture and leadership

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## 1. Introduction: local leadership and the nature of urban dynamics in disadvantaged peripheral areas

When speaking about the nature and qualities of place-based leadership, we can outline three main approaches.

The first is a structural approach or ‘the contextual thesis’ [1]. Scholars who follow this line of thought, as political economists or Marxists (with its various theoretical extensions<sup>1</sup>), tend to highlight and empower major objective forces in politics, sociology and geography, in a manner that reduces the potential of local leaders to shape their own environments. Accordingly, the structural conditions within which certain local leaders are embedded and engaged (e.g., power relations, class structure, their actual location within the national, spatial hierarchy), together mold and fix a context that substantially influences the volume of their deeds, and the quality and effectiveness of local leaders. In this view, disadvantaged places, such as peripheral towns or poor neighborhoods in marginal areas, that suffer under macro contextual forces, such as globalization and neo-liberalization, negatively affect and worsen the welfare and living standards in their vicinities. Such conditions significantly restrict the abilities of local leaders, no matter who they are and what their cultural or biographical sources. In a structural analysis, such forces operate in a one-way direction: they redirect and shape the policy and decisions taken by local leaders, while the latter are unable to control these forces. This structural mechanism may be even more rigid when it comes to municipal leadership. Beyond global or national forces, the fundamental nature of city politics is much more complicated and rife with conflictual and contradictory interests and values, as in: [5] real estate, community life, and municipal administration. Hence, leaders who represent disadvantaged communities are forced to face many exogenous problems and conflicts in a limited, by-the-book manner; they have almost no freedom to insert their visions, values, personalities, biographies and personal narratives. At best, they can solve problems reactively or sufficiently to cope by exchanging resources. As those who lack material, financial and political resources, and frequently face severe social problems, such local leaders are compelled to produce a distinct and narrow pattern of policy making, one that is oriented towards trouble shooting (i.e., finding immediate, short-term solutions), often producing poor strategies, rather than designing long-term, sustainable plans. Furthermore, seen from a Marxist viewpoint, local leaders, situated in places in desperate need of financial resources, will attempt to gain help by means of flexible, survivalist politics, shifting from one politician to another and turning to various ministries and philanthropic institutions. Their fundamental situation manipulates them to adopt and internalize a hierarchical and subjective politics—a position that obliges them to become integral parts of problem. Even those local leaders who are aware of this and make honest efforts to formulate policies designed to break the vicious cycle, will probably, eventually fall into a Sisyphean logic.

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<sup>1</sup>See: [2]; for the Israeli context see [3, 4]. Tzfadia and Grinberg do point to active position taken by local leaders. However, in line with collective structuralism base of Marxist thinking, such reaction, shifts and other movements are not analyzed as they were an outcome of individual reaction but rather as a collective action that directed to challenge the capitalist super-structure.

The second and contradictory theoretical perspective is one that may be called a humanistic approach or 'the personality thesis' [1]. Scholars who take this viewpoint tend to empower the abilities of local leaders, while putting aside or ignoring objective material conditions. Such studies analyze leadership qualities by emphasizing personalities, values, characteristics and perceptions, presuming these leaders to be "a problem-solver, crisis-handler and the man-to-blame" [6]. As such, the extent to which a local leader appears on the political scene as an innovator, arbitrator, or mediator, this is not the outcome of particular objective circumstances nor of the municipal circumstances within which that local leader functions, but rather the outcome of that individual person's 'conception of office' [6]. In other words, scholars who follow 'the personality thesis' ignore or minimize the role of structural forces as autonomous powers that shape urban order and determine the wellbeing of the local residents.

The current study follows a third approach, which I suggest labeling 'the humanistic-interpretational approach' for analyzing local leadership. Scholars, who follow this approach [1, 5, 7–13] accept the notion that certain structural situations of disadvantaged places may have a negative impact and restrict the abilities of local leaders to accomplish their desired goals. Furthermore, unlike 'the personality thesis' (which is often correlated with conservative views), these scholars view real politics, material and macro structural conditions as being frequently manipulated by politicians and certain economic interests. However, unlike 'the structural-contextual thesis', they incorporate the leader as the one who *interprets* context and has the potential to become a powerful actor within the system. In other words, these scholars consider the local leader as an *independent variable*, shaped by structural forces and autonomously reshaping them at the same time.

Based on this humanistic-interpretational framework, the current study seeks to empirically examine and analyze the case of certain Israeli mayors and local leaders, who represent and lead relatively disadvantaged urban areas, by examining how they interpret and manage their difficult situations. This analysis addresses the following specific questions: To what extent have these local leaders succeeded in improving the wellbeing and quality-of-life of their resident citizens? What practical added value or improvement did their actions and policies provide? Were certain aspects of their personalities (e.g., perceptions, values, charisma, visions, political narratives or biographies) recognized and disseminated in the public sphere?

To address these questions, the present study summarizes a series of empirical studies that explored different types of Israeli mayors and local leaders in some peripheral Israeli municipalities during the period from 1983 to 2017. It also discusses the relationship and the dialog conducted between the examined local leaders and their constituents, as well as their entire socio-political environment.

## 2. The context: Israeli geographical peripheries

The local leaders under discussion in this article were, and some still are, leading Israeli medium-sized towns located in the peripheries of the State of Israel, categorized as having a

low socio-economic status.<sup>2</sup> In broad terms, historically, these towns were labeled 'development towns' (Heb., *arei pitu'ah*). Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Israeli government and national planning authorities prepared to accommodate the large influx of Jewish immigrants, many from Arab states. To this end, during the 1950s and early 1960s, the Israeli authorities founded and built about 35 'new towns' in the frontier areas of the new state. These included the following towns (some of which later became large cities): Ashdod, Be'er-Sheva (Beersheba), Beit-She'an, Kiryat-Shemona, Lod (Lyda), Migdal ha-Emek, Netivot, Ofakim, Ramle, Yavne, and Yeruham.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, these new towns were located at a distance from the big metropolitan areas of Israel (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv). As such, they were disadvantaged and suffered from the significantly poor conditions that were typical of peripheral areas, such as: an employment base that rested on traditional and low-tech industries (e.g., food, textiles and mining industries); a high rate of unemployment; low income levels; high levels of socioeconomic instability; low quality public services; and a narrow tax base. In addition, for many years, these towns also suffered from a selective and negative pattern of emigration (the better-educated young people would leave to find work in larger and more affluent urban areas), a phenomenon commonly known as 'brain drain', that further reduced the socio-economic potential of those towns.

As for the sociological and ethnic aspects, the vast majority of the people who now live in those towns are the second and third generations of new immigrant parents from Muslim countries; many accustomed to traditional-hierarchical interactions with the broader political environment [14]. Since the early 1990s, in the greater national political arena, Israeli society has undergone a sharp move towards a neo-liberalized and globalized social order [15]—a dynamic that widened the socioeconomic and spatial gaps between rich and poor areas in Israel. In addition, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Israeli municipalities have come under more scrutiny and have been subjected to tighter regulation by the Israeli Treasury and the Ministry of the Interior, particularly the poorest and lowest ranking municipalities.<sup>4</sup>

Based on humanistic-interpretational approach mentioned above, the goal of the following analysis is to address the question: How do leaders in those disadvantaged towns cope with and transcend their demeaning conditions? The following analysis and discussion address this question by identifying, conceptualizing, and classifying various types of local leaders using common leadership models.

The empirical analysis consists of three sections. The first section focuses on the personality and strategies of the Mayor of Yavne-Meir Sheetrit (1974–1992), describing his mayoral

<sup>2</sup>According Israeli official statistic, each among all Israeli cities, towns and settlements categorized in one of 10 statistical clusters; each cluster represent a certain level of socioeconomic conditions. Settlements who appears in cluster 1 represent the lowest level of municipalities cluster 10 represent the highest level of urban standards. In the research period, the settlements that under consideration appeared in clusters 3–4.

<sup>3</sup>Up until 1948 Lod and Ramle were homogenous Arab cities. During the Israeli War of Independence (May 1948), these cities were evacuated and a short while later rebuilt as new town. Along the years they become ethno-nationally mix town, see below Section 5.1.

<sup>4</sup>Further, in many case the Israeli ministry of interior affairs intervene in the local municipal affaires of these municipalities, expropriating their powers and limiting local autonomy, as in some case reached to firing mayors replacing them with appointed high officials.

activity, representing an entrepreneurial style of leadership. Second section analyses the relationship between the social and geographical conditions in Yeruham and the leadership qualities exercised by the mayors who served this town from 1983 to 2005. This includes a more detailed discussion of an egalitarian leadership style, as expressed by the personality and strategies of Mayor Moti Avisror, comparing it to other types of leadership, mainly hierarchical and meritocratic. The third section analyzes some common local leadership styles among politically-active Israeli-Arab civilians engaged in contemporary Israeli 'mixed cities and towns' (consisting of resident citizens/communities with different ethnic and national identities). This section specifically focuses on Faraj Eben-Faraj, a municipal council member (2012–present), who represents a new model of leadership, one which I call the 'pragmatic reformer'. Here, special attention is paid to the political narrative and to biographical resources, as crucial elements that support the attitudes and abilities of this leader, as well as any other leader.

### 3. The local entrepreneurial leader

Any city or town has a set of objective attributes—geographical, sociological or political that provide its relative advantage or, to use Michael Porter's term, its 'competitive advantage'. In general, this concept refers to the notion that the "endowments of inputs, such as labor, natural resources and financial capital [...] enable the nation [or city] to productively *use* and *upgrade* its input" [16]. In an urban context, such input may be either 'fixed' (e.g., climate, or landscape, or the distance to a big metropolitan area) or 'dynamic', such as changes in state tax-benefit policies, or in commuter habits, or in housing and residential preferences. A crucial point regarding local leadership is that 'competitive advantage' cannot be always regarded as an explicit objective entity, but rather as something that *should be identified* or even invented (i.e., something bound to subjectivity). Successful leaders are those who are better at identify or inventing such advantages and utilizing them wisely on behalf of the city residents. The following discussion demonstrates this guiding principle by reference to Meir Sheetrit, the Mayor of Yavne (1974–1992) ([14], pp. 106–107; [17]).

#### 3.1. Political, geographic and economic contexts

Meir Sheetrit was a young vibrant activist when first elected to be the Mayor of Yavne in 1974—a small Israeli town located at the southern border of the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. Yavne was established by Jewish immigrants from Morocco in the mid-1950s. During the 1960s and 1970s, Yavne ranked as one of the poorest municipalities in Israel, suffering from inadequate or lacking infrastructures and services, stigmatized and characterized by a high rate of social-welfare problems.

#### 3.2. The mayor as an innovator of 'competitive advantage'

A short while after being elected, Sheetrit formulated a vision for Yavne as an attractive place that can provide 'equal opportunity housing' for local and non-local Israelis ready to live in

Yavne. He emphasized that, although Yavne was not within the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, it was, in fact, adjacent to it. Thus, Sheetrit claimed that Yavne has the potential to become an attractive suburb for middle- and upper-middle class populations. However, in order to attain that goal, Yavne would first have to gain a competitive advantage—something that would convince members of the middle class this Yavne is worthy. In the late 1970s, Sheetrit realized that many Israelis had changed their life styles and preferences in regard to housing, seeking for more privacy, wanting to live in private home with large yards. Acting on his intuition, Sheetrit prepared a strategic plan and took steps to make Yavne an attractive place particularly for middle-class emigrants from nearby (people who could not afford to live in Tel Aviv proper due to the very high cost of housing there). By doing so, he thought, Yavne would gain an advantage, one that would later spread and eventually benefit the older lower-class residents of Yavne. Unlike Yavne's former mayors, who had been passive and acted reactively, Sheetrit was proactive and determined to implement his municipal vision and strategy. In doing so, he initially rejected the existing official city plan (originally designed for building a new neighborhood of high-rise residential buildings), profoundly changing the urban master plan and essentially replacing it with a new design. Sheetrit's alternative master plan focused on the construction of a large new neighborhood, one suited to the current middle-class, ground-floor housing orientation and living standard.

Then, he made an advertising campaign promoting this new Yavne neighborhood targeting middle-class Israelis in the vicinity. Furthermore, knowing that there was a large Israel Defense Force military base not far from Yavne, inhabited by I.D.F. officers fitting the sociological profile of the Israeli middle class, Mayor Sheetrit initiated promotional meetings with those career officers, convincing them to buy homes in this neighborhood and to emigrate to Yavne; he succeeded in this mission. By the mid-1980s, a new upper-middle-class neighborhood had been built, bought and was inhabited in the western section of Yavne, consisting of about 1000 spacious, private homes, each with a large courtyard.

### **3.3. Overcoming challenging class conflicts**

The next stage towards realizing Sheetrit's vision was the most crucial and difficult one. Sheetrit sought to utilize the socioeconomic advantages embodied by this group of I.D.F. personnel to benefit the entire population of Yavne. To that end, his general policy was to initiate or enable projects designed to integrate these new residents with the relatively-disadvantaged veteran residents of Yavne. This posed a complicated challenge, putting Sheetrit at a political crossroads. Seen from the perspective of socioeconomic classes, the natural tendency of members of the upper-middle class is to protect the use and exchange values of their properties, often by practicing self-segregation (such as by building sophisticated boundaries, both concrete and abstract, designed to discourage social integration). At first, this was the case in Yavne. For example, in the mid-1980s, young parents in the new neighborhood, established a new elementary public school, built especially to serve their own children and, thus, to avoid integration. As mayor, Sheetrit objected to their initiative, determined to create an integrative educational and sociological system, first and foremost, as a means to allow the disadvantaged children a chance to increase their social mobility. Officially, Sheetrit could

reject this initiative since the Israeli law allow mayors to enforce integration in the school system<sup>5</sup>. However, he did not utilized this option. Instead, to overcome the middle-class resistance and to avoid bitterness, Sheetrit adopted a pragmatic approach, suggesting the new residents a deal. Unlike conventional thinking, in which politicians presume the logic of a 'zero sum game' when negotiating with outgroups, Sheetrit negotiated using a 'win-win' strategy. Working together with professional educators and experts, he adopted an educational model in which the curriculum and teaching process in the new school was not fixed, but rather highly flexible. The new school incorporated the 'individual teaching method' — a novel and, as yet, unfamiliar model in those days. In practical terms, this meant that the children of the relatively affluent families would not have to suffer at lower educational levels but would rather be encouraged to advance at their own speed, in accordance with their personal abilities. Meanwhile, the relatively disadvantaged children would not be harmed, still getting the necessary time and attention from their teachers. This enabled Sheetrit's goal to be met, as children from different social classes socialized in integrated classrooms with their classmates. By applying this model, Sheetrit and the educational staff succeeded in advancing the interests of both communities, while avoiding the conflict of interest.

Mayor Sheetrit's second attempt to block an unacceptable initiative, instigated for the purpose of avoiding integration, occurred later on, when some of the new residents wanted to open a sports club ('the water park') near their neighborhood; they established it as a non-profit association in which the owners (i.e., shareholders) of the potentially exclusive club were all residents of the affluent neighborhood. Mayor Sheetrit was once again concerned that this might encourage a pattern of segregation between new and old residents. However, being a pragmatic and creative leader, he did not reject this initiative outright, but insisted on establishing some prerequisite ownership criteria that would open the water park to other members. Sheetrit wanted to promote the circulation of social capital and to reshape the local social system, making it more inclusive and integrative. As such, his main precondition was that at least one third of the club's shareholders come from outside the affluent neighborhood. This obliged the founders to appeal to residents of the old neighborhoods and to convince them to accept partial ownership of the club.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Yavne had become much stronger, much less stigmatized, and much more integrated. The high school now includes children from all the social classes and socioeconomic levels. The local partisan-politics system is not strictly divided according to ethnic or class lines. The aforementioned sports club became an inclusive, rather exclusive, place and is not identified the upper-middle class. Since the 1990s (and more intensely since 2010), Yavne has raised its status and is currently considered a strong suburban magnet that attracts young couples from broader areas surrounding the Tel Aviv metropolis. Indeed, such improvements were also caused by other sources and mechanisms (steps taken by the three mayors who followed Sheetrit). Nonetheless, taking a broad perspective, the strategic steps made by Mayor Sheetrit during the 1980s caused a positive, fundamental shift, substantially altering the urban socio-cultural dynamics in Yavne. Not only

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<sup>5</sup>According to the Israeli "Mandatory Education Law of 1949," while the municipalities were the official zoning authorities, school children were only to be registered in the schools within their own residential zones.

did Sheetrit correctly identify the competitive advantage of Yavne, he also tailored it to fit the target populations. Furthermore, after gaining this advantage, Sheetrit harnessed the abilities and high potential of his upper-middle class residents for the benefit of the greater Yavne community. Sheetrit accomplished these difficult and selfless tasks by remaining committed to his urban social vision, standing firm and engaging in tough negotiations with relatively strong people. To borrow a well-known typological model suggested by Svava [8], it seems that Sheetrit fits the *entrepreneurial* model of leadership (or the ‘innovator’). According to Svava, the *entrepreneurial* leader is one who sets a policy that strives to push forward *structural reforms* within the urban sphere and successfully carries them.<sup>6</sup>

The above analysis concentrated on the relationship between a mayor and his socio-political environment, showing that strong leadership can make a significant difference. However, this analysis may be deceptive and unintentionally lead some to a naïve attitude towards leadership, due to the use of the social-class perspective to analyze the ‘leader-followers relationship’, while taking for granted the cultural and value orientations of both the leader and the followers. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanism of leadership, we must also incorporate the cultural context and the value orientation of the actors involved. The following section highlights and clarifies this aspect.

## 4. Hierarchical, meritocratic and egalitarian-transformational local leaders

The volume and quality of the resources given to politicians, whether material or abstract, existing or invented, may indicate very little about the real dynamics of leadership and urban change. Resources alone offer meager insight, if one ignores the question: What are the fundamental cultural values in a politician’s background that guide the practical use of those resources? The following discusses this question and provides empirical comparisons of various types of local leaders in Yeruham.

### 4.1. The geographic, political, sociological and cultural context

Yeruham, inhabited by approximately 10,000 people [11], is a small disadvantaged town located in Israel’s Negev desert, far from the biggest Israeli metropolitan areas. The political history of this town in the later twentieth century and early twenty-first century shows three substantial transformations, each with a distinct pattern: hierarchy, meritocracy and egalitarianism. Since its founding in 1955 and until the early 1983, Yeruham was markedly dominated by the Israeli establishment. The town was characterized by a high level of dependency and a client-patron-style relationship, further exacerbated in the 1980s, when it was governed by a mayor who employed a paternalistic and centralistic style (from 1983 to 1992). This mayor

<sup>6</sup>Svava ([8], Figures 2–4, p. 105). In Svava’s words: the innovator is one who characterizes by having a high level of “effectiveness in policy initiation” plus a high level of “effectiveness in implementation”.

regularly bypassed the professional suggestions made by other officials and uprooted local criticism by means of a tactic of co-opting political rivals. At that time, such leadership norms had a great impact on Yeruham's residents. For example, the citizens were deeply convinced that if they have a tangible problem, the best way to handle it would be by seeking political assistance by means of gaining personal favor with the mayor, rather than making an effort to deal with their own problems by themselves. This political pattern changed significantly in 1992, when a young local leader, Mayor Moti Avisror, entered the Mayor's Office (1992–2003).

Right after being elected, Avisror stated that he wished to substantially change the common practice in the Yeruham municipality and in city politics as a whole. Avisror took many steps designed to undermine the culture of dependency and to thwart the popular habit of leaning on exogenous political aid. He strove to make Yeruham a place where its citizens are prouder, more independent and self-sustaining. For instance, when local citizens would enter the Mayor's Office seeking help, Avisror would politely reject them, saying: "You should first go to the professional department manager, who'll gladly help you. If they can't help you there, then come back to me." Furthermore, in contrast to the former prevailing governing norms (based on access to the mayor being granted only to select political comrades or by nepotism), Mayor Avisror practiced norms based on professional considerations and meritocratic values. Thus, whenever the municipality of Yeruham sought to recruit professional contractors, Avisror insisted that the screening of potential candidates be given to impartial, private agencies that would examine them in accordance with professional criteria. He always explained to those seeking jobs within the municipality: "First, you should pass the external tests," (i.e., the relevant occupational aptitude tests). By applying such practices and policy, Avisror sought to change the 'old' well-established norms and to promote a political culture of professionalism and autonomy. Unsurprisingly, in late 1990s, the municipality of Yeruham received many awards from various Israeli ministries and state agencies praising Mayor Avisror and his staff on their excellence and professionalism in management and leadership.

However, many young people in Yeruham were deeply disappointed with this managerial style, and unlike the governmental ministries and officials, they did not consider it to be efficient or successful; they argued that the unavoidable outcome of choosing meritocratic values and higher professional standards is the deprivation and exclusion the weakest, most disadvantaged residents. To a certain degree, their criticism was justified. This highlights the paradoxical nature of applying the meritocratic model of leadership in marginal, disadvantaged peripheral areas; the inherent structure of this model promotes and benefits only the more professional and well-educated members of the lower class (often correlating with young people). In many cases, the less privileged, those most in need of help from local leadership, do not stand a chance in meritocratic competition.

A reasonable and logical solution to this problem might be to implement an egalitarian policy alongside the meritocracy, as, in fact, was done by Mayor Avisror. Although he insisted on establishing local norms based on higher professional standards, at same time, he advanced certain egalitarian projects, directly targeting the young strata of local residents, such as the high-school students, as described below.

#### 4.2. The egalitarian-transformational leader

From the moment he took office, Mayor Avisror strove to shape the social order in a way that would provide local teenagers with an equal opportunity. He determined that the local formal education system was the best platform for the fulfillment of this vision and for the promotion of social mobility for the younger generation.

To that end, Mayor Avisror would have to overcome certain difficult structural problems to enable the application of such equal-opportunity policy and programming under the inherent conditions of peripherality and marginality. Although his policy appears to be worthy and achievable, a structural-cultural perspective may dampen that optimism. As implied earlier, local leaders who attempt to break free of the natural mechanism that maintains and perpetuates poverty, must inevitably deal with severe problems born of local cultural preconceptions, such as: clientelism [18], passiveness, fatalism [19], cultural distrust [20], and low-level expectations. Nonetheless, the following empirical analysis shows that this structural scenario was not necessarily practiced. Determined local leaders, who are well-apprised of local political culture, may successfully break the vicious cycle to introduce a totally different socio-cultural dynamic.

Until mid-1990s, Yeruham high-school students (there was only one high-school) presented poor achievements in terms of the rate of students who were awarded full high-school matriculation certificates. For three decades, the residents of Yeruham, especially the children and youth, passed through the low-quality educational system, characterized by low standards, low expectations, low professionalism, and graduated, suffering from a sense of stigma and with a poor self-image. This negative dynamic significantly changed during the late 1990s under Avisror's leadership.

In 1994, the Israeli Ministry of Education decided to take affirmative action by applying a policy that granted poor municipalities (including Yeruham) some 40 million new shekels (about 10 million dollars) to improve their school systems. Avisror recognized this opportunity to apply his egalitarian vision by instituting a massive reform in the Yeruham school system. He stated that the ultimate goal of the Yeruham municipality is to raise the rate of students who graduate with full high-school matriculation certificates. To accomplish this, he hired an expert team of educators to execute an intensive intervention in the high-school, and to work together with the students, the parents, the teaching staff, and the Municipal Department of Education. By 1996, after the great efforts that had been invested, Yeruham began to enjoy the results, as the rate of high-school graduates with full high school matriculation certificates rose dramatically from a mere 20% to 60%, remaining stable since then. As will be shown in the analysis below, Avisror's success in accomplishing significant structural changes in organizational culture would not have come to pass without his personal leadership resources and his effective mode of interaction and persuasion with his constituency and the higher authorities.

This educational intervention project began in the summer of 1994, when Mayor Avisror held a general meeting (in the desert just outside the town), including the participation of: high-school students, parents, teachers, educators and representatives of the municipality. The official explanation given for this meeting was: "preparation for the upcoming school year." Mayor Avisror recalled the proceedings as follows:

*I remember myself sitting cross-legged [i.e., oriental style; body-language interpreted by Israelis as a genuine expression of spontaneity and authenticity]. I asked someone to speak briefly about his role and life story. When it was my turn, I said: "My name is Moti Avisror. I was born here in Yeruham. I had a poor childhood. About twenty years ago, when I was seventeen years old and still studying in our local high-school, I was enrolled in the study track designed prepare me and my classmate for a full high-school matriculation certificate. But then some officials from the Ministry of Education canceled that study track. This was traumatic news for me and my classmate; I was shocked and almost desperate. However, despite the difficulty, I decided to continue studying for the matriculation examinations on my own. I took myself in hand and made great efforts to achieve a full matriculation certificate. I wanted to improve myself and to prove to myself that I could do it--and I did!*

*So, you see--if I did it, there's no reason why all of you cannot! So, what I am asking now is that all you students sitting here with us, join the prep course and get yourself a full high-school matriculation certificate. Just do what I did--dare! Strive! Make an effort!"*

This statement was not enthusiastically accepted by everyone present at that meeting. Some students, parents, teachers, educators, and even the school principal refused, at first, to take part in the mayor's vision, arguing that Avisror did not really know enough about the high-school. Initially, they did not understand what he was expecting of them. Some declared: "It's an impossible goal." Others believed: "It's a waste of time and energy."

This kind of reaction was not entirely unexpected; frequently marginal or disadvantaged communities are characterized by a low level of expectations and a political culture of distrust towards authorities and elites, often resulting from histories of bad collective experiences, similar to the socio-political history of Yeruham before Avisror became the mayor. The people of Yeruham had a long and bad experience with politicians (both nationally and locally), as well as with elite groups, all of whom had low expectations of them and never considered encouraging them to try harder, never thinking they might succeed.

Avisror sought to put an end to that negative dynamic. He refused to accept the rationalizations voiced by teachers, parents and students. He insisted on executing his novel intervention program. Shortly after that first general meeting, he held a conversation with the reluctant high-school principal and fired him, replacing him with a cooperative principal. The entire concept of classroom learning was substantially changed once the recruited professional contractors from outside Yeruham arrived. Meanwhile, Mayor Avisror interacted with various parties—bureaucrats, teachers, parents, students and contractors—revealing his fundamentally different mode of leadership to them (to break the old stereotype); he strove to change their fatalistic orientations and to raise their levels of expectation and optimism. Recall that in 1996, the official data received from the Israeli Ministry of Education was very positive, citing a dramatic rise in the number of students who completed the maximal high-school study track. Avisror also utilized this good news to generate positive, attitude-changing publicity via the local news media, posters in school corridors, announcements at official meetings, stressing one simple, blatant message: "Yes, you can!". Furthermore, whenever the mayor met the officials, teachers, parents and students who had attended that first meeting, he reminded them, pleasantly but firmly, of their original, skeptical reactions to his initiative, and he did this repeatedly on every possible occasion. Following Richard L. Daft's conceptual framework [21], Avisror utilized a storytelling technique in which the leader tells the followers a story, involving facts and myths, one that teaches an important lesson; that story is then

often repeated by the followers. According to Daft, the more the leader repeats that story, the more likely it is that the followers will internalize and assimilate the desired message and the embedded values.

In summation, the above analysis shows that policy outcomes cannot be understood solely by analyzing the volume of the resources given to a community or a mayor (in this case, governmental financial assistance given to the municipality of Yeruham in the mid-1990s). Policy makers, as well as researchers, must also answer the question: How do leaders utilize gifted resources?

In light of these consequences, it appears that Avisror's policies fit the type of leader called a 'transformational leader' by Bass and Riggio [22]. Unlike a 'transactional leader', Avisror did not identify success with the satisfaction of his constituent, nor by exchanging gratification with them. Instead, he worked to reshape their expectations and consciousness; by doing so, he got them to internalize a valuable life lesson, *beyond* the specific, concrete outcomes (i.e., increased full-matriculation rates). That lesson was: "What may seem to be impossible at first may be possible. That depends on you!" Avisror formulized this particular message intentionally, in order to dash the negative presumptions (or *idees fixes*). According to Bass and Riggio, the main features that characterize "transformational leadership" are the reshaping of expectations, the setting of high expectations, the internalization of greater responsibility, and facing real challenges.

Thus far, this discussion has emphasized the notion that leaders (both Sheetrit and Avisror) have succeeded in their missions by utilizing personal internal resources: to motivate change, to determine which challenges to face and how to handle them, to conceptualize and analyze the state-of-mind of others, and to negotiate with conviction regardless of the others' reticence or skepticism. An additional subcategory within 'personal internal resources' is—'biographical resources'. The following section demonstrates the political use of biographical resources empirically by presenting it in a different context—that of local Israeli-Arab leaders in mixed cities and towns.

## 5. The pragmatic-reformer as a local leader

### 5.1. The political context

Israeli-Arab citizens compose about 20% of the Israeli population. Some live in homogenous Arab settlements; others live in mixed cities, such as: Yafo (Jaffa, a borough of Tel Aviv), Jerusalem, Haifa, and some small-medium towns like: Lod (Lyda), Ramle, Akko (Acre) and Nazareth-I'llit. The vast majority of citizens who live in those locations are Jews and none are governed by an Arab mayor. In other words, the Arabs citizens living in such places are minority populations at both the local-municipal and the national levels. Generally, the standard-of-living of those Israeli-Arab citizens residing in mixed cities and towns is lower than that of the Jewish citizens living in entirely Jewish cities (such as Yavne and Yeruham). Several factors dictate this relative inferiority ([13], pp. 261–268): the political histories of the mixed

cities and towns, the cultural and political heritage of their residents and, no less important, the political orientation (attitudes, values, perceptions) of the Israeli-Arab activists who are engaged in mixed-city/town politics. The following provides a more detailed discussion.

Until recently, Israeli-Arab citizens living in mixed cities and towns were dominated by two prototypical kinds of leaders ([13], pp. 261–268). The first kind is the traditional-hierarchical leader, who holds a pragmatic, relatively-subjective position towards the Israeli majority and the Israeli establishment. The basic rationale of this type of leader is that there is no point in even thinking about changing the existing power structure (i.e., the Jewish majority versus the Arab minority). Based on this perception, such leaders believe that by maintaining close ties with the existing power centers (e.g., municipal officials, mayors, Israeli politicians) and by respecting the rules of the game, they better serve the material and political interests of the Arabs residents and may benefit them more. In addition, unlike radical activists (more below), such Israeli-Arab leaders are deeply convinced that their local problems have nothing to do with national problems (i.e., the ongoing conflict between Jews and Arabs) that should remain separate. Hence, they feel that local problems can be resolved incrementally, by means of local arrangements made at the local level of governance.

In a sharp contrast, radical Israeli-Arab local leaders view the power system fundamentally differently; they firmly believe that national and local-municipal issues are intertwined. As such, they blame the Israeli establishment as being primarily responsible for their bad circumstances and the low standard-of-living in the mixed cities and towns. Due to this fundamental preconception, the radicals despise their more senior hierarchical opponents, blaming them for cooperating with the hegemonic power and being manipulated by it. Thus, the chosen strategy of radical Israeli-Arab local leaders is to ignore governmental and municipal activity. Instead, they favor taking part in various NGOs (through which they wish to promote psychosocial change in the minds of the Israeli-Arab public) and by appealing to the Israeli Supreme Court.

It seems that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, these two competing types of leaders are both being challenged by a third type of young Israeli-Arab local leader—one who severely criticizes both the traditional-hierarchical type and the radical type. Someone who clearly represents this new third type of Israeli-Arab leader is Faraj Eben-Faraj—a local activist in the city of Lod (Lyda). Before presenting a political profile of this person I'll briefly review the geographical context, i.e., the local condition upon which this leader interact and operate.

Lod (Lyda) is a small-medium mixed town located not far from Tel Aviv. In 2017, its total population was about 74,000 residents [23] and it ranked as one of the poorest municipalities in Israel. Two-thirds of the city population are Jews and the rest are Arabs. Most of residents (especially the Arabs) came from low socioeconomic strata and have, for many years, experienced poor levels of municipal services. In addition, this town is characterized by severe social problems, such as: serious ethnic conflicts; [24] a high crime rate; and a bad reputation as a commercial center for illegal drugs. Furthermore, since the early 1980s, many of Lod's residents have been concerned about housing; there is a severe lack of suitable housing, especially for the Arab population (most of whom live in illegal housing). Faraj Eben-Faraj was born into this context and is affected by it.

## 5.2. The pragmatic-reformer model

Faraj Eben-Faraj began his political activity during 2012 by calling the local Israeli-Arab residents to join him in an attempt to change the poor social conditions by suggesting a different model of leadership that I prefer to call *pragmatic-reformism*. The following discussion outlines the basic elements that define this model, while next subsection analyzes the biographical sources and resources that support it.

Eben-Faraj severely criticizes both the hierarchical and the radical activists with whom he used to socialize from time to time, mainly in his younger years (see below). As opposed to the radicals, Eben-Faraj adopted a pragmatic leadership style, one that does not sufficient with criticism and protest, but strives to advance practical solutions. Like the hierarchical leaders, he avoids the big national controversies relating to the ongoing Jewish-Arab conflict. Instead, he prefers to invest his energies in practical issues that seems achievable and affordable. He stated: “I don’t care about al-Aqsa. I don’t care about the issue of the occupied territories, nor about the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs” [28]. This is what differentiates Eben-Faraj from the radicals.

Eben-Faraj equally rejects the hierarchical model, arguing that such leaders do not effectively or comprehensively solve the real problems of the local Israeli-Arabs, because their actions are *ad hoc* (i.e., relating to specific, single cases) and *ad-hominem* (relating to a particular individual). Thus, applying the hierarchical model means providing individual solutions to specific problems, which does not benefit the vast majority of the local Arabs in Lod. Instead, Eben-Faraj advocates making real changes by promoting and executing serious, comprehensive reforms.

The fact is that Eben-Faraj did not reach these insights just by means of quiet reflection, nor were his personal political views shaped as a direct outcome of pure theoretical thinking; many of his ideas and opinions result from his personal experiences, especially during his childhood, and have become inextricable parts of his personality. Throughout his lifetime, he interacted and socialized with many people, with whom he had intense dialogs, eventually adopting, adapting and formalizing his own unique, personal political view. This holds an important lesson for the entire issue of understanding leadership. As shown below, the study of a leader’s biography is necessary not because it is interesting but rather to comprehend the basic personal, psychosocial experiences that yielded the individual’s potential for becoming a powerful mechanism able to shape real politics. The following subsection briefly clarifies this theoretical notion as a necessary step towards understanding the resources utilized by Eben-Faraj in contemporary local politics.

## 5.3. Biographical resources behind the pragmatic-reformer leader

Since the early 1980s, there has been a growing interest in studying the nature of the relationship between individuals and greater society by researching their ‘biographical resources’ [13, 25–27]. Concisely put, this concept refers to the notion that certain abstract resources, such as motivation and moral justification for action, cannot be considered to be outcomes of

socialization or socio-political conditions (as is presumed by some strict 'orthodox' sociologists), but are also drawn from personal biography. Childhood experiences and significant events undergone by individuals during their lives may later become biographical resources. The crucial element lies in the nexus where objective experience meets subjectivity. The qualities of the biographical resources depend on how each individual, or leader, recalls his/her own existence and sees his/her position vis-à-vis the world and its organization (or urban environment) [27]. Lynn Froggett and Prue Chamberlayne argue that, by focusing on this, researchers may identify abstract attributes, such as motivation, moral justification for action, and the discourse of social enterprise. Let us now apply the study of biographical resources for leadership to our case of the pragmatic-reformer—Faraj Eben-Faraj.

Faraj Eben-Faraj was born in Lod in 1970 to a local Muslim Israeli-Arab family. During the 1970s and 1980s, his father, Ebrahim Eben-Faraj, had served as a council member in the Lod municipality. In those days, Ebrahim held political views and a position that reflected the above hierarchical pattern. His son, Faraj, was exposed to this pattern, but rejected it. As an adult, Faraj Eben-Faraj pointed to an ongoing childhood experience that had led him to criticize this kind of politics:

*In the early 1980s, when I was ten-year-old boy, I remember many activists, council members, who used to come to our house. During these meetings, my mother was almost always in the kitchen preparing refreshments on behalf of our guests. My job was to bring them to the table where my fathers' colleagues used to sit and talk. I had no choice but to stand and wait nearby; after being in that position for years, I was forced to hear many conversations. I noticed that there was one general theme that ran through all those maybe hundreds of conversations. What these guests, actually politicians, wished to do was to solve local problems on a personal basis, on behalf of a specific man or woman. The repeated line was something like: "You should take care of this poor woman, because she has little kids, so we should appeal to the Department of Education [in the municipality] to give her special treatment. We can fix her a job as a kindergarten assistant." You see, I heard a great number of such conversations and I did not like it. I said to myself: "When I grow up, I'll never ever follow this political tactic." That's why the Arabs in Lod stay in the lower [socioeconomic] strata. We must take a totally different approach and push reforms in order to improve the socioeconomic mobility of the younger generation. [28]*

This quotation reflects a political narrative in which the leader rationalizes and explains his distinct political view. By doing so Eben-Faraj rationalized his fundamental objection to the hierarchical mode of leadership. Nonetheless, Eben-Faraj did not totally reject the values and worldview of his father and his father's close social milieu. Later, during the late 1980s, he had also been exposed to the different socio-political milieu that of radical activists who were strongly opposed to his father. Faraj Eben-Faraj remembered an interesting event that produced an additional pillar in the evolution of his personal political narrative and views:

*When I was a boy, I saw and heard some Arab guys who belonged to the Communist Party. In general, they opposed my father, sometimes even despised him. I remember one day, two such guys were talking to each other, while my father and his buddy were sitting in the background. One said to his friend something like: "Ah..., leave them! After all, they don't actually understand the real nature of politics. I don't expect more from a taxi driver and his close friend, the bus driver (pointing to my father and his fellow)." You see, when I heard this talk, I was extremely angry. Why should a taxi driver know less than anyone else?! I know many common people who have a much better understanding of politics than some well-educated people! [28]*

This dialog caused Faraj Eben-Faraj to reformulate his political narrative in a way that rejected radicalism. Beyond natural rationalization, he also rejected radicalism for psychological reasons; as one who emotionally identified with his father, he could not accept the critique and the hate voiced by those two radical activists. On the whole, Faraj Eben-Faraj adopted a model of pragmatic-reformism, simultaneously rejecting both hierarchical and radical views, though taking the best of each.

Based on his revised model, Faraj Eben-Faraj intervened in Lod's local politics in a new and different way. After being elected to serve on the Lod Municipal Council in November 2012, he acted pragmatically by developing social relations with the Jewish mayor (Yair Revivo, 2012–present) with whom he carried out serious reforms, including the construction and improvement of physical infrastructures, especially in the Arab neighborhoods, including: bridges, roads and a club for local Israeli-Arab teenagers.

Furthermore, a clear expression of Eben-Faraj's political leadership style is seen in the way he handled the aforementioned explosive issue of all the illegal construction of Arab homes. From 2014 to 2016, the Israeli Ministry of Housing and Construction launched a program in an attempt to achieve a broader solution to local-Arab's housing problem. Unlike the radicals, Eben-Faraj enthusiastically joined this program as a representative of Lod's Arab population. Unlike the hierarchical leaders, who tended to address such matters on a house-by-house or person-by-person basis (often granting nepotistic preferential treatment), Faraj Eben-Faraj insisted on solving this problem comprehensively and for the long-term. To do so, he utilized his academic knowledge as a lawyer and the reputation he had gained in his ingroup by negotiating with the Israeli establishment.

To summarize, the above analysis points to an interesting relationship between social environment (at both macro and micro levels) and leadership. Eben-Faraj's biographical experiences became political narratives that, in turn, transformed into biographical resources, in this case, providing moral justification and motivation for his actions. These resources helped him achieve substantial practical and material benefits on behalf of the local Arabs in Lod.

## 6. Conclusions and discussion

The study and understanding local leaders functioning under demeaning conditions in disadvantaged peripheral locations may seem to be a pointless or fruitless endeavor, if one accepts that there is insufficient autonomy and that these leaders' initiatives will inevitably be stymied. However, the empirical case studies presented above clearly contradict such structural logic. Examples were given of Jewish mayors and Israeli-Arab local leaders situated in disadvantaged places who, nonetheless, succeeded in promoting their original socio-political views and achieving practical, beneficial reforms. Though context does matter, the fact remains that the under similar conditions, distinct types of leaders came to power (even in same town): hierarchical versus egalitarian; pragmatic-reformers versus radicals, questioning the 'context thesis'.

Leadership also matters. A most significant finding is that the same bad conditions may either be considered as insurmountable challenges or as windows of opportunity, depending on those leaders' prior orientations, presumptions, and strength of character. The empirical section pointed to several strategies by which these local leaders were able to fight against the negative circumstances and find the fortitude to proactively improve their environments by identifying competitive advantages for making their places more attractive and worthy of local pride. Projects to bring more affluent residents as a means of potentially raising the overall socioeconomic status; reforms improving the local school system; construction and repairs of physical infrastructures, and other projects to improve wellbeing in the peripheries of Israel and to reform the quality of local government—all these outcomes fundamentally contradict the negative mechanism known in Marxist thought, that leaders of lower-class populations are forced to take an integral part in producing the problem. The Marxist notion of “production is at same time reproduction” limits to theoretical sphere.

The ultimate questions are: What enabled these particular local leaders to deal so well with their bad situations and to successfully transform negative social dynamics into positive outcomes? How are certain local leaders in disadvantaged areas able to overcome all the negative predispositions and preconceptions in order to forge new, positive, viable notions and methods of action in order to gain public cooperation and make real progress?

The analysis pointed to a set of abstract resources and abilities that drew from leader's personality. This set operate as independent variable, i.e., one that is not fully synchronized (and cannot be synchronized) with objective conditions. This include: values, perceptions, motivation, determination, creativity, charisma, family affection, formal education, memories, narrative and biographical resources.

The present findings reveal some answers in regard to practical policy and methods. Two subsystems must first be differentiated: the leader's value system and leader's resources. The first refers to the question: What are the basic values, perceptions or the cultural coordinates that guide a leader's path and policy? Is that leader hierarchical, meritocratic or egalitarian? Does he/she follow a competitive logic (win-lose) or a 'win-win' strategy? The second subsystem refers to the question: What are the personal abilities that this leader may utilize to implement his/her values and policies? Is this leader a conventional-rational thinker (following prevailing norms) or does he/she utilize (unique) personal biographical resources? Does he/she have an 'expert mind' or an 'open mind'? Does this leader interact with his/her constituents like a transactional leader or a transformational leader (i.e., utilizing intrinsic versus extrinsic resources)?

By getting answers to all these questions, policy makers, as well as researchers, can better analyze and evaluate both the direction and the depth of changes being made by local leaders regarding various issues.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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