

# In Search of Soul

What sort of state should Israel be? Reading the rich and thought-provoking collection entitled “The Jewish State: The Next Fifty Years” (AZURE 6, Winter 1999) brought to my mind the folk narrative in which a Jew is deeply unhappy with his soul. It feels too tight, it doesn’t sit right; in short, he can’t get along with it and complains to God.

Suddenly, he is “beamed up” to the heavenly storehouse, and told: “Take your time—look around. Pick a soul you like.” So the Jew spends the day trying on souls of every size, shape and hue. Finally, he exclaims: “This one! This is the soul I want.” Comes the response: “That’s your soul.”

In the complex quest for Israel’s soul, with all the tearing questions attendant on it (religious? secular? Zionist? post-Zionist?), this simple motif carries a profound message. Many of our leftist intellectuals have shrugged off a Jewish soul they find old-fashioned, constricting and burdensome. Some are busily trying on other, gaudier souls labeled “Made in the USA,” “Made in the Far East” or

elsewhere. With feel-good and instant gratification such strong motivational factors in modern society, the painstaking struggle to achieve wholeness and integration and become one’s “true self” can seem almost foreign—and yet untold sums are spent on therapy by people needing to do just that.

At day’s end, the Jew in the narrative is faced with the revelation that the soul he sought to cast off as wearisome and outmoded is the one he jubilantly chose as new and fresh and suiting him the best. How long will it take us to realize that the pursuit of alien souls, cut from un-Jewish cloth, is doomed to frustration, or worse?

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## *Cultural Decadence*

I offer the following considerations in reaction to the symposium on “The Jewish State: The Next Fifty Years.”

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Contrary to the views of both Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion, and also in a completely different vein from Ahad Ha'am, the State of Israel's survival as a Jewish state is independent of its economic or scientific successes; nor is it contingent upon its military successes or its being a spiritual center detached from all material foundation. Rather, it depends on the force of its Jewish spirit. In other words, the State of Israel will stand or fall on the quality of its original, independent culture and its willingness to accept this culture as the spiritual principle orienting all of the nation's material and spiritual actions. Martin Buber, in his essay "The Face of Man" and his pamphlet "Three Letters on Judaism," accepts in principle the truth of this claim, which also is not inconsistent with the views of R. Abraham Isaac Kook.

While most of Israel's problems—economic, strategic, political—offer hope for solution, in only one sphere does the future appear to be without a solution, and perhaps even hopeless: The cultural sphere. Encroaching technology, alienation from religion, misunderstanding of religious values, lack of knowledge and understanding of humanity and civilizations, aspirations to mythical, false and egotistical humanism, and the myths of a twisted version of democracy, of a utopia of greatest individual liberty devoid of all

human values or sacred gods, all couched in a hyper-rational, technobarbaric language, will shape a man who is half, if not entirely, a robot. To understand this problem, we should note two fundamental facts.

First, no individual, even the most educated, can significantly develop national civilization single-handedly. Even a genius, the greatest writer, thinker or artist, can at most make a small contribution to culture, with a slight impact, such as only prophets or great Hasidic leaders were able to make in our history. The fundamental principle of any civilization is the collective consensus of the individuals who comprise it. Excessive emphasis on individuality and liberty only undermines civilization, creating post-modern chaos.

Political leaders coming from command positions in the military will not be able to cure this ill. Leaders from civilian backgrounds offer no particular cultural and spiritual promise for addressing the state's problems, and this is even more true of leaders from the ranks of the military. This may not be a source of difficulty for the economy or the army because these spheres do not require men of culture. The state, however, dealing as it does in social and educational issues, certainly does need them.

Second, one must note that national culture is never universal. The

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great civilizations, whether ancient China, ancient India, Communist Russia, or the democratic United States, only appear to be unified cultures. In fact, each is an amalgam of cultures and religions, whose differences are much more significant than their common denominators. Unfortunately, trying to separate a culture into its elements is like creating anew the Tower of Babel, a process characterized not only by a “confounding of their languages” (Genesis 11:7) but also by a confusion of leaders, of their feelings and their worldviews. In such a situation, one cannot speak of values at all because the deconstruction causes not a single value to remain which is common to all members of the nation.

Clearly if there is no consensus on values, there is nothing to be said of education in morals. The result is that many books are written in the vein of Moshe Kroy’s *Life According to Reason* which praises extreme egotistical individualism, and Moshe Kaspi’s *Tomorrow’s Education*, in which education is transformed from a values-nurturing discipline to something which provides skills training and preaches nihilism. From his book, it seems that Kaspi is willing to relinquish all past achievements in favor of some “future” devoid of human content, such as has never existed and is doubtful ever will.

Anyone with even a minute knowledge of culture knows that it consists of millions of values, customs, habits, opinions and writings representing positions on philosophy, education, religion, law, literature and art. One can speak of “culture” only when this immense totality is controlled by a spiritual principle which creates a unifying consensus among infinite numbers of individuals. In the absence of such an organizing bridge, culture becomes only chaos, and in chaos nothing can be said of values or of education. Kaspi and others all over the world have blamed education for favoring indoctrination, but they dismiss the fact that even chaos works by coercing thought.

Education that is indoctrinated unifies individuals, unlike chaos-driven or supporter-driven indoctrination, which separates individuals and erodes unity. In chaos-driven degeneration, everyone loses the benefits of past achievements and the added value of unified forces. The result is that one can find no common language with others, and the opportunity to live in harmony is lost. Perhaps, instead, everyone will act like the disassociated techno-barbarians of Max Frisch’s *Homo Faber* and Stiller, Victor Perkiss’ *Technological Man*, or the isolated citizens of Neil Postman’s technopolis. Perhaps the world will organize into an annihilative economy, as portrayed

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in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, or an existence of empty, debilitating sex, as in the short stories of Philip Roth and John Updike. It may be that a chaotic common denominator will direct us into lives like those of the characters in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, David Fogel's *Marriage Life* or Meir Shalev's *The Blue Mountain*. Or perhaps we will attain that combination of great love between man and ape, the last "human" survivors after destruction by an "advanced and enlightened humanity," as portrayed in Bernard Malamud's famous *God's Grace*—if not a common past with the apes, then at least a common future.

Culture, clearly, is multifarious, made up of millions of details of countless manifestations of life. Its destruction can, perhaps, be effected by planning but it is impossible to create through planning. It is also clear that a world lacking culture is worse, more humiliating and more cruel than the world of Cain and Abel, of Sodom and Gomorrah, or of Lot and his daughters. Beyond this is the indestructible bond between a nation and its culture. Culture is created through the interaction of the national spiritual principle with the nation's ability, religious and moral values, customs and history. The national corpus greatly affects the development of culture, as accumulating

culture greatly influences the national corpus.

Because of its deep national and religious roots, every culture has a comprehensive, usually irrational system of "sacred cows." In times of cultural crisis, these are the first to come under attack by men of reason, by rationalism, and this approach leads inevitably to complete nihilism. Thus, the extreme tendency toward rationalism and post-modern attempts to dismiss the Jewish cultural system in its entirety pose a threat to Israel's existence as a Jewish state. The slaughtering of the sacred cows of religion and belief by the members of the Second Aliya and today's militantly secular population—their attempts to undermine kashrut, Passover, religious marriage ceremonies, Yom Kippur and circumcision—is naturally leading to a corresponding slaughtering of secular Israel's sacred cows (settling the land, kibbutzim, the work ethic in general and the primacy of agricultural work in particular, socialism, individual obligations, and so on). Today, even the IDF has lost its halo, Jewish immigration is little aspired to, and the secular judicial system, for decades considered the purest, most uncorrupted element in Israeli democracy, has lost the nation's trust—something which perhaps is to be blamed on the atmosphere of slaughtering sacred cows, although the attitudes and behaviors of members of

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the judiciary have themselves contributed to this atmosphere.

What is clear is that the fragmenting of the Hebrew cultural personality is having an effect far greater than was originally intended. First, traditional beliefs and religion were undermined, followed by the weakening of secular social aims, leading to significant impairment of the nation's political and judicial institutions. This has adversely affected the existence of Israel not only as the state of the Jewish nation, but as a democratic state as well. The worst part is that although it is impossible to build a new Israeli culture or absorb a foreign culture, which necessarily would be inconsistent with the nature of the people, it is certainly possible to destroy the old culture. What is left in the wake of this tiring process is the emptiness of a cultural void, which small-minded militia are already beginning to penetrate: Materialistic nihilism and primitive, violent barbarity.

I have presented a thoroughgoing explanation for what in the nineteenth century was called decadence. And now an additional development in decadence threatens our state, because of the distortion of democracy. Affirmative discrimination which prejudices the Jewish nature of Israel may bring about the elimination of Jewish interests, with the far-reaching result of bringing about a state in which Jews

are a marginal demographic and political factor. By following this sociopolitical path, and not necessarily through the use of force, the face of the nation may be transformed into something like a diaspora country where Jews are a large minority who happen to have moved to Israel.

These predictions are, of course, pessimistic, but I think also realistic. Roman historians knew that cultural decadence had practical implications for national life, and those willing to take this chance can choose to do so. Yet we should not be surprised to find ourselves fulfilling the pessimistic predictions of the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg of another tragic end to an attempt at creating a Jewish polity.

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### *Canaanite Quandary*

I enjoyed the article "Zionism and the Myth of Motherland" (AZURE 5, Autumn 1998) by Assaf Sagiv, but would like to make the following comments:

The idea that exile "serves in the Bible as a basis for responsibility" is a rather negative one. How much more upbeat is the philosophy that conscience and responsibility are inbred

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Jewish traits (possibly the *gevura* trait of Isaac); they push us to fulfill responsibilities. Failure is thus the other, undesirable side of the coin.

Therefore the aim of the nation of Israel, to paraphrase Mizrahi philosophy, is: The nation, God, his Tora and his land are one—rather than Sagiv’s “otherness between man and the world.” Thus the aim is the positive goal of filling the land with Jews (see, for example, R. Zalman Sorotzkin, *Oznaim Latora*, Numbers 14:21, s.v. “*Truly, as I live*”). This idea has the additional advantage that if goals directed at the land itself are stymied, one can still push forward in developing the perfection of the people who are already here.

That this positive viewpoint is that of the Bible can be seen in the writings of R. Avigdor Neventzal. In his *Talks on the Book of Genesis*, he writes that the “flight from the East” (Genesis 11:2) was a general *aliya* of all mankind to the Source, the “Motherland,” the Land of Israel (only one man completed the journey, Abraham). The motives for this *aliya* are outlined in the *Kli Yakar* on Genesis 12:1: “Get thee gone” is a return to man’s source, of inestimable benefit both spiritually and materially (“and I will make you into a great nation, and bless you...”). Thus the Bible does not “reject autochthony as irrelevant”—but rather sees man’s return to the “source from which soul and

body were created” (*Kli Yakar*) as the central story of mankind.

Finally, the quote from Ben-Gurion is sad, in that it was entirely unnecessary for him to postulate that the “Hebrews dwelt in the land among the Canaanite peoples even prior to Abraham.” Rashi comments (Genesis 12:6) that “the Canaanites were in the land” and were “continually conquering the land of Israel from the children of Shem, for Noah gave the land to Shem when he divided the land,” and not to the usurper Canaan. So Ben-Gurion need not have been so apologetic.

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### ***Immigrant Art***

Avraham Levitt’s article “Israeli Art On Its Way to Somewhere Else” (*Azure* 3, Winter 1998) was a readable, fascinating, illuminating and truly historic overview. I find its conclusions to be sad and probably quite correct, but I must ask: What about the artistic abilities and contributions of our Russian Jewish brethren who migrated here en masse in the last decade? Approximately one million Jews from the ex-Soviet Union have come here since 1988, of whom, apart from thousands of scientists, engineers and

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musicians, there must also be many artists.

Has this influx of foreign talent not affected the Israeli artistic landscape? Are those artists not employed as art teachers? Must they resort to floor-washing to scrape out a living? There are scientific incubators for immigrants (and their ingenuity); what about incubators, or better put, studios, for immigrant artists?

As Levitt's overview seemed so thorough (and sincere) I was concerned to find out that not a word was said about Russian Jewish artistic talent now within our borders. I sure hope

that all those artists did not get re-trained as English teachers or as computer freaks. (We have a big enough supply of the above as it is.)

I recall an article in *The Jerusalem Post* within recent years that claimed the abundance and depth of musical talent that came with the Russian Jewish immigrants of the last decade raised music in Israel to a level that would not have been achieved in a full century of purely native talent. So, what about the artistic talent of those same Jews?

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*AZURE welcomes letters from its readers. Letters should be sent to: AZURE, c/o The Shalem Center, 1140 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 801, Washington, DC 20036. E-mail: [azure@shalem.org.il](mailto:azure@shalem.org.il). Letters may be edited for length.*

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