



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### Israeli Identity: What Has Changed This Year?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** This year, when Israeli Jews assemble for high holiday prayers, as they hear the voice of the shofar and the hush of "Unetanneh Tokef," they will be haunted by an issue that has intensified over the past year: the struggle over Israeli identity.

External threats to our existence as Israelis create an awareness of a common fate. It is tempting to focus on such threats, because they provide a comfort zone in which security-political experts can ask the familiar question: how will we continue to defend our existence over the coming year? By concentrating on this question, we have found a way to repress basic questions about Israeli identity.

Beyond anxiety over our common fate as residents of this country stands a key question: do we still have anything in common? This debate, which has gathered steam over the past year, invites us to reconsider who we are and what we expect from our joint existence as a nation.

This past year, the Israeli identity crisis was expressed in new ways in the public discourse. President Reuven Rivlin described it in terms of the four tribes of the state of Israel: the religious, the secular, the ultra-Orthodox, and the Arabs. Amnon Rubinstein addressed the issue in his book *The Tribes of the State of Israel: Together and Separately – Liberalism and Multiculturalism in Israel*. *Haaretz* has devoted many articles to the topic.

Notwithstanding the president's view, a focus on the deep structure of Israeli society, especially among the Jews, reveals an important common denominator, one that is more and more evident in the synagogues. Between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews there are differences of formulation, not of essence. Hence a new

trend is apparent in large synagogues in Tel Aviv: the conducting of frequent integrated prayer quorums and the use of blended versions of prayers.

Not only is there a new trend of integration of communities, but religious and secular Israelis are intermingling. Israeli sociologists largely concur with one another that “secular Jews are the majority.” They tend to identify the large numbers who identify as traditional as a secular subdivision – “secular lite.” As sociologist Oz Almog put it, “The majority of Israeli society is secular and traditional.”

Based on the same data, however, one can propose a different perspective and a contrasting conclusion. If we merely change the point of departure for the distinction between secular and religious – if we agree that not everyone who drives on Shabbat is necessarily secular, as in the case of Shalom Asayag in the fascinating TV series *The 1980s* – we can assert that the majority of Israeli Jewish society is religious and traditional. Those of a pronounced secular bent are in the minority.

It is worth observing Shabbat evening prayers in hotel synagogues in Israel. There are always many Israelis present who have come to pray with genuine enthusiasm. After dinner, most of them – without qualms and with the same enthusiasm – will head out for “secular” recreation at a discotheque. The halachic religious person will ask them: If you came to pray, why did you then go dancing? The “halachic” secular person will ask: If you came to the discotheque, then you’re like me – so what were you doing earlier at the synagogue? This is a dichotomous approach to the religious-secular divide that enables a tacit alliance between the two rigid extremes, as they try to ignore the widespread trend that does not obey the strict rules of classification.

The question of who is the majority and who the minority is not just a matter of sociological research. It is fundamental to the struggle over the nature of the public space. The secular demand for a public space with a secular character is based on the claim that they are expressing the majority opinion. Thus the minority behaves like the majority, while the majority is trapped in the false impression that it is a minority.

All the disputes that have escalated, from the nature of the Israeli Shabbat to the curricula in the schools, center on one core issue: how to shape the public space in a Jewish state of Israel. That is the nub of the controversy: not who is the majority and what is common to their identity, but what is the desirable nature of the public space.

That is the true context of the new struggle over the contents of Jewish studies in state schools. Here it needs to be clarified whether a state school in Israel is necessarily secular or, first and foremost, an Israeli Jewish school. The choice by parents to enroll their children in a state school does not mean they want them to get a totally secular education. It can be argued that most parents, especially those in the traditional majority, are pleased with the education minister's push to integrate Jewish heritage into the curriculum.

While serving as commander of the National Security College, I visited Moscow with my students. On Shabbat evening we were hosted at the Great Synagogue. For some of the students, who were senior officers in the defense establishment, this was an unfamiliar experience. When, during the welcoming of the Shabbat, the congregants came to the song "Lecha Dodi," an outstanding officer asked me: "Where do you know that song from?" Is this what we aspire to in the Israeli educational system?

### **What has changed, and where are we headed?**

At the end of his service in the Jewish Brigade in 1919, Berl Katznelson, one of the spiritual leaders of the Labor movement, came to Jerusalem and wrote about his visit. "The most important day for me in Jerusalem was the day I went to the Temple Mount," he wrote. "The day that helps me understand everything connected to volunteering, and makes my heart throb and overflow." In a quite different vein, the author Meir Shalev recently said about the passion for a bond with the historical past: "All the politics of the Middle East is based on fake history." Today, Katznelson's elation would probably be seen as a case of religionization. What, then, has changed?

Katznelson was not just fondly embracing a memory of the past. He wanted to know what it meant in the present, and how it could orient our path towards the future. In my assessment, Israel's Jewish majority of today identifies with Katznelson's Temple Mount experience.

### **Between a unified and a multicultural Jewish nation**

The tension between forging a unified nation and preserving the riches of multicultural variety should be seen as a fortunate advantage. This perpetual tension, which the Jewish people has experienced since it came into existence, is also its uniqueness. Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, known as Rabbi Manitou, expressed it well:

The Jews maintain their unique identity and also amass the identities of each place and adopt them. They are at the same time people of the path of Abraham and people of the path of France, Lithuania, and Morocco.

When they assemble in Jerusalem, they unite all of the human identities, and reunite all of humanity in the path of Abraham”.

So it should be.

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