

ISRAEL

Why Israel's new right-wing leaders immediately made plastic plates inexpensive again

BY DEBORAH DANAN JANUARY 6, 2023



A man shops for disposable plastic tableware in Osher Ad Supermarket in Givat Shaul, Jerusalem, Oct. 27, 2021, shortly after new taxes on disposables went into effect in Israel. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

TEL AVIV (JTA) — Devora Zien's tiny apartment in Bnei Brak runs like a factory, but, she admits, not a very smooth one. With 12 mouths to feed three times a day, single-use plasticware is a basic necessity, she says. So when Israel's then-Finance Minister Avigdor Liberman increased taxes on disposables in 2021, Zien said she was "in total shock."

"For me, it's more important than bread and milk," she said. "It's about survival. I can't stand in front of the kitchen sink all day washing

dishes — and where would I put a dishwasher even if I could afford one?”

Lieberman’s tax on disposable dinnerware, as well as another set of taxes he imposed as finance minister on sugar-filled soft drinks, were viewed by many ultra-Orthodox Israelis as unfairly targeting their lifestyle and cynically using health and environmental considerations to single out their community.

This week, after Benjamin Netanyahu’s government was sworn in, Lieberman’s successor, Bezalel Smotrich, in his first move as finance minister, signed orders repealing the tax hikes on disposables and sugary drinks.

Ultra-Orthodox lawmakers hailed the move, as did many in the broader haredi population. Images made the rounds on social media of haredi men celebrating the decision by drinking Cristal Mint, a low-in-price, high-in-sugar soda, from disposable plastic cups. Beyond the relief felt by members of the community, there was also a sense that the balance in Israel’s cultural war is once again tipping in their favor.

MK Uri Maklev of the haredi United Torah Judaism party, said the tax reversal underscored the new government’s policy of “working for the citizens and not against them.”

Israel is either the world’s top or second-biggest consumer of disposable tableware per capita, depending on the analysis, making the goods a natural target for environmental activists. And the taxes were projected to bring in \$350 million annually to the country’s treasury, no small amount. That’s nearly twice, for example, what the city of Jerusalem spends each year on sanitation.

But the disposables were Lieberman’s only target for environmental taxes, which came as he sought to address Israel’s high cost of living by cutting taxes on other goods. And no environmental activist himself, Lieberman is well known for his fierce criticism of Israel’s haredi sector, which he says contributes too little to the country through work and army service.



Avigdor Liberman, center, holds a news conference following the dissolving of the Israeli parliament, in Tel Aviv, May 30, 2019. (Flash90)

“The only thing that matters to him is sticking his finger in our eye,” said Devora’s sister-in-law Yael Zien, a media personality who advocates on behalf of Israel’s haredi population. She went on to cite Liberman’s widely condemned statement that he would send haredi Jews on “wheelbarrows straight to the dumpster.”

“You can’t compare your average, secular, two-car family that orders takeaway, with the haredis. We also host far more family functions than any other sector,” Zien said. “Why not raise taxes on a second car? Or flights overseas?”

“Haredim are actually more green than anyone else. We buy less clothes, we don’t fly abroad, and our communities rely heavily on gmachim and passing things on,” she said, referring to the free-loan establishments that provide anything from baby bottles to evening gowns.

Though the taxation touched on a sensitive nerve and was viewed by both sides as another round in the cultural war between secular and

Orthodox Israelis, when the dust settled, it turned out that both sides may actually agree on some important issues.

Despite saying she reacted with “ecstasy” to Smotrich’s moves, Zien is not entirely opposed to reinstating the taxes, but this time with cooperation from the affected parties and a multi-pronged approach. Addressing the sugary drinks, Zien believes that the government should have taken steps in parallel to raise awareness in haredi society about the danger of diabetes and not just enforce acts that could be interpreted as punitive.



Yael Zien, a haredi Orthodox personality and mother, said she opposed the tax on disposables – as it was enacted, not on principle. (Courtesy of Yael Zien)

Meanwhile, environmental activists, who had marveled at the taxation on plastic dishes, are willing to admit that Liberman might have paid too little attention to the needs of haredi communities.

Yael Gini, community director at Sustainable Development Goals Israel, noted that tax hikes are just one way to combat waste, and not necessarily the most optimal. Targeting businesses or public places with a blanket ban on disposables, as France enacted this week in what

activists are calling a watershed moment, might have been a more prudent first step, she said.

“It’s a shame it came to this. This isn’t sectorial but it feels like it is. [Politicians] turned it into something political and the haredim are right about that,” said Gini, formerly a program director at Greenpeace.

“But [the haredim] need to understand, it’s not an us-versus-them situation,” she said, adding that the environmental impact of Israel’s use of disposables is “a disaster for everyone.”

Despite the political uproar created by the decision to tax single use dinnerware, anecdotal evidence shows it might have been effective, especially for haredi Orthodox families living on a tight budget. Data published in April 2022 by the Ministry of Environment indicated that purchase of single-use plastics in supermarkets had dropped nearly 50% since the taxes were imposed six months earlier. Critics of this survey noted, however, that it did not take into consideration the haredi community’s tendency to shop at convenience stores and to make large purchases before Jewish holidays.



A man shops for disposable plastic tableware in the Osher Ad Supermarket branch in Givat Shaul, Jerusalem, Oct. 27, 2021. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

For Leah, a Hasidic Orthodox mother of seven living in the cloistered Bukharian neighborhood of Jerusalem, Liberman's policy worked.

"We finally got around to toivelling a dinner set that we had been gifted years before," she said, referencing the Jewish practice of immersing dishes and utensils in a ritual pool to ensure that they can be used with kosher food.

She also went to IKEA to buy other multi-use items like casserole dishes and admits that she would not have made the trip had plasticware remained affordable. "Life is fast-paced and that was one less thing to worry about," she said.

The adjustment took time and there were bumps in the road. "Many plates got broken, the children argued all the time over cups, but we

got through it. I bought each child their own set and encouraged them to wash it.” Leah, who asked that her last name not be printed, has very little exposure to current affairs and was not aware of Smotrich’s rollback. While the move means she would probably allow herself to be less frugal about buying plastics in the future, she was unlikely to go back entirely to the way things were before, she said.

“It’s nice to eat Shabbat meals on real plates,” Leah said. “It feels more special.”