



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

A Question of Identity

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 956, September 21, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: It is not alleged “religionization” that threatens Israeli identity and deepens the cleavages in Israeli society but the absence of a mutually accepted contemporary Jewish common ground.

The millenarian exilic experience has deprived the Jewish People of the cultural wholeness underpinning the national existence, while the religious component that maintained it during these exacting times has failed to replace the intricate web of sociopolitical and intercommunal interrelationships that had formed the foundations of Jewish peoplehood. The reappearance of the Jewish People in the late 19th century as a national actor and the reestablishment of statehood in its ancestral homeland half a century later seemed to have redressed this anomaly. Yet as shown by the intensity of the ongoing debate about the desired nature of Israel’s Jewish identity, this issue remains a major challenge for both Israelis and Diaspora Jews.

Take, for example, David Ben-Gurion’s late 1960s comment that, “twenty years after its creation, the Jewish State I hoped to establish still doesn’t exist, and who knows when it will arise.” Significantly enough, the former prime minister spoke about “the Jewish State” rather than “the state of the Jews.” For while according to the liberal outlook, a state is little more than an institutional-organizational mechanism for managing and regulating relations among citizens and as such cannot be Jewish (however many of its citizens identify as Jews), Ben-Gurion envisaged a state that would be Jewish in its ethos, substance, and attributes – in the national, not the theocratic, sense of the word. Indeed, even during their millenarian exilic experience, where the national aspect of their identity was superseded by its religious counterpart, Jewish communal life far exceeded the purely theocratic (halachic) dimension to include philosophical thought and mythology (*agada*), morality, culture, social

interaction, and – above all – a religious-national yearning for a return to the ancestral homeland.

Ben-Gurion's vision of a Jewish state notwithstanding, a small secularist minority has been recently bemoaning "the end of Israeli identity," as if it was ever possible to dissociate such an identity from its Jewish context. In his book *Speaking Zionism: The Existential Struggle between State and Religion*, Arye Carmon, founding president of the Israel Democracy Institute, offers a secularist manifesto that he hopes will help build common ground for Israeli society. Instead he exposes the depth of the divide. On the one hand, he criticizes the founding fathers of the Zionist revolution for "throwing the baby out with the bathwater and disconnecting their children from their heritage and culture" by rejecting the exilic experience. On the other, he censures those Israelis who observe traditional Jewish practices and values as attempting "to insert holiness into the public space." "In advanced democracies," he laments, "God has been taken out of this space."

And it is precisely there, in the public sphere, that we can locate the fundamental difference between a state that identifies itself as Jewish and a state that comprises Jewish citizens, even as a Jewish majority. The dispute between secularist and traditional/religious Israeli Jews revolves around the public space in the narrower technical-halachic sense of the word, like observance of the Sabbath, religious dietary restrictions, or marriage registration. But these issues have far deeper and more spiritual dimensions that require public expression, such as the Jewish obligation to the Sabbath as a social justice ideal, or the lasting commitment to the millenarian oath: "If I forget Thee, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill." Such obligations have a central significance especially when manifested in the public sphere.

It is true that in the eyes of ultraorthodox Jews, Ben-Gurion is a quintessential secularist. Yet, perusal of his many writings reveals a different perspective: rather than view the Zionist revolution as a shift from a religious to a secularist way of thinking, he saw it as a perceptual change in the nature of Jewish action in both its religious and national dimensions. His unwavering commitment to the Aliya enterprise offers perhaps the clearest manifestation of state action derived from the Jewish vision of salvation.

By framing Aliya in biblical terms as "the ingathering of exiles," Ben-Gurion linked the enterprise to such millenarian Jewish themes as the daily prayer to "blow a great horn for our freedom and raise a banner to gather our exiles," or the ancient sages' assertion that "the day of the ingathering of the exiles is as great as the day when Heaven and Earth were created." This was the essence of the fundamental change introduced by the Zionist movement in its struggle for national reconstitution.

Individual and public acts of religious practice do not necessitate an organized state effort to be executed, but the Return to Zion and the reestablishment of statehood required a national effort of the highest order. And while many of the early pioneers strayed from a religious to a secular lifestyle, their very immersion in the national revival enterprise was more of an effort to revitalize vital aspects of Jewish identity that had become dormant during exile than a secular revolution.

In rebuffing the adamant ultraorthodox opposition to taking practical responsibility for national salvation, Ben-Gurion insisted that "this theological concept is not a religious precept, and it has nothing to do with the Judaism of Rabbi Akiva, the Maccabees, Ezra and Nehemiah, Joshua, or Moses."

It is of course arguable that the ingathering of the exiles is a national, rather than a religious, enterprise. But given Judaism's unique position as a national religion, there can be no such distinction between its religious and temporal aspects. Keenly aware of this, Ben-Gurion viewed himself as following in the footsteps of Rabbi Akiva and Joshua.

In the final account, neither extreme of Israeli Jewish society offers a panacea to most Israelis seeking to preserve their Jewish traditions and ways of life. On one side of the aisle stands a militant secularist minority detached from Jewish faith and tradition. On the other are ultraorthodox communities removed from the beating heart of Jewish national life in Israel. In these circumstances, it is not the alleged "religionization" that threatens Israeli identity and deepens the cleavages in Israeli society but the absence of a mutually accepted contemporary Jewish common ground.

An earlier version of this article was published in Israel Today on September 9, 2018.

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