

Israeli Society and Religion: Ethnic Groups, Identity and Nationalism

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I will speak about the diversity of Israeli society from a religious perspective - in other words, how religion plays into the diversity of different Israeli world outlooks. In order to clarify this, I need to briefly go back to the change in the make-up of the Jewish community that actually began in the 18th Century, and continues on even today. In reality, the Jewish world generally started changing in the 19th Century. Until then, the lives of Jews all over the world were similar in that they were principally regulated by their religion. Traditional Judaism is based primarily on the Torah (the five books of Moses) as the revelation of God through Moses, and in addition, the belief that the Torah was written in an abbreviated form, therefore requiring traditions and expositions, which we call the oral Torah, or, in written form, the Talmud. From the Talmud that expounds the Torah, codes were formulated to enable Jews to lead their lives in accordance with the Divine Will as they understood it. This religious way of life was led by Jews in different part of the world, similarly to the way their ancestors had lived before them. Within this way of life and its world outlook, the land, Palestine, Eretz Yisrael, played a special role, even when they were living away from it. For example, The Jewish religious calendar is regulated by the seasons here in this land. Jews who live in Australia or Argentina pray for rain according to the seasons here in Palestine. When all Jews pray, they face holy Jerusalem. Every Jew knew until the 19th Century that he/she should be living in Palestine, but this was in many cases either too difficult or people were happy with where they were. Instead, they used to send money for charities supporting those who were prepared to rough it here. In that way Jews felt connected to the land, even if they lived far from it. This relationship featured as part and parcel of daily prayers and grace after all meals. And we continued to live as all generations before us lived: governed by the Torah, aware of a distant promised land, but

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generally living elsewhere, dreaming and praying for the Messianic age when we would no longer be dependent on other nations, but would be able to take our destiny into our own hands.

What brought the change in Jewish life was Modernity, which consisted of two elements: emancipation and enlightenment. Until the 19th Century, even if Jews wished to assimilate, the Gentiles² would not let them. The Jew was generally hated, he was the 'other', and society's problems were blamed on the Jews. This animosity towards the Jew was rooted in certain Christian theology; Christianity taught that the Jews were cursed and rejected by God for failure to recognize Jesus as the true Messiah. Therefore they would suffer forever, and wander forever. That is why the idea of the return of the Jewish people to the land to reestablish their independence in it, was originally opposed. It is also the reason why hostility towards the Jew was so much greater in Christian Europe than in Muslim lands,³ where Jews and Christians were protected minorities and treated not too badly as long as they knew their place.

However, in the 19th Century, through the process of democratization and the concept of equality of franchise, the European attitude became more accepting of diversity within society, including Jewry. For European Jews themselves, the enlightenment revealed new worlds and ideas. Until the 18th Century, not only was there a general European exclusion of Jews from their society, but Jews did not see the latter as especially attractive to be part of anyway. European Christian society seemed to them rather uneducated, barbaric and violent, and Jews felt that their own world of religious life was far more valuable, holier and more peaceful. However, with emancipation and enlightenment, they began to discover a new and attractive world of science, art, and philosophy, etc.

² The word 'Gentile' comes from the Latin 'gens,' which means nation – goy in Hebrew (goyim, plural), and is used within Jewish tradition to mean all the rest of the nations of the world.

³ The term 'Semites' includes all the sons of Shem and therefore, in Jewish perception, all Arabs and probably all the Near and Middle Eastern peoples. The term "anti-Semitism" is therefore an inexact word to describe hostility towards Jews - 'Judaeo-phobia' would be a much more appropriate term.

There were three main reactions to the challenge of modernity. The first was a movement of assimilation. Jews were somewhat naive about the ease of assimilation, but the psychological possibility was at least opened. On the other extreme was the anti-assimilationist reaction. This is the ultra-orthodox outlook, which is a historically new phenomenon for the Jews. In the past, Jewish sages in the Middle Ages, often living in Muslim lands, interacted with non-Jewish culture and thought. The new, ultra-orthodox mentality, however, feared modernity. It is a reactionary withdrawal from the modern world, without a sense of historical perspective. Most of the Ultra-Orthodox probably think that Moses came down from Mount Sinai with a big black hat and a long black coat, pouring with perspiration. They may study technical subjects such as mathematics or perhaps even computer science, but fundamentally they want as little as to do with general studies of the outside world; they want to be as isolated as possible.

In addition to these two extreme positions, most European Jews lay somewhere between them, wishing to benefit from the modern world while maintaining a sense of tradition. This produced different forms of modern Judaism. However, to generalize broadly, all of them are different attempts to balance tradition and modernity.

However there was another response to the challenge of modernity that was not based on religious adaptation. Recognizing the social and cultural character of the Jewish people as distinct from other peoples intensified by their historical persecution, they insisted that a modern Jewish nation-state was the only means by which Jews could ensure their security and preserve their identity in the modern world. This was political Zionism, which was essentially a secular movement, born out of 18th Century rationalism and 19th Century nationalism, but which could not have succeeded without the religious and historical attachment to the land described above.

Political Zionism had an ambivalent and sometimes even contradictory relationship with religion. Neither the assimilationists nor the Ultra-Orthodox were interested in participating in political Zionism, which contradicted their

basic tenets. However, political Zionism gave rise to a new religious outlook namely Religious Zionism, which asserted that even if many Zionists were themselves irreligious, they were in fact fulfilling the vision of the prophets. By fulfilling the dreams of traditional prayers and prophetic vision, these secular Zionists were seen to be doing God's work, bringing about the religious ideal of the return to the land. In the Holy Land, the Jews would be able to fulfil their religious dreams and their human potential in a society where they would be free from persecution. Thus, religious Zionists viewed secular Zionists as bringing about the fulfillment of their religious goals. Religious Zionism was bitterly opposed by the Ultra-Orthodox, who rejected the secular aspects of the movement. For them, religious Zionism was legitimizing the illegitimate because Zionism was secular – it was like putting a kosher stamp of approval on a piece of pork! In Herzl's time, the majority of religious Jews were anti-Zionists, and only a minority considered themselves to be religious Zionists. By World War II, even before the establishment of the State of Israel, a majority supported religious Zionism, which an Ultra-Orthodox minority still bitterly opposed.

Jews of Muslim lands, of the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, did not experience the tensions and cultural wars that existed within the Jewish community in the Christian lands of Europe. As opposed to the tensions produced by modern secular movements in Europe in conflict with Religion, in Muslim lands, the impact of modernity did not create the same divisions as those that occurred in Europe. Therefore, the Jewish communities in these various countries were more organically unified. Everyone, despite his or her level of religiosity, tended to be part of one community, unlike in Europe where different secular and religious components were far more separated from one another. Other aspects of modernity within the European society, e.g. the question of the status of women, altered the character of the Jewish community. Within the Reform and Conservative movements of Judaism today, not only do men and women sit and pray together, but women also serve as rabbis. This is a consequence of modernity. Nothing similar happened within the Jewish communities of the Muslim world. Even the most modern Jews in Muslim countries never imagined the idea of men and women

praying together, let alone allowing women to become rabbis. Similarly the traditionalism of Jews in Muslim lands affected the way they viewed Zionism. This was not seen as an expression of any tension between modernity and tradition, but simply as a political movement that was fulfilling the traditional relationship between the people and the land. Therefore, the reaction within “Sephardic” Muslim lands was generally positive toward the idea of Zionism. Any negative response was due to the lack of desire to leave one's home, rather than disapproval of the idea. When Sephardic Jews came to Israel, the ideology of religious Zionism naturally appealed to them.

With the advent of World War II and the Holocaust, the ultra-orthodox community concluded that despite Zionism's secular nature, it would be better to live even under secular atheistic Jews than to live under non-Jews. As a result, in time the Ultra-Orthodox became somewhat more pragmatic in their attitude toward a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Nevertheless, even when the State was established it was viewed at best as an “undesirable necessity”. Thus the Ultra-Orthodox were not actively involved in the political life of the emergent state, and remained so aloof to a large degree until 1977. Their basic interest was preserving their own community and institutions, in isolation of the rest of society.

The election of Menachem Begin as Prime Minister in 1977 brought a change in their position. For the first time, the Likud Party came to power. However, no one party has ever won an absolute majority in Israel's electoral history, and therefore has had to form coalitions to establish a government. Begin persuaded the elected representatives of the ultra-orthodox, that if they supported his government, they would benefit from the national fiscal cake. Because of these financial incentives for their own communities, the ultra-orthodox parties made an enormous ideological compromise. Although originally they wanted to have nothing to do with Zionism, they slowly discovered that not only could they receive benefits from the State, but could even influence the State in terms of their own ideology. Indeed, they had to believe that they could do the latter, in order to justify their dependency on the Zionist State.

In order to describe the make-up of current Israeli security it is necessary to explain some of the social-political nomenclature. The word 'secular' is particularly important, as it has the potential to be very misleading and confusing. I will give you two examples of the 'secular' Israeli. The first Israeli, who may come from an old Palestinian family or a family who immigrated here from Syria, Egypt or Morocco, might describe himself as secular by saying, "Saturday I went to synagogue to pray but sometimes we pray for three hours! Who has patience for three hours? And there is a football game I want to see so I only stayed in synagogue for half an hour, I got in the car, God forgive me, I went to see the football game. It was a great game. God will forgive me." For this person, being secular means that he does not keep Jewish law as his grandparents did or as I think I should. However, he is religious in as much as he believes in God and his religious tradition. In the West, a man like that would never be called secular.

My second example of a secular Israeli is the classic Ashkenazi example. Let us say, his great-grandparents were among the pioneers who came here and drained swamps to make a kibbutz in the Galilee. Obviously, two generations later he is not on a kibbutz, but in Tel Aviv, perhaps working in real estate selling property. When asked if he is religious or secular, he says, "Are you crazy? Me, religious? Do you think I'm abnormal?" When asked if he is Jewish, however, he replies, "Of course I'm Jewish." In what way are you Jewish?, he is asked and answers, "Look, I work for six days of the week. My day of rest is the Shabbat - when I go to the beach! My calendar is a Jewish calendar, my language is the Hebrew language, and my children can recite from the prophets. I give three years of my life to defend my country and then many years more of reserve duty. How can I be more Jewish than that?" For him, Jewishness is characterized by culture, ethnicity and nationalism. Even then, his national character is taken from religious tradition. It is impossible for him to cut himself off from it. It is actually very difficult to be an Israeli atheist, with so much Jewish tradition around. This is why the word secular is very misleading within the Israeli context.

Today, Israeli society can be divided into the following groups:

- Not more than 7 percent of Israelis are *Ultra-Orthodox*. In Jerusalem they may number about 27 percent, but not more than 30 percent. Jerusalem is not typical of Israel, and you cannot understand Israel from examining only Jerusalem.
- *Religious Zionists*, i.e., modern orthodox religious Zionists who keep the Shabbat and pray daily, are probably 20-25 percent of the country. As a general rule, anyone who is modern orthodox is a religious Zionist, and anyone who is a religious Zionist is modern orthodox. However, religious Zionism traverses a vast spectrum, from people like me who are on the left of the Israeli political spectrum to the most militant political elements in Israeli society today. However, that whole spectrum can still be called modern orthodox and religious Zionist. The essential message is one of commitment to religion and tradition while still living in the modern world, and to meet the responsibility of being part of modern Israeli society. Different people have very different interpretations of what that responsibility means. Not all settlers are religious Zionists though the majority would certainly define themselves as such.
- Approximately 15 to 20 percent of the people in Israel today are aggressively *secular*.
- The remaining 50% of society describes itself with various sorts of words but is essentially, in different degrees, traditional.

One fascinating political group that reflects a particular social/cultural constituency is Shas. Most of its supporters are not ultra-orthodox though the movement is led by a thin layer of Ultra-Orthodox Jews who have been substantially influenced by Ashkenazi haredim. They have studied in Ashkenazi institutions and have even begun to wear secular Ashkenazi-style clothing and were influenced by the spirit of intolerance for secular society (as opposed to traditional "Sephardic" leadership). The majority of the people who vote for Shas are 'secular' Sephardim, who support this party because it is

primarily a social protest movement. In many ways it is similar to the Islamic movements in different Arab societies. It is a movement that sees its adherents as marginalized by the secular Ashkenazi elite who led the country. Although Sephardi immigrants were provided for by the State, they still came to resent the Ashkenazim, who seemed to have achieved greater success. While the Likud profited from that sense of resentment, Shas turned it into a much more successful movement through the tool of religion. Religion is a very powerful means by which to distinguish oneself from the secular elite, both in terms of culture and identity. Nevertheless, although the leaders of Shas may raise an outcry over public work on Shabbat, they will not try to stop football games for example, which are attended by their constituents (This just reflects the hypocrisy of politics!) Shas is a unique phenomenon that is only able to be what it is because it is an amalgamation of a protest movement and religious revivalism, very much like the Islamic movements in certain Arab countries.

On the political level, there is great competition between Shas and the Likud because both of them and even the National Religious Party to a large degree are competing for a common constituency.

(In parenthesis one might mention a process of “return” to traditional religion, but especially a search for a purer spirituality particularly on the part of the better-educated, younger generations in Israel. Often this emerges from within “secular” society which increasing numbers of young people find materialistic and empty. In recent times a new phenomenon has developed of young people traveling the world, encountering Hinduism and other religions, and though they cannot relate completely to these, they are consequently opened up to different possibilities for self-identification, a 'new spirituality'. They sometimes express this in what might be called 'New Age Judaism'. Those people are alienated by politics, politicians, and political ideologies. They want to rediscover a spiritual world, to be at peace with the world. This movement or mentality is similar to that of the hippies of the 1960s, but now reattached in its way to a Jewish identity.)

In my opinion, the influence of the ultra-orthodox parties is actually peaking, and for several reasons, will now decline. The two most important among these reasons are economic factors and the Russian immigrants. Of Israel's one million Russian immigrants, some half a million are non-Jewish. This has happened because, according to Israel's Law of Return, Israeli citizenship only requires that one has a Jewish grandparent. The presence of these non-Jewish Israelis will be a big influence in favor of greater separation of Religion and State in Israel. Within five years, I believe we will have civil marriage, which will be beneficial for Israel, because the current situation of the Turkish millet system that only provides for religious marriage is unacceptable in democratic terms and it is also religiously counter-productive, because coercion alienates people from religion.

The third factor in the diminution of ultra-orthodox power is the peace process. Even though this may be moving slowly, I believe the peace process is inexorable. The only question is how soon and at what price. In the coming years, the dialogue within Israeli society will focus less on territory and more on the inner fabric of our own civil society. Then, the small orthodox parties will not be able to manipulate the system in the way they did before. In my opinion, the situation will actually be healthier both for religion and democracy, with greater separation between religion and politics.

However there is still the potential to set the Peace Process back through violence, on both sides.

In this part of the world, it does not take many people to do a lot of damage, it only takes one crazy person, which is a dangerous fact. The most potentially sensitive location in this regard is Haram El Sharif, the Temple Mount. Orthodox Jewish Tradition teaches that not only can we not presently rebuild the Temple that twice stood on the site, but that we cannot even go onto the site because of its intrinsic holiness. However while most Orthodox opinion is against any change in the status quo, there is general recognition that the prohibition applies only to the area of the Dome of the Rock and north of it, and not to the south of the mosque. Attitudes towards the Muslim presence

and control on the Mount differ. While most Jews are reconciled to it, there is a tiny fringe minority that would like to wrest control away. A significant group of religious Zionist Jews would like to share the space with the Muslims, some of whom would like to institutionalize Jewish prayer on the site. In my opinion, this institutionalized prayer is a legitimate religious desire and it would be wonderful if we could do that. However I believe that the political reality prevents the implementation of such an ideal, and therefore we must accept the current status quo. This is also the position of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

The Bible contains three different definitions of the Holy Land. The minimal definition includes the east bank of the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, and from Dan, (not including the Golan Heights) to Beersheba (which excludes Eilat). As a religious orthodox Jew, I believe that those are the biblical boundaries. However, this historical attachment does not necessarily demand absolute sovereignty over all of that land, especially when it is inhabited by others. Indeed Judaism teaches that we must respect the dignity and right of all people and peoples. As far as the question of the justifiability of the Jewish presence here, I believe that it is a tragedy for all of us that we were not able to find a way in which we could all live peacefully with one another in this area. We must make every effort to find such a way that is respectful to all inhabitants of this land. According to my own religious teaching, the belief in my historical relationship to the land does not allow me to deny the relationship of others to this land, or, above all, to deny their human rights. Thus I believe that territorial compromise is a religious obligation and necessity for the wellbeing of all us in the region.