

The Tribes of Israel



Jewish Identities in the Jewish State



In the media and popular discourse, Israeli Jews have long been divided into the categories of “secular” and “religious,” or, in Hebrew, *hiloni* and *dati*. As opposed to North America, where denominationalism and diversity of Jewish beliefs and affiliations abound, Jewish identity in Israel is often perceived to be flat and dichotomous. In the minds of many Israelis, Judaism as a religion is synonymous with Orthodoxy, which generates an all-or-nothing approach to Jewish life that has served both camps well. The perception of Judaism as extreme and uncompromising has reinforced the secular rejection of religion, whereas the belittlement of secularism as Jewishly impoverished has permitted the Orthodox to perpetuate their cherished myth of being the sole carriers of authentic Judaism within the Jewish state.

{ By **DONNIEL HARTMAN**

For many years, this collective mindset, predicated on mutual misperception, has made for a peaceful status quo. Secular Israelis, more concerned with freedom *from* religion than freedom *of* religion, have adopted a policy of extreme passivity. Since their public agenda has been to limit the effect of religion and its institutions on their lives, they have not been motivated to exert political pressure in favor of religious pluralism. In fact, the ability of Orthodox politicians to stymie pluralism has been enabled by the complicity of the so-called secular majority who wish to be free of religion. Religious pluralism is only a value if one wants to participate in religious life. So long as religious institutions continue to affect but a few milestones – birth, marriage and death – in the life of the average Israeli Jew, then they are tolerable, regardless of their alienating nature. In fact, the more alienating the better, as each negative encounter serves to reinforce the caricaturization of religious Jews and to strengthen one’s ideological commitment to secularism.

For their part, Orthodox leaders have sought to reinforce the control of Orthodoxy over Judaism and its institutions and to look out for the welfare of their communities. In the arena of education, their aim has been to secure government funding for their own schools and not to promote Jewish education for secular students. Here, too, they have been abetted by secularists, who are wary of religious infiltration of the secular schools.

Over the years, this polarized cultural mindset and discourse has limited the ways in which generations of Israelis have understood, or misunderstood, their Jewish identity. When Jewishness is either secularism, devoid of Jewish content, or radical and ritualized ultra-Orthodoxy, people have difficulty fostering more complex feelings and approaches to Jewish life. The religious-secular prism thus serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy, imprisoning future generations in its narrow perspectives and creating a Jewish desert in the modern Jewish State.

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Whether the categories of secular and religious were ever a sufficient or accurate depiction of all Israeli Jews is, of course, questionable. For one thing, a large sector of Israeli society, consisting primarily of Jews who came from Arabic-speaking countries, has long defined itself as “traditional” rather than Orthodox. For many decades, however, these Jews had little impact on public discourse, and their religious identity remained invisible or irrelevant to the larger population.

The situation, however, began to change with the end of the Labor Zionist hegemony and the electoral victory of Menachem Begin, in 1977. This political shift was accompanied by the movement of Sephardic Jewry (*edot ha-mizrach*) from the sidelines to the center of power and cultural influence. Furthermore, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the influx of a million new immigrants, the social, cultural and Jewish reality of Israel became even more diverse. Thus today, while the religious-secular distinction remains valid to a degree, it is not longer sufficient

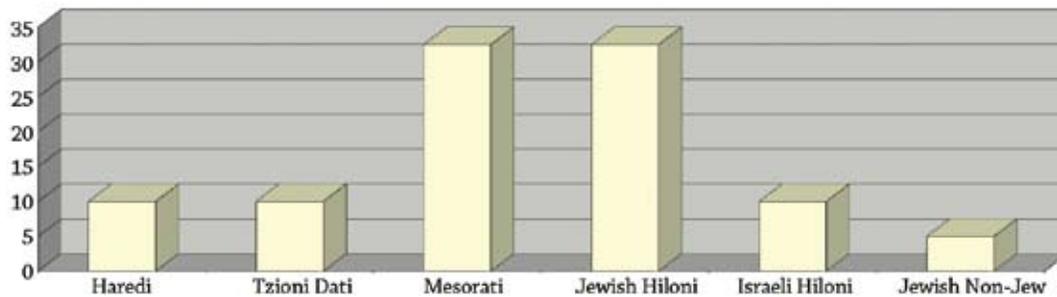


Jerusalem, Geula
neighborhood, 2007

as a descriptive tool and must undergo considerable revision before it can aptly represent the intricate dynamics of Israeli Jewish society.

A proper reading of the cultural map is of great educational importance. A richer and broader classification of Jewish identities in Israel can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy – just as the narrower one did, but in reverse. When Israeli society is popularly understood to contain complex varieties of Jewishness, this may serve as a catalyst and opportunity for many Israelis, previously constricted by the all-or-nothing dichotomy, to explore their religious feelings and affinities in a more sensitive light. It may encourage them to construct their identity in terms more akin to who they really are and not in accordance with ideologies that aspire to draft them to their cause.

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To this end, I would like to propose, instead of a dichotomy, a model of six “tribes.” Israel’s Jewish population, which in 2008 constitutes approximately 78% of the state’s citizenry, may be seen as consisting of a spectrum of six contiguous subcultures, each with its own narrative, ideology and lifestyle. These six tribes could easily be twelve or eighteen, as each contains multiple possibilities for subdivisions, yet for the sake of clarity I shall focus on what I believe to be the primary six, specifying the subdivisions where relevant. These tribes of Jewish Israel are:

1. The **Haredi** or Ultra-Orthodox – almost 10% of Israel’s Jewish population.
2. The **Tzioni Dati** or Religious Zionist – about 10%.
3. The **Mesorati** or Traditionalist – 30–35%. (Not to be confused with the Masorti movement, the Israeli branch of the worldwide Conservative movement, which bears the same name.)
4. The **Jewish Hiloni** or Secular Jewish – 30–35%.
5. The **Israeli Hiloni** or Israeli Secular – another 10%.
6. The **Jewish non-Jews** – approximately 5% *
(see table)

Let us examine each of these groups in turn.

“Everything New Is Forbidden by the Torah”

Currently slightly less than 10 percent of Israeli Jewish society, the *Haredi* (ultra-Ortho-

dox) tribe is expected to grow dramatically in the coming generation, as their birthrate is about three times higher than that of other Jewish Israelis. This tribe is defined primarily through its attitude toward modernity. According to the ultra-Orthodox narrative, modernity has nothing of value to add to one’s life or religious quest. On the contrary, a pious Jew must be “*hared*,” literally fearful, not only of God but also of all innovations that might lead one away from God and God’s commandments as represented in traditional Judaism.

As Reform Judaism took root in Central Europe, the *Hatam Sofer* (Rabbi Moses Sofer, 1762–1839) expanded the Mishnaic dictum “the new is forbidden by the Torah” (which referred specifically to “old” versus “new” flour) into a popular motto that to this day encapsulates the ideology of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. For *haredim*, modernity threatens to distort the authentic Judaism that has been continuously expressed over the past 3,000 years. Religious excellence may only be achieved if one isolates oneself from the modern world and its innovations – not necessarily from its technological inventions or economic structures, but from its value system and philosophy. This isolation, which was fortified in the past by the coercive institution of the ghetto, is rebuilt through a self-imposed ghetto consisting of distinct neighborhoods, dress and language, kashrut policies that make social interaction with non-*haredim* almost impossible, and the placing of all men, especially in Israel, in yeshivot for as long as possible, minimizing contact with the outside world and susceptibility to its influence. As it says in *Pirkei Avot*, “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it” – everything one has to know may be found within the Torah. One need not look further.

The State of Israel, as a product of modernity, is thus equally devoid of religious value. The land of Israel may harbor unique spiritual qualities and exclusive halachic

* All of these estimates are based on an analysis of a 2008 survey by the Guttman Institute and a 2007 survey by Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics. The Guttman survey adopted four categories: *Haredi* – 9%; *Dati* – 10%; *Mesorati* – 30%; and *Hiloni* – 51%. The Central Bureau of Statistics adopted five: *Haredi* – 7%; *Dati* – 10%; *Mesorati Dati* – 14%; *Mesorati non-Dati* – 25%; and *Hiloni* 44%. Both surveys end up with a single, monolithic *Hiloni* category, maintaining *Hiloni* as the largest tribe but failing to reflect the diversity of answers that this group provided as to their Jewish and religious behavior.

obligations, the most basic of which is to settle in it, but the modern state bears no religious significance whatsoever. Quite the contrary: Zionism, in the *haredi* view, is an affront to the belief that the restoration of Jewish sovereignty must be initiated by the same God who decreed our exile. Hastening the messianic End of Days (*dehikat haketz*) by rebuilding a Jewish polity is an act of rebellion against the will of God.

Governed by modern secular law, Jews in Israel are still, in this view, essentially under foreign rule, no different from Jews in Czarist Russia or 21st-century America. In order to further their religious values and goals, such as the study of Torah and child-bearing, the *Haredi* tribe elects its own representatives to the Knesset. At the same time, the overwhelming majority refuse to serve in the army, reflecting their desire to remain insulated and alienated from the larger Zionist culture.

Their growing birthrate, apparent imperiousness to change, and disproportionate political power have imparted to the *Haredi* tribe the aura of stability and strength. However, a number of factors have converged in recent years that have begun to erode the boundaries between them and the larger society, signaling a subtle process of change. The high birthrate of the ultra-Orthodox has increased their dependency on government funds, which has led to a perceptible weakening of their ideological rejection of the State of Israel. Their representatives in the Knesset, who for many years were only concerned with issues directly impacting on their constituency, now find themselves engaged in decisions involving the security and foreign policy of the state. In addition, in a development whose long-term significance has yet to be measured, we are witnessing an increase in *haredi* men entering the larger Israeli workforce to supplement government child-support stipends, thus further removing the barriers between the communities.

With the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, religious Zionists were torn between their loyalty to the state and their loyalty to Judaism.

The intensification of Palestinian terrorism, which moved the front lines from Israel's borders to the streets and buses of the cities, brought about a greater involvement of *haredim* in the welfare of their fellow Israeli Jews. The religious imperative to honor the dead – which had often led the ultra-Orthodox to oppose construction projects that uncovered ancient Jewish graves – now propelled *haredi* men to volunteer in the aftermath of terror attacks, to ensure the sanctity of the victims' bodies. Television screens were filled with scenes of ultra-Orthodox men combing the wreckage to salvage fragments of skin and bone, and offering assistance to the wounded. These acts of compassion were not lost upon the larger public, which began to view this insulated and alien community in a new light. In 2003, the state bestowed one of its highest honors, the lighting of a torch on Independence Day, on Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, head of Zaka, the emergency *haredi* volunteer corps. His recitation, as he lit the flame, of the ceremonial phrase *l'tiferet Medinat Yisrael* – for the glory of the State of Israel – was a watershed moment in the relationship between the ultra-Orthodox and the other tribes of Israel, and may have reflected the beginning of new self-understanding within the *Haredi* tribe.



“Possess the Land and Dwell in It”

Unlike the ultra-Orthodox, the Religious Zionist tribe strives to balance an unwavering commitment to halacha with an active involvement in the modern world. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, one of the founding fathers of religious Zionism, taught that the world and all within it are products of the divine will and as such are infused with value. Accordingly, Religious Zionists are full participants in the secular world, refusing to isolate themselves from the innovations of modernity or from the larger Israeli public.

For them, the State of Israel is a product of the divine will, part of God’s plan for history. As opposed to the ultra-Orthodox, who see the pursuit of Jewish independence as a rebellion against God, the Religious Zionist sees the rebirth of Israel as *at’halta de’geula*, a beginning stage in the messianic redemption of the Jews and the world. Support for the state is a profoundly Jewish act and a foundation of Jewish identity, but must not, of course, conflict with strict halachic

observance. As a result, one of the central objectives of the Religious Zionist movement during the first 25 years of Israel’s existence was to harmonize daily life with Jewish law. Creating the military rabbinate and Chief Rabbinate, and securing the latter’s hegemony over such areas as marriage and divorce, conversion and kashrut, allowed Religious Zionists to become full members of Israeli society without compromising their halachic standards.

The fundamental emphases of Religious Zionism, however, have changed over the last four decades. Victory in the Six-Day War, which expanded the rule of the Jewish people over the Land of Israel – in particular such places of biblical significance such as Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, Beit El and Shiloh – were viewed by Religious Zionists as the ultimate justification of their view of the temporal, secular state as a vehicle of divine redemption. Fulfilling God’s command to “possess [the Land] and dwell in it” (Deuteronomy 11:31), became the new pillar of the tribe’s ideology.



Kfar Darom, Gaza,
before Israel’s
disengagement, 2005

“To be *hiloni* is more than simply being nonreligious and more than being a nonbeliever of religious beliefs . . . To be *hiloni* is to stake a claim to autonomy over one’s life.” – S.Yizhar

Over the years, the Religious Zionist camp relinquished its hold over the Chief Rabbinate – the bastion of its civic participation – to the ultra-Orthodox, focusing instead on the institution that would ensure that the Land of Israel would remain under Jewish hands, namely, the army. Today, roughly 25% of the junior officers in combat units in the IDF come from this tribe, and the presence of Religious Zionists in the upper echelons of the army, unheard of in the past, is now a regular occurrence. On the political level, the long-standing practice of the National Religious Party (Mafdal) of joining every coalition government was replaced by a policy of sitting only in governments that opposed territorial compromise with the Palestinians. With the advent of the Oslo peace process, religious Zionists increasingly found themselves at the fringe of the national consensus. Formerly situated at the center of the collective Zionist enterprise, this tribe has become focused on the political agenda of the settler movement. As such, it is gradually replacing the *Haredi* tribe as the most extreme and marginal tribe in Israeli society.

In 2005, with the disengagement from Gaza, religious Zionists were confronted by a severe ideological crisis, torn between their loyalty to the state and their loyalty to Juda-

ism. For the first time, the State of Israel was ceding a portion of the Holy Land to non-Jews, thus violating Jewish law and delaying the redemption. The foundation of the partnership between the Religious Zionists and the state was broken. No more could they assume that loyalty to the state would never be at the expense of loyalty to halacha. And yet, during the disengagement, the Religious Zionists made a choice to preserve their place within Israeli society and gave precedence to the state over the land. As a result, there were almost no signs of conscientious objection amongst Religious Zionist soldiers and officers, and most settlers refrained from crossing the lines of passive resistance. In the aftermath, however, the leaders of this tribe made it clear that they would never countenance a repetition of the Gaza disengagement in Judea and Samaria.

The Synagogue and the Soccer Field

The *Mesorati* tribe is possibly the largest tribe in Israel, comprising close to 35 percent of Israeli society. Here, the prevailing religious-secular distinction most blatantly breaks down. Like the religious Zionists, these Israeli Jews immerse themselves in the modern world. They, too, are an integral part of Israel’s social, political and cultural spheres, though less inclined to stress the mystical holiness of the land. The tribe’s uniqueness lies in its approach toward ritual observance, an approach which is having an increasingly important role in shaping the character of Jewish life in Israel.

A central feature of *Mesorati* Judaism is that in principle it defers to Orthodoxy, believing it to be the authentic and binding form of Judaism. I say “in principle,” for the second feature of *Mesorati* Judaism is that its practitioners do not always abide by the Orthodox interpretation but feel free to pick and choose what they will and will not observe. This selective observance neither plagues them with guilt, nor is it institution-

alized as an alternative approach to Judaism. The authentic Jewish life for *Mesorati* Jews is the Orthodox life. This is how their grandparents (or parents) lived; this is how the rabbi they respect lives. And while their own lifestyles, with its sporadic halachic observance, deviates from Orthodoxy, they never aspire to replace it as the true version of Judaism.

The origin of this apparent inconsistency lies in the religious tolerance of the Sephardic community, of which this tribe is largely comprised. The Ashkenazi communities of Europe, particularly over the past two centuries, erected very clear boundaries between insider and outsider, between heretic and believer, between Orthodox and secular and Reform. One was either in or out, and failure to comply fully with the accepted halachic norms of the community meant that one was ultimately out. Sephardic rabbis and communities, in sharp contrast, did not remove deviants from the purview of their authority and institutions. There were some who observed more, some who observed less, yet everyone had a place in the synagogue and a standing in the Orthodox community.

As a result, the *Mesorati* tribe spans a wide spectrum of lifestyles and self-definitions, with varying degrees of observance. In general, they are quite proficient in the different aspects of Jewish ritual. *Mesorati* men who do not generally wear a *kippah* feel comfortable wearing one at funerals or bar mitzvahs. They know how to recite the Kaddish over a relative who died and what to say when called to the Torah. They may go to synagogue with some frequency on Friday nights (particularly if the family patriarch is still alive); yet on Shabbat day they may go to the beach or the soccer field. They are conversant with the Jewish calendar and live their lives according to its rhythms, yet they do not fulfill all of its ritual obligations. They keep kosher in Israel but may go to nonkosher restaurants abroad – though they will never touch pork or shrimp.

The building of a shared narrative will require a new culture of disagreement, religious tolerance and pluralism. The tribes can only join together to the extent that its members all feel safe and respected.

These somewhat erratic choices are governed by myriad considerations and circumstances, often determined by the tradition (*masoret*) – real or perceived – of their parents, not necessarily by a search for consistency and coherency. It is important to understand, however, that the different degrees of observance do not in any way imply an alienation from Judaism. *Mesorati* Jews love the Jewish tradition, feel bound by it and participate with great joy in a wide range of ritual practices and lifecycle events. Some *Mesorati* Jews consider themselves to be quite religious, while others see themselves as less so. None of them, however, would call themselves secular.

Today the *Mesorati* community faces new challenges. As the generation of the grandfathers passes on, the foundation for their practice is being weakened. The particular brand of Judaism they practice involves natural compromises that grew out of a living reality, which generated a beautiful balance between love of tradition and life in the larger world. Now, *Mesorati* Israelis need to conceptualize their principles, which will necessitate a measure of separation from Orthodoxy and its rabbis and the creation of an independent religious leadership. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the future of the

Mesorati tribe is dependent on their ability to redefine themselves in categories similar to the North American liberal movements, though with a distinct Israeli identity. To do so, however, would entail a radical shift in their religious outlook, since, like the *Haredi* and *Tzioni Dati* tribes, the *Mesorati* view Orthodoxy as the sole authentic expression of Jewishness.

Judaism as “Israeliness”

Like the *Mesorati* tribe, the secular Jewish *Hiloni* tribe constitutes 30–35 percent of Israel’s Jewish majority. Its members do not reject Judaism outright but take a more subtle position, akin to that of the *Mesorati*. Indeed, the increased role of this tribe in current Israeli society is due in no small part to the relocation of *Mesorati* Jews at the center of the Israeli map. As negative stereotypes of Sephardim, propagated by the Ashkenazi elite, gradually declined, intermarriage between the two groups became common. This mingling of Jewish ethnic groups (*edot*) exposed secular Ashkenazim to aspects of Jewish ritual that had often been absent from their prior way of life.

The major characteristic of this tribe lies in the fact that they do not see Orthodoxy as the primary carrier of Jewish religious identity or its most authentic representative. Secular Judaism, while having roots in the past, is fundamentally a new Jewish identity. For this tribe, the State of Israel, its land, culture and values, are the foundations of this new Jewish life, replacing the synagogue, religious belief and halachic observance. “Israeliness” is a new, vital expression of Jewish life, reflected in the contemporary reality of the Jewish people in their sovereign state. As A. B. Yehoshua wrote in the *Ha’aretz* newspaper in 2006, in a piece addressed to American Jews:

Israeli Jewish identity, which we call Israeli identity (as distinct from Israeli citizenship,

which is shared by Arab citizens . . .) has to contend with all facets of life though the binding and sovereign framework of a territorially defined state . . . The homeland, the national language and the binding framework are the fundamental components of the national identity of every person . . . For me, Jewish values are not located in a fancy spice box that is only opened to release its pleasing fragrance on Shabbat and holidays, but in the daily reality of dozens of problems through which Jewish values are shaped and defined, for better or worse.

Members of the Jewish *Hiloni* tribe are not necessarily atheists. In fact, most believe in God but are simply not interested in being guided or commanded by God, nor are they interested in worship. In the words of the Israeli author S. Yizhar: “To be *hiloni* is more than simply being nonreligious and more than being a nonbeliever of religious beliefs . . . To be *hiloni* is to stake a claim to autonomy over one’s life.”

These secular Jews are comfortable with the Jewish calendar because it is the national calendar of Israel. According to opinion surveys, the vast majority of this tribe fast on Yom Kippur and participate in a Seder on Passover. Many now build sukkot, light candles on Hanukkah, dress up on Purim, plant trees on Tu Be’shvat and, as children, collect wood and gather around a bonfire on Lag Ba’omer. A recent development has seen the inclusion of a *tikkun*, a night of studying, on Shavuot night, as a mainstay of the secular Jewish calendar, as they, too, celebrate the Jewish people’s receiving of the Torah. The majority have a Shabbat dinner on Friday night, mostly without reciting the Kiddush; some may continue the evening at a cinema or club.

This is a tribe which feels deeply Jewish, no less so than the *Mesorati*, Religious Zionist and Ultra-Orthodox tribes. In a sense, secular Jews are even more at home with their Jewish identity than many *Mesorati* Jews, since they

do not feel obligated by that which they do not observe and, consequently, experience no dissonance between the lifestyle they endorse and the one they actually lead. Another difference between these two tribes is the secular Jews' deep alienation from the ultra-Orthodox. The *Mesorati* Jews, by contrast, are a main constituency of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party.

The *Hiloni* tribe rejects the Orthodox notion that their spiritual “cart” is empty (*agala reikah*) – a classic metaphor applied by the *haredi* leader Hazon Ish in a famous encounter with David Ben-Gurion. However, sustaining their self-perception of a full Jewish identity requires that secular Jews become more knowledgeable about the tradition. As Amos Oz has commented on the famous biblical verse from the end of the book of Lamentations: “Renew our days as old.’ It is impossible to renew without the old, and there is no existence for the old without renewal.” Given the abysmal state of Jewish education for secular Jews in Israel, achieving this renewal is no easy task.

Nothing but Israeli

The Israeli *Hiloni* tribe, which for many years dominated Israel’s cultural elite, does not want to see itself within Jewish categories. If, for the Secular Jewish tribe, Israeliness imbues the Jewish tradition with new meaning, for Secular Israelis it serves to replace Judaism altogether. This tribe prefers to refer to itself as Israeli as distinct from Jewish. Judaism, it believes, may have been of value in the Diaspora, but with the return to the land and the establishment of the State of Israel, that value had become obsolete.

Like the Jewish *Hiloni* tribe, Secular Israelis do not feel compelled by halachic obligation; unlike Secular Jews, they feel no need or inclination to participate in ritual either. This is a tribe devoid of all sentimentality toward Jewish life. The 10 percent or so of Israeli Jewish society who do not fast on

Yom Kippur, who go to the beach on the High Holidays, who do not attend a Passover Seder, belong to this tribe. Judaism, for them, is neither a collective ethos nor a national heritage; it is a burden to be shed. Secular Israelis see themselves as members of a “normal” nation like all others, with a “normal” identity rooted in universal ethical values and not in a Jewish past that divided them from the world and from a healthy existence.

Of the Jewish tribes, this is the one with the deepest assimilation tendencies; what sustains their continuity is their physical and philosophical rootedness in the land and State of Israel. Outside of Israel, this tribe would be disconnected from its life force and be absorbed into the larger society. If any vestiges of Jewishness are to be found, they are those which have been nationalized and absorbed into the new Israeli narrative. Hence, Hanukkah, Purim and – to a certain degree – Passover are commemorated, but solely as Israeli holidays.

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These secular Israelis want freedom from religion, not freedom of religion. Shinui, the now-defunct political party that represented this tribe, demanded the legalization of civil marriages but not the right of non-Orthodox rabbis to perform marriages. Indeed the Secular Israelis are happy to acquiesce to the control of Orthodoxy over Judaism. They are the ones to whom the famous Israeli saying most applies: “The synagogue I don’t go to is Orthodox.” The Orthodox rabbinate’s hammerlock on Judaism is a boon for Secular Israelis, as it legitimizes their rejection of religion.

However, by building their national identity within the State of Israel, even the most secular Israelis have difficulty breaking completely with their Jewishness. Almost all circumcise their sons and maintain some measure of Jewish mourning rituals. While declaring that they have more in common with their fellow Druze and Bedouin citizens – who serve alongside them in the Israeli army – than with ultra-Orthodox or Diaspora Jews, this seems to be more of a hyperbolic slogan than a true assessment of their identity. Despite the contrarian rhetoric, secular Israeli-ness is basically a different way of expressing the notion that Jewish identity need not be religious, but at its core entails membership in the Jewish people. In the words of the Zionist thinker Jacob Klatzkin (1882–1948):

In the past there have been two criteria for Judaism: the criterion of religion . . . and the criterion of the spirit . . . In opposition to these two criteria, which make Judaism a matter of creed, a third has now arisen, the criterion of consistent nationalism... To be a Jew means the acceptance of neither a religious nor an ethical creed. We are neither a denomination nor a school of thought, but members of one family, bearers of a common history. Denying the Jewish spiritual teachings does not place one outside the community and accepting it does not make one a Jew.

In the end, the Secular Israeli owns a seat at the Jewish table and helps shape the Jewish discussion in Israel. One of this tribe’s limitations, however, is that more of its efforts seem to be directed to keeping Judaism out of public life, rather than developing a positive vision of what Israeli identity must entail.

The Outsiders Within: Jewish non-Jews

The youngest tribe in Israel consists of some 350,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have arrived over the past two decades and who, while eligible for citizenship under Israel’s Law of Return, are not recognized as Jews by the Orthodox rabbinate – nor, for that matter, by most Israelis, including secular Jews and the Israeli Reform movement, who hold that a Jew is someone whose mother is Jewish, or someone who has converted to Judaism. The Law of Return, however, grants automatic Israeli Jewish citizenship to anyone whom Nazi Nuremberg Laws would have classified as Jewish – meaning anyone with at least one Jewish parent or grandparent, as long as they did not convert to another religion.

The Jewish non-Jews – who also include spouses of former Soviet Jews who have made aliyah – are an integral part of mainstream Israeli Jewish society. They live among Jewish Israelis, attend Jewish public schools, serve in the army and are generally indistinguishable from the Israeli Jewish population. Some still consider themselves to be Christian and maintain their former religious customs, but they are a minority. Most see themselves as part of the secular Israeli tribe.

From a cultural standpoint, the Jewish non-Jews are gradually assimilating into the Jewish culture of Israel and consider themselves Jewish. This process is being accelerated by the army’s *Nativ* program, which pro-

vides a voluntary intensive Jewish-studies immersion program that many non-Jewish immigrant soldiers choose to pursue. While the program's goal of formally converting the soldiers to Judaism is only marginally successful, the program is transformative from an educational point of view. Conversion is a problem because the stringent requirements of the Orthodox rabbinate are completely unrealistic for most Jewish non-Jews. Hence among the 350,000 members of this tribe, there are only about 1,000 to 1,500 converts a year.

The dilemma of the Jewish non-Jews as insider-outsiders most acutely penetrates the national consciousness when a member of this tribe dies in battle and the question of Jewish burial arises. In these cases, a sense of decency coupled with the recognition that service in the IDF is tantamount to a sort of secular conversion, leads the army to find ad hoc solutions within military cemeteries. The dissonance is more pronounced when members of the tribe want to marry Jews. Eventually, public pressure may finally force the institution of civil marriage in Israel, for it is manifestly unacceptable to impose the responsibilities of citizenship upon immigrants and then deprive them of the ability to marry in their own country. It is also to be hoped that the Chief Rabbinate will relax its standards for conversion, though this is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Toward a Common Narrative

Israel is a far more complicated country than the religious-secular model implies. Eighty percent of Israeli Jewish society does not live an Orthodox lifestyle, but barely half of Israeli Jews would call themselves *hiloni*. The majority of the *hiloni* Jews are not anti-religious, and at least 85 percent of all Jewish Israelis live a Jewish life of different degrees of intensity and see themselves as having a Jewish identity. Amid this spectrum of Jewish expression, at least two-thirds of Israeli

Jews – including large numbers of secular Jews – regard Orthodoxy as the sole authentic version of the Jewish religious tradition.

While Jewish diversity thrives on a private level, the various tribes – the Orthodox excepted – are quite passive in the public sphere. They do not lobby for government allocations to Jewishly educate their children, and they are willing to maintain the status quo on issues of state and religion, even if this impinges on their individual rights. The Israeli majority continues to cede control over Judaism to Orthodox authorities, subordinating issues of religious freedom to the need to build parliamentary coalitions with the Orthodox parties in order to implement foreign and defense policies. Such behavior reinforces passivity and Jewish spectatorship, and thus significantly endangers, in the long run, the ability of Israelis to sustain their religious diversity on a private level as well.

While disagreements still abound among the six Jewish tribes of Israel, there is also much that is shared. The fact that the great majority of Israeli Jews are connected on some level with Jewish tradition makes it possible to imagine the structuring of a common narrative and a collective identity. Doing so will require of all the non-Orthodox tribes to strengthen their attachments to their own Jewish narratives and the ultra-Orthodox to strengthen their bond with the state. At the same time, the building of a shared narrative will require a new culture of disagreement, religious tolerance and pluralism. The tribes can only join together to the extent that its members all feel safe and respected. Whether there is a will to work – on both fronts – is the most significant question facing contemporary Zionism and the modern Jewish state.



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