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Judaism and Jewishness in the Jewish State

By CHARLES LIEBMAN and BERNARD SUSSER

ABSTRACT: While Israeli Jews would appear to be divided into a secular and a religious sector, a more appropriate division would be into three population groups. First is the majority of religiously observant Jews, who subscribe to a religiopolitical culture and who represent roughly 20 percent of the population. Second, there is a radical secular public, representing about 10 percent of the Jewish population, who define themselves as totally nonobservant religiously and who favor not only separation of religion and state but the dejudaization of the state. They are sometimes referred to as post-Zionists. Finally, there is the vast majority of the Jewish population, who are somewhat observant of religious custom and who continue to favor a Zionist—that is, a Jewish—state. This segment of the population lacks political and cultural leadership; it is subdivided into distinct ethnic and political segments; and it appears far weaker than it is in practice.

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ENGLISH distinguishes rather neatly between Judaism and Jewishness. The former relates to the Jewish religion with its theological credo and prescribed practices; the latter describes culture, ethnicity, and a historical sense of belonging to the Jewish people. English speakers have no trouble in speaking of Jewishness as a personal or communal sense of identity that does not necessarily entail Judaism, with its specifically religious denotations.

Strange, then, that Hebrew does not allow for such distinctions to be easily made. One can speak of *Ya-hadut*, which is normally rendered into English simply as "Judaism." One can construct indeterminate adverbial phrases such as *betzura yehudit* ("in a Jewish way"). But one cannot—not without resorting to ungainly neologisms such as *Yehudiyut*—capture the meaning of "Jewishness" in its straightforward English sense. Hebrew compels the modern speaker wishing to differentiate between Jewish life as culture and Jewish life as religion to invent convoluted, unfamiliar linguistic forms.

The paradox is indeed arresting, but, on second thought, its resolution is rather obvious. The lack of nuance in Hebrew accords with Jewish civilization's self-understanding for two millennia and more. It reflects the inextricability of the Jewish religion from Jewish culture prior to the Enlightenment and Emancipation. Hebrew accurately reflects the Jewish status quo ante in which Jewishness and Judaism were, in fact, much the same thing. Contemporary Israelis,

who wish to convey the idea of Jewishness that is not religious in character, are, therefore, linguistically challenged by the weight of an uncomprehending past. The task of conceptualizing ethnocultural Jewishness in modern Israel begins with a telltale linguistic handicap.

Strangely, the same blind spot to Jewishness as an ethnocultural identity can be found in the stereotypes that dominate the contemporary debate over contemporary Israeli society. Here, too, ethnocultural Jewishness is a phantom presence. The media image, often adopted by academic social analysts, is familiar and insistent: there are two Jewish societies in Israel—the one religious, the other secular—and they glare at each other across an unbridgeable cultural chasm. Israel is portrayed as a country riven into two camps, religious and antireligious, with nary a third alternative to moderate the standoff. They occupy distinct and incompatible worlds of moral axioms, ideological imperatives, and life patterns. The only question that appears to remain unresolved is whether coexistence and conciliation are possible or, for that matter, even desirable.

For the radicals on both sides of the divide, there is simply nothing to talk about. Secular and religious Israel represent two irreconcilable cultures, and all the warmed-over pieties about Jewish unity cannot put them back together again. One mordant secular polemicist reminded the religious that there is a biblical precedent for dividing the land in two (Judea and Israel) and proposed that the religious take Jerusalem—where

they can sacrifice animals and fight Palestinians—and allow the secular to have Tel Aviv, where they can enjoy the beach and pursue the peace process. From the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) camp as well comes a steady vituperative stream of excommunications and maledictions against the “enemies of Israel,” who brazenly desecrate the faith for the sake of which the Jewish people endured through the centuries. The God-fearing are warned to keep their distance lest they be contaminated by these blasphemers and fornicators.

Although these sentiments are not entirely new, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin released a volcanic eruption of animosities, of charges and countercharges. For parts of the Israeli secular Left, the lesson to be learned was clear: there can be no dialogue between those intent upon “saving lives and ending the conflict [with the Arabs] through rational instrumentalities” and those whose actions derive from “a few Biblical analogies and *halakhic* decisions intended for other times and places.”¹ The religious educate to “fanatical racist fundamentalist slogans” and, hence, Rabin’s assassin, Yigal Amir, was no “black sheep” but rather fully a product of the yeshiva world from which he came.²

This barrage was often met with an equally charged and embittered retort on the part of the religious. Rabin’s assassination, they charged,

was only a flimsy pretext for these secular recriminations. The secular community’s hatred of everything traditionally Jewish long preceded the murder, only it was then not bon ton to indulge in cleric baiting and religion bashing. Their unrestrained condemnations of the religious world after the assassination are only Jewish self-hate with a hypocritical good conscience.

Although this two-culture perception was said to receive further reinforcement in the May 1996 Israeli elections (more on this later), we believe it to be fundamentally misleading, not to say dangerous. There are, we contend, three major cultural orientations and three major publics that can be distinguished within the broad setting of Israeli society. Moreover, the public that is ignored by the two-camp theory is, arguably, the largest and most important in Israeli society.

Jewishness, as we noted before, is not simply a form of Judaism; it focuses its concerns on history, culture, and ethnicity rather than upon religion per se. Jewishness, therefore, connotes a secular identity, even though many of its sources and practices may overlap with those of Judaism. Wanting to preserve powerful and immediate ties to the Jewish people and to Jewish history, many Jews turn to the Jewish heritage, to the practices contained in the Jewish religious tradition, and adopt them as their own. (Although the term “secular Judaism” has a distinctly oxymoronic character to it, there is, nevertheless, an important heuristic message that rises from the phrase.) In this way, religion is trans-

1. Menachem Brinker, “Rabin after Rabin” (in Hebrew), *Haaretz: Sefarim*, 29 May 1996, pp. 1, 14.

2. Naomi Riftin, “Who Killed Yitzhak Rabin,” *Kibbutz Trends*, 21:21-22 (Spring 1996).

muted into folkways, theology into cohesiveness-enhancing family observances, and Orthodox devotion into communal solidarity. Secular Jews of this kind share a great deal with those conventionally spoken of as religious in terms of both practices and collective commitments to Jewish continuity. We shall return to this third public after briefly describing the other two.

The easiest of the publics to describe is the one that operates within the religiopolitical culture. Although there are a number of subcultures that fall under this rubric—the national-religious, the *haredi*, even Ashkenazi and Sephardi religious communities can be distinguished—these cleavages can be bracketed for the purposes of our argument. At its heart, the religiopolitical culture is driven by the belief that halakha (Jewish law) is divine and eternal, that it ought to pervade all aspects of public as well as private life, that learned rabbis are the arbiters of this system, and, by extension, that the rabbis—in an ideal world, at least—ought to be the ultimate authorities in all significant private and public concerns. Of all the communities, it is by far the most self-enclosed.

At the other pole, secular Israeli culture tends to be indifferent to Jewish tradition. Conventionally described as postmodern (in the consumerist, permissive, individualist sense), this cultural community is Western before it is Jewish; indeed, it tends to grasp its palpable civic bond with the religious community as somewhat perplexing, if not actually quite embarrassing. In its more radical forms, secularism evinces deep

hostility to the religious community, scorn for religious practice, and a dismissive attitude toward religious belief. Although they are surely no more than a tiny minority even within the secular community, those who go under the name “post-Zionists” press this antitraditional animus to the point of rejecting the very idea of a Jewish state.

There can be little doubt that the consumerist, permissive, individualist style is becoming increasingly dominant in Israeli society at large. Yet there is an important distinction to be drawn between the radical secularists, for whom postmodernism entails a deliberate effort to dissociate Israel from Judaism, the Jewish people, and the Jewish past, on the one side, and those—a far, far larger and more amorphous cohort—who are merely concerned with creature comforts and private needs and whose ties to Jewishness can take many forms, ranging from the indifferent to the warmly traditional. For the radicals, democratic pluralism is the banner under which Israeli society is to be dejudaized, that is, liberated from the constraints of Jewish tradition in general and from Zionism-centered Jewish nationalism in particular. Amos Elon, for example, concedes that

as a measure of, if you will, “affirmative action,” Zionism was useful during the formative years. Today, it has become redundant. There is a need to move ahead to a more Western, more pluralistic, less ideological form of patriotism and citizenship. One looks with envy at the United States, where patriotism is centered on the Constitution; naturalization is conferred by a judge in a court of law; iden-

tity is defined politically and is based on law, not on history, culture, race, religion, nationality or language.³

Gideon Samet, another prominent exponent of this position, believes that postmodern lifestyles are the irrepressible wave of the future. "It is possible," he writes buoyantly, that we are ridding ourselves of that old bother: clarifying our national identity. In the past, so many efforts were made to examine what it is, what happened to it, how it was formed, whether it exists at all, and if it exists, why isn't it visible . . . it now appears that just as this old question threatened to bore us to death, it has begun to be resolved.⁴

Resolution has come through "normalization," that is, the "move from nationalist slogans to simple individualism." Young people, Samet believes, are turning to "Madonna and Big Mac" as part of a worldwide revolution in styles of cultural consumption and leisure activity. This universal pursuit of "popular music, movies, trips abroad, dress, even modes of speech" is, thankfully, taking the place of antiquated anxieties about national character and values.⁵

As is so often the case, each of the two clashing cultures relies upon the other to sustain its own sense of righteousness, its conviction that it is the one that occupies the moral high ground. After all, a showdown scenario in which it is only one's own steadfastness that prevents the other side from triumphing has a self-serving benefit: it renders the struggle all the

more freighted with consequences, and allegiance to the embattled community all the more imperative. Through secular eyes, the traditional world—pictured preferably in its most obscurantist ultra-Orthodox form—provides decisive proof of just how primitive Judaism can be. Visions of *haredi* thugs exhuming halakhically questionable Jews from their graves or assaulting policemen who try to keep the roads open on the Sabbath become the prototypical representation of religiosity in action. For the religious, scenes of homosexual exhibitionism or of young people with tattoos and nose rings, glassy-eyed on drugs and alcohol, constitute the preferred cautionary tale. Both sides urge us to believe that they represent the exclusive alternative to the medievalism or decadence of the other.

This Manichean picture may serve the battling sides to shore up their cohort's allegiance, but it does not accord with what we know about Israeli society. There is a third public and a third culture—encompassing the majority, perhaps as much as 70 percent of Israeli Jews—that is neither religiously observant in a rigorous way nor yet secular in the sense of eschewing all religious practice, much less wishing to dissociate Israel from the Jewish tradition. This very disjointed, intellectually incoherent, and motley public selectively observes religious rites without being concerned with their theological import or the halakhic consistency of their actions. Jewishness is fundamental to their identity perceptions, and the idea of disengaging Israel from the Jewish people and its his-

3. Amos Elon, "Israel and the End of Zionism," *New York Review*, 19 Dec. 1996, pp. 27-28.

4. Gideon Samet, "The Nation Goes up a Grade" (in Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 28 July 1995.

5. *Ibid.*

tory is, for them, unthinkable. The rubric most often utilized to describe this amorphous community and its behavior is “traditional,” even though some of them may well define themselves as secular. But they are traditional in the sense of being effectively and communally bound to the Jewish tradition while lacking either the theological intent or the legal rigor that is conventionally associated with religiosity in Israel’s dominating Orthodox Jewish context. Terms like “civil religion” and (in a somewhat different key) “folk religion” are alternate designations to characterize this novel form of Jewish identity and practice.

Not surprisingly, neither the religious nor the radically secular are happy to acknowledge the existence of a traditional public mediating between them. Here they stand then, roughly 20 percent of Israeli Jews on the religious side and about 10 percent on the radical secular side, raging at each other over the heads of the great majority of Israelis, whose existence they prefer to disregard. For the religious, nonhalakhic Jewishness has no religious significance whatever and its practitioners must be counted as betrayers of Judaism and as allies of the secular enemy. Traditionalism is, at best, only misguided quaintness; at worst, it is a fraudulent and cynical exploitation of religious practices for alien purposes.

For the radical secularists, traditionalism is little more than religiosity *manqué*, and hence its practitioners—even when they describe themselves as secularists—cannot be

counted upon in the coming showdown with the religious world. If they have mezuzahs on their doors (96 percent of Israeli Jews do), Tom Segev declares, they cannot be considered real secularists, and “without enough real Israeli secularists, there is no hope of halting the influence of the religious.”⁶

Notwithstanding the desire to deny its reality, traditionalism patently exists as a form of Jewishness apart. Although it is disdained and dismissed by both religious and radical secular elites, we are convinced that traditionalism constitutes the dominant form of Jewishness in contemporary Israel. It is here, in the evolving and distinct forms of traditionalist Jewish culture, that the future of Israel as a Jewish state will be determined.

The religious and secular communities are already known, determinate quantities. Precisely because they are far more systematic, articulate, and fervent in their views, they are also relatively fixed in their positions. Barring events of truly traumatic magnitude, it is as unlikely that the religious will abandon their faith as it is that the secular will be overpowered by it. Traditionalism, by contrast, is soft, malleable, and possessed of many uncommitted resources—a source of potential surprise. With the larger part of Israeli Jews best described as traditional in one way or another, this is the social group to watch.

It is not difficult to understand why traditionalism is given such

6. Tom Segev, “Who Is a Secularist?” (in Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 25 Sept. 1996.

short shrift. It tends to be overlooked because, given its folk-religious, practice-centered, inarticulate character, it rarely justifies itself in principled, creative, or rebellious terms. There are no traditionalist manifestos, no traditionalist intellectuals, no traditionalist political parties. Neither is it ideologically outspoken or, indeed, even determinate on the right-left continuum as are religiosity and secularism. As widespread as traditional Jewishness may be, it tends to elude the ready categories of the analysts. That it is, as often as not, prevalent among Sephardi Jews of lower educational and economic status does not add to its salience.

Neither does traditionalism understand itself as presenting a combative alternative to Judaism in its dominant Orthodox mode. It does not distinguish itself in the Israeli public sphere by assaulting or even disparaging the regnant religious establishment. Since tradition is their focus, its practitioners have little desire to break ranks with tradition and create a new form of Judaism, such as that created by Conservative and Reform Judaism. As opposed to the socialist-egalitarian movements of the heroic age of Zionism that strove to create a "new Hebrew person," a revolutionary, explicitly antireligious conception of the Jewish mission and of Jewish values, traditionalism is quite content to live in the prosaic world of communal solidarity and routine practice. It is to be found in the myriad quotidian observances and conventions that densely organize the texture of everyday Israeli life. For example, life-cycle

events are overwhelmingly organized within the Jewish context. A recent survey of the attitudes, behavior, and beliefs of Israeli Jews, undertaken by the Guttman Institute,⁷ reports 92 percent observing circumcision, 83 percent bar mitzvah, 87 percent marriage, and 90 percent mourning rites in a traditionally Jewish fashion. Seasonal rhythms, vacations from work and school, public and private celebrations and memorials, media programming, and so on are determined by the contours of the Jewish calendar. Kashrut is recast into a kind of normative national cuisine (two-thirds of Israelis report bringing only kosher food into their homes, while half keep separate utensils for meat and milk). Passover Seders, candle lighting on Hanukkah, Purim celebrations, and so forth are so overwhelmingly widespread that even those who think of themselves as entirely secular are likely to observe them in one form or another. Street names celebrating Jewish personalities or recalling the Jewish historical and religious heritage are omnipresent. (Getting directions in some parts of town will sound something like this: turn right at Rabbi Akiva Street, left on Maimonides, continue straight past Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and Redemption Streets to . . .)

Although traditional observances do not make sense halakhically, this does not mean they are random, individual, or unsystematic. Traditional

7. The survey highlights are described and the survey analyzed in Charles S. Liebman and Elihu Katz, eds., *The Jewishness of Israel: Responses to the Guttman Report* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

behavior is entirely coherent and intelligible if its underlying intent is taken into account: a conscious commitment to the continuity of the Jewish people. It is the intent of an ethnically loyal Jew rather than of a pious and devout one. Traditional Jews seek to communicate and consolidate cultural identities rather than express worldviews. Moreover, as opposed to the common Orthodox conceit, traditionalists do not understand their deviations from halakha as laziness, dereliction, or negligence. There is method here even if it is not the method of halakha. They understand themselves—if their unspoken assumptions were to be articulated—as participating in a patterned form of observances that is not halakha—observances that they have transformed into the folkways of a Jewish civilization.

For traditional Israeli Jews, halakha and its rabbinic arbiters are not relevant, or at least not decisive, in determining their ideological postures and policy preferences. Much like their casual bearing toward halakhic Judaism, they relate decorously to rabbinical opinions regarding politics but do not see them as obligatory or authoritative. One kind of traditionalist, well characterized as “synagogue back benchers,” are deeply respectful of religion but “have difficulty in dismissing the dictates of their own conscience and their own logic when confronted by a halakhic decision.”⁸ Jewish history, they might say, can be understood without resort to divine interven-

tion—although such intervention should not be ruled out as a matter of principle. These traditionalists are swayed by what they understand to be Jewish values and categories without any felt need to attribute these to a patently divine origin. If religion in its more conventional forms focuses on the ultimate issues of cosmic meaning and human transcendence, the objects of traditionalist sentiment and practice are closer at hand, to wit, Jewish communal solidarity, ethnic self-identification, and historical continuity.

Traditionalist ideas are often formulated in what is unmistakably religious terminology. Nonetheless, these are not to be taken as straightforward affirmations of faith. The vehicle of delivery and the substance of the message must be distinguished. Like the rhetoric of much American politics with its generous dose of God talk, traditionalist public discourse in Israel resorts to religious rhetoric not because it is God centered at its core but because religious language is uniquely charged, poetic, and resonant with the grandeur and tragedy of Jewish history. The language of the sacred is employed because it embodies picturesque and dramatic images that are uniquely designed to convey the anguish of national traumas, the jubilations of triumph and of deeply stirring moments, the sense of dedication and constancy. The airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, for example, prompted some very hardened nonbelievers to utilize some very glowing religious rhetoric. Traditionalism, in a word, possesses the protean character of popular, ethnocul-

8. Yaacov Levi, “A Vanishing Breed” (in Hebrew), *Meimad*, no. 8, p. 25 (Dec. 1996).

tural folkways that derive from religious sources; often utilizes religious symbols, practices, and language—and yet is fundamentally not a religious phenomenon. It is, rather, a form of national self-identification expressed through the immemorial language of the Jewish tradition.

Traditionalism exists, but does it have the viability and self-possession to resist the unrelenting inroads of the global village, pluralist liberalism in the intrusive Western mode, post-Zionist pressures, and, perhaps, the coming of peace to the Middle East? Can traditional Jews transmit their admittedly nebulous values to an increasingly westernized younger generation? If traditionalism does not possess these capacities, the Jewish character of the state of Israel is surely fated to wear thinner and thinner in coming years.

The findings of the Guttman Report are reassuring in regard to the solidarity and prevalence of traditional behavior and identity. They are less encouraging when the subject is their long-term continuity. We simply do not know how deep or significant these observances are for their performers, not to speak of how attractive they will be to a new generation of Israeli youths further removed from traditional lifestyles. Indeed, there is evidence, some of it from the Guttman Report itself, that we are witnessing a gradual dissolution of the traditionalist Sephardi population. A social centrifuge seems to be distancing them from their erstwhile traditional center; some are spinning off to the religious (including the *haredi*) world, many more to the post-

modernist culture of consumerist affluence.

At present, therefore, traditional Jewishness is alive, even if it is not entirely well. One striking indication of its vitality came to the fore in the May 1996 elections. Benjamin Netanyahu did all he could to minimize his territorial and foreign policy differences with Shimon Peres (it came down to Labor's "peace with security" versus the Likud's "security with peace"). He appealed instead to the traditional majority, claiming to be the guardian of Jewish values, a bulwark against the secular cosmopolitans of the Left. The latter, he taunted, are more at home in a Jewish neighborhood than they are in a synagogue. He peppered his language with "blessed be the Lord," "the Lord willing," and other dutiful religious formulae (even though his past gives no indication of a significant relation to the Jewish tradition). The Lubavitcher movement, as if catching the import of Netanyahu's appeal, closed the campaign with an advertising blitz under the slogan "Netanyahu, he's good for the Jews."

The *haredi* and national religious parties also directed their messages at the anxieties of the broadly traditional populace who were concerned that under the Labor-Meretz coalition, Israel's Jewish character was withering away. Although many of these voters were themselves immersed in the postmodern culture (perhaps precisely because they felt somewhat abashed at their departure from traditional ways), they supported the parties that promised to safeguard the legacy of the past. The

religious parties appealed explicitly beyond the religious community, identifying themselves broadly with traditional concerns and apprehensions. They made every effort to stress their cultural Jewishness as opposed to their narrowly religious character. With 55 percent of the Jewish vote going for Netanyahu, there can be little doubt that this Jewish-centered message hit its mark.

Were the conception of a culture war between the religious on the one side and the non- and antireligious on the other even vaguely accurate, the secular camp would have easily prevailed at the ballot box, where they outnumber the religious by four, perhaps even five, to one. But the Israeli electorate clearly saw the issues differently from what the conventional wisdom would have us believe. Many perceived the campaign as pitting a secular, highly westernized elite with little interest in Judaism or Jewishness against a tradition-preserving coalition of parties—and they voted accordingly. Netanyahu's victory is properly understood, therefore, less as a rejection of the Oslo peace process (two-thirds of Israelis consistently report supporting the peace process) and more as the protest victory of a Jewish identity coalition that felt its traditional and communal values threatened by the forces of dejudaization.

Clearly, traditionalists can be mobilized when challenged. It is odd therefore that they nonetheless fail to recognize themselves as a group apart, a group with its own distinct vision of a Jewish Israel and its own

very unique manner of sustaining a Jewish civilization. Neither do they recognize their potentially decisive effect on Israel's public life. Herein lies their most serious weakness: they have not risen above the level of habitual practice and basic irritability to a conscious expression of their ideas and a deliberate defense of their values. Like the nonexistent term for "Jewishness" in Hebrew, the Jewishly traditional do not lead a clearly defined existence. Because they lack a clear sense of self, not to speak of a high culture, their hold on the future may turn out to be tenuous. The future of Jewish Israel is likely to ride on the outcome of their spiritual odyssey.

One sign that secular Jewishness is making its mark on the public is the fact that it has been subject to recent attack by dejudaized secular elements. We can do no better than quote from a recent article by an *Haaretz* columnist. Aryeh Caspi writes as follows:

In the last few months, the press has been filled with favorable articles concerning secular programs for transmitting Judaism. One mustn't leave Judaism to the *haredim*, argue the religiosecular. . . . In this country, a culture war is being waged, partially under the table. . . . In a culture war, like any other conflict of power, the one who determines the playing field will win. "The study of Judaism" is a code name for concern with rabbinical literature. Judaism is the playing field of the religious whether we like it or not. . . . The declaration that the secular are returning to the Jewish bookshelf is a victory for religious propaganda. The public who has heard this in the last few months from sources of all kinds gets the message

that secularism is interior. . . . It is difficult to understand what some secularists who learned something in their lives in addition to the *shulkhan arukh* [the Jewish law code] are doing in this barren field. . . . The secular Jewish preachers remind one, to a great extent, of the *haredi* missionizers. They all share the desire to determine the spiritual world of other people. It is easier to understand the motivation of the religious propagan-

dists. It is hard to understand what motivates the secularists.⁹

Caspi's column, and others like it, suggest that the Jewish secularists are having more of an impact than one otherwise might have thought.

9. Aryeh Caspi, "To Whom Is He Faithful" (in Hebrew), *Haaretz: Sefarim*, 11 July 1997, pp. 14-15.