Dionysus in Zion

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In early October of last year, the modern city of Tel Aviv became the scene of a colorful pagan spectacle. On the boardwalk overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, about 150,000 young people gathered together to take part in what the organizers called the "Love Parade." As dozens of scantily clad performers danced atop a procession of slowly moving floats, huge crowds under the influence of ecstasy and other drugs throbbed and swayed to deafening electronic music.[1] The participants, who included not only people in their teens and twenties but also children, surrendered willingly to the intoxicating mix of sound, sight and smell, a combination which elicited what one account described as a feeling of "pure, simple, tribal joy."[2] The daily *Ma'ariv* reported that the mass event, whose purpose was to celebrate the "spirit of openness and freedom of the end of the millennium," proved conclusively that Tel Aviv "can look like Berlin, New York or Amsterdam, or even more so," when it brings together "all that love, the people, the noise, the crowds, the heat, the loud music, the traffic, the colorful clothing and the variety of naked bodies of men and women, children and adults."[3]

Indeed, the Love Parade vividly expressed the permissive spirit of the millennium's end. Yet it recalled a much older spirit as well, one whose roots are

to be found not in contemporary Amsterdam, Berlin or New York, but in a distant era that predates Western civilization itself. Thousands of years before the advent of "trance" parties, similar celebrations were held throughout the ancient world, involving the same combination of wild music, sensuous dancing and chemical intoxicants. In ancient Greece, for example, ecstatic festivals were held for the god Dionysus (known also by the name Bacchus). In these "Bacchanalia," the deity's devotees, men and women of all classes, gathered in remote locations to give themselves over completely to the god of wine and fertility.[4] Wearing satyr masks, half- or wholly naked, they cast off their inhibitions and worshipped in dance and song the god whom Ovid described as "the deliverer from sorrow, sun of the thunder,... god of the wine-press, the night-hallooed...."[5]

To the Greeks, Dionysus represented the demonic, chaotic side of nature, which can be neither tamed nor restrained by civilization.[6] In the wild cultic celebrations held in his honor, all borders were dissolved—between the sexes, between classes, between nature and culture, and between man and the gods. "The participators in these dance festivals intentionally induced in themselves a sort of mania, an extraordinary exaltation of their being," wrote the philologist Erwin Rohde. "This excessive stimulation of the senses, going even as far as hallucination, was brought about, in those who were susceptible to their influence, by the delirious whirl of the dance, the music and the darkness, and all the other circumstances of this tumultuous worship."[7] At the climax of the event, devoted followers of Dionysus entered a kind of trance in which they lost all sense of self, becoming "empty vessels" into which the essence of the god could enter.[8] Having attained a mystical union with the god, in body and spirit, they experienced a state they called *eudaemonia*—a joy of the divine, an indescribable feeling of grace and elevation. The "sacred insanity" of Dionysus spread among the celebrants like wildfire, turning them into a single body, swaying, turbulent, possessed by an ecstatic spirit.[9]

An outsider watching the drug-and-dance festivals held today, of which the Love Parade was but one example, cannot help but sense their Dionysian intensity. After a period of dormancy that lasted for centuries, the

Bacchanalia have returned with a vengeance, giving birth to an entire cultural movement that has attracted millions of young followers around the world. The last decade has witnessed the rise of a new culture of ecstasy, a resurrection of the pagan intoxication via electronic "trance" music and the widespread use of mind-altering drugs. Contemporary Israel is a vital center of this new international movement, a hothouse of permissiveness in the conservative Middle East. In this riven, embattled country, the ancient fertility cults which the zealous followers of the Hebrew God sought to extirpate three thousand years ago have come to life again in the land of Israel, in mass festivals held in the heart of nature and in crowded city nightclubs. Fueled by the frenetic energies of Israel's youth, the Dionysian spirit has cast its spell on large portions of the younger generation of the Jewish state, and they devote themselves to it with alarming enthusiasm.

II

To understand the link between the wild fertility rituals of Dionysus in ancient times and the mass trance parties taking place today in Goa, India, on the island of Ibiza off the coast of Spain, or along the beach in Tel Aviv, one must examine the underlying psychic forces from which both derive their power and vitality. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian impulse has never been restricted to Greek culture. It is a fixed element of human nature that expresses itself through a longing to dismantle "the ordinary bounds and limits of existence" and to reach a state so intense that "everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness"[10]—a type of ecstasy (in Greek *ekstasis*, or "standing outside of oneself"), an intense experience of elevation beyond sensual pleasure, even beyond the sensation of space and time. In the ecstatic state, the individual consciousness dissolves into an unbounded sense of the absolute. Georges Bataille described the experience as follows: "The totality of what is (the

universe) swallows me... nothing remains, except this or that, which are less meaningful than this nothing.... It is at this cost, no doubt, that I am no longer myself, but an infinity in which I am lost...."[11]

The Dionysian longing for ecstasy contains within it a deep yearning for self-annihilation, for the negation of one's separate individual existence. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade described this impulse as the universal desire, manifest in religious and cultic practices around the world, to "return to the womb" as a prelude to being born again.[12] This view of the ecstatic urge as motivated, like other states of mystical union, by the yearning for a protective fetal state devoid of worries is shared by other scholars as well. Shlomo Giora Shoham, for example, posits the existence of a deep psychological force which works against the normal development of the personality. Unlike Eliade, however, Shoham claims that this force tends not toward rebirth, but toward the negation of existence as such: "The longing not to be...," he writes, "is constantly present and active, whether openly or in secret. I am inclined to agree with the proposition that if man were to have a switch in his body, by means of which he could end his life by simply pressing a button or pulling a lever, everyone would do so sooner or later."[13]

As a primal force embedded deep within the human soul, the expressions of this longing for oblivion have accompanied human civilization from its beginnings. The ecstatic impulse played an important role, for example, in tribal societies from Siberia to southern Africa, where it was exploited for spiritual and ritual purposes. The detachment from physical reality served (and continues to serve in certain parts of the world) tribal magicians and other mediums in their communication with the world of spirits, a task requiring mastery of various ecstatic techniques. The shamanistic cultures did not see ecstasy as a type of pathological behavior, but as a heightened state of consciousness in which man touches a higher, invisible reality. The debauchery that at times characterized shamanistic rituals or ancient fertility rites was not simply a casting off of inhibitions; it expressed the terrible sense of beauty that pagans saw in nature, and the fear and awe they felt in its presence.[14]

Though many ancient pagan societies adopted a positive attitude towards ecstatic cults, not all did. Classical Greek culture, for example, was characterized by a more ambivalent approach, reflecting an appreciation for the danger that such phenomena posed to the social and political order. The Greek fertility religions were, for the most part, more inhibited than those developed by many of their neighbors. Widespread displays of public licentiousness were replaced by secret, mysterious rituals intended for only the select few.[15] The popular cult of Dionysus was the striking exception, and the Greeks—who cultivated an entire civilization based on self-control—generally responded to it with revulsion and fear (as is expressed powerfully in Euripides' tragedy, *The Bacchae*). The ecstatic religion of the god of wine was not suited for life in the polis, and its devotees therefore preferred to worship Dionysus outside the city walls. Likewise, when certain Greek city-states adopted this cult formally, they imposed restrictions on the ceremonies.[16] But the tension between the Bacchic ecstasy and the cultural ethos of the Hellenic world did not generally result in violent campaigns of suppression. On the contrary: If we accept Nietzsche's argument in *The Birth of Tragedy*, this very tension may have brought about some of the most sublime expressions of classical culture. Thanks to the refined, reasoned "Apollonian" element in Greek society, which served as a counterweight to the Dionysian spirit, this culture gave birth to the heights of tragic drama. As Nietzsche describes it, the power of Greek culture was rooted in the synthesis it created between these two elements—in its weaving together of Dionysian passion with Apollonian restraint.[17]

Western civilization, which drew heavily on the culture of Hellenic Greece, nonetheless rejected the Greeks' relatively permissive attitude towards the Dionysian. The Romans, who saw themselves as heirs of the Greek tradition, were far less tolerant of the Bacchanalia, and in 186 B.C.E. the Senate banned them altogether.[18] But it was Christianity—which inherited its enmity towards the ancient fertility religions from Judaism—that declared all-out war on the Dionysian spirit. It launched continual and bloody persecutions which did not reach their peak until the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries, when intensive witch-hunts almost completely eradicated the shamanistic culture that had survived in Europe for nearly two thousand years.[19]

The secular religion of reason, which in later centuries sought to displace the doctrines of the Catholic Church, nevertheless shared the latter's revulsion towards the ecstatic. That which had been seen by the Catholic inquisitors as the worship of Satan came to be seen by the devotees of reason as a psychopathology that had to be expunged from civilized society. Yet the revulsion harbored by the Western intellect toward the institutionalized expressions of the ecstatic impulse did not make Western culture impervious to the seductive power of the longing for self-obliteration. A century ago, Nietzsche foresaw the end of reason's hegemony and the resurrection of the Dionysian spirit.[20] As he wrote, "The disaster slumbering in the womb of theoretical culture gradually begins to frighten modern man.... the most certain auspices guarantee... *the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit* in our modern world!"[21] And indeed, that same Western civilization, which for centuries had denied the Dionysian urge, has, in the second half of the twentieth century, witnessed the eruption of the enormous energies associated with this primal force. Today the Dionysian has returned with an intensity unknown since the end of the classical period—and it is directed against the cultural and social order that had suppressed it for so long.

The vanguard of the Dionysian revival was of course the youth counterculture of the 1960s, which again raised the triple banner of sexual license, mind-altering drugs and powerful, rhythmic music—"sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll." This movement was inspired by an overtly neo-pagan vision: The liberation of man from the moralistic shackles in which the Judeo-Christian tradition had chained him, and the return of mankind to a blessed, primordial state of unity with nature. In the attempt to achieve harmony with the cosmos, psychedelic drugs played a decisive role in removing the barriers between individual consciousness and absolute reality. Timothy Leary, one of the central figures in the drug culture of the 1960s, was among the first to preach the ecstatic gospel as the path toward individual and collective redemption: "All the harsh, dry, brittle angularity of game life is

melted," he reported enthusiastically concerning his experiments with LSD. "You drift off—soft, rounded, moist, warm. Merged with all life.... Your control is surrendered to the total organism. Blissful passivity. Ecstatic, orgiastic, undulating unity.... All is gained as everything is given up."[22]

In their rediscovery of the Dionysian impulse, the hippies and flower children were drawn towards shamanistic cultures and their millennia-old ecstatic rites. At the same time, however, this movement adopted a very modern mission, one quite alien to the Dionysian spirit. It saw itself as a revolutionary force, bringing about the creation of a wondrous new world. Its worldview was idealistic, optimistic and naive. In many respects, the flower children embodied the same romantic ideal cultivated within Western culture since the eighteenth century—that of youth revolting against the rigid social arrangements and injustice prevalent in the world. As Martin Buber, one of the foremost spokesmen of this ideal in the first decades of the twentieth century, put it: "Youth is the eternal opportunity of mankind. There is constantly emerging on the scene a new generation of twenty-year-olds, filled with passionate longings for the absolute, unlimited devotion to an ideal, and the will to break the locked gate of Paradise."[23] But the real audacity of the 1960s counterculture was in its ambitious aims: In many respects, it opposed Western civilization itself, with its political, social, cultural and psychological traditions. For many of those who participated, the results were disastrous. In the words of Camille Paglia:

> We put the myth of Dionysus into action, and we hit the wall of reality. The Sixties revolutionized consciousness, but on the road of excess by which we sought the palace of wisdom, many of us lost our minds, lives, or careers through drugs, sexual orgy, or... constant challenges to authority.[24]

Today's ecstatic youth culture is in many ways a direct consequence of the revolution of the 1960s and the new legitimacy it afforded the Dionysian impulse. The innovation of the new movement is found in what might be called the technologizing of Dionysus: The transfiguration of the ecstatic craze into a pre-packaged, commercially available product, involving

a now-standard combination of frenetic lighting, overwhelming electronic sound and the proper dose of mind-bending chemicals. It was the discovery of this formula that spawned the new Dionysian wave of the global youth culture in the late 1980s. The "revolution" began in the summer of 1988 on the Spanish island of Ibiza, a center of the world nightclub scene, when a number of young socialites from Britain discovered the overpowering effect of combining the new generation of synthesized music with the influence of the drug ecstasy. The result, according to Yaron Tan-Brink of the weekly *Tel Aviv*, was nothing less than the "great cultural explosion of the end of the twentieth century":

> The synchronicity between the new drug and the new music was perfect. The music sounded so good under the influence that it was simply impossible to stop dancing. And this did not stop with a few good parties. The Summer of Love of 1988 hearkened, for the first time since the hippies swallowed their psychedelic sugar cubes, the birth of a new youth culture....[25]

The drug that gave birth to this "new youth culture" did not get its name for nothing. Ecstasy (or methyl-endioxy-methamphetamine, as it has been known to the scientific community for eighty years) is a stimulant that causes feelings of elevation and euphoria.[26] At the parties where it is taken, its effects are amplified by electronic music (of which the popular trance music is the most prominent example), based on rapid, pounding rhythms played at high volume. According to *Tel Aviv*'s description of the drug's effect:

> It begins in the stomach, and from there it slowly spreads through the entire body, like a bursting stream of energy. Every region reached by this stream immediately feels a greater vitality. At first everything is confused. "Undefined" is the only word people manage to utter under its growing influence. The dancing sweeps you up more. The beat too. The more you are drawn into the music, the more you forget—everything. The ecstasy reaches higher and higher, becomes more intense. The feeling of time is lost, together with all inhibitions.[27]

The pagan element of the ecstasy movement has been pronounced from the beginning, finding its most explicit expression in the stupefying mass parties—"raves"—that are held in remote locations under open skies, on the beach, in the forest or desert. The religious aspect of "raves" has been noted by Russell Newcombe, who has studied the phenomenon in detail: "The DJs are the priests of the rave ceremony, responding to the mood of the crowd, with their mixing desks symbolizing the altar.... Dancing at raves may be constructed as the method by which ravers 'worship' the god of altered consciousness."[28] Indeed, the feelings expressed by participants in the raves carry a decidedly spiritual and mystical overtone. As Ronald Tzvi Trotush relates in *Tel Aviv*:

> You connect to the life energy of the galaxy and become a part of it. You feel, you love, you are open, liberated and happy—this is the peak.... [Ecstasy] definitely causes everybody to become attached to everyone else without regard to religion, race and sex, and it definitely causes you to love until death.[29]

The total experience of ecstasy, the feeling of union with nature, the effacement of individual identity, and the sensation of overwhelming love constitute the most important parallel between the "raves" and trance parties of today, on the one hand, and the ancient Bacchanalia on the other. As Nietzsche put it when describing the latter: "Under the charm of the Dionysian, not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature, which has become alienated, hostile or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man.... Now all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice or 'impudent convention' have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him...."[30]

Yet despite the supposed spirituality of the "rave" experience, it has remained devoid of anything that can be called an ideology or a vision. The ecstatic state for which it strives is not indicative of a "higher" consciousness, and

serves no end other than itself. It is entirely private, and suggests no connection with the concerns of public life.[31] Thirty years after the emergence of the idealistic counterculture of the 1960s, that movement's most striking features—license, drugs and music—have been harnessed to a diametrically opposed ideal: That of *disengagement* from society. Unlike the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s, the youth culture of the last decade is gripped by the same emotional alienation characteristic of post-modern culture. Generation X—as the phrase coined by author Douglas Coupland implies[32]—has long given up on any hopes of effecting real change in the world, and hides instead behind a hardened pose of apathy and cynicism. "Nothing can be sacred," writes sociologist Ryan Moore of the prevailing mood. "All styles are exhausted the moment they are born, and, all other things being equal, one does, says and feels nothing."[33]

This feeling of despair and apathy is not only the product of disillusionment, of disappointment with fantasies of changing the world. Paradoxically, it is also the result of material satisfaction. Today's Western youth live for the most part in a world of plenty which caters endlessly to their needs. Today's capitalist society has identified the young as the ideal consumer class—possessing an abundance of leisure time, an insatiable thirst for new stimuli, and money to burn—and has learned to attend to their tastes and preferences, to cultivate them doggedly and to respond quickly and expertly to their demands. The market not only provides a constant flow of new products and services but also works tirelessly to create the need for these products and services. Encouragement of the young consumer's desire for immediate and boundless gratification has become a necessary condition for the system's own survival—and the youths have played the role of willing accomplice. Never has there been a generation so aware of its own "needs"; nor has the satisfaction of those needs ever been so readily available.

In his 1843 work *Either/Or*, Soren Kierkegaard described the results of such excess, in his depiction of the "esthetic" type whose life is geared solely to the satisfaction of his appetites.[34] Such a person, contends Kierkegaard, lives his life in an "unmediated" way in the present, always enjoying the moment.

The categories which form his world are not those of good and evil, but of satisfaction and frustration, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering. The most immediate threat he can sense is that of boredom, which he seeks to escape through the pursuit of new experiences. But in the end, after he has become aware of the unbearable monotony of his existence, he is no longer able to escape from despair—"Despair over himself, because he no longer believes in himself.... Despair over his human nature, because he no longer believes that any sort of self is possible for him.... Despair over life, because all his tomorrows will be the same as today."[35] More than a century after Kierkegaard, the same idea was voiced by the rock artist Iggy Pop, in a manner representative of the prevailing sentiment of our day: "They say that death kills you, but death doesn't kill you. Boredom and indifference kill you."[36]

According to Kierkegaard, the way out of despair lies in pursuing a life of ethical commitment. Post-modern youth culture has chosen a different solution: Addiction to the ecstatic experience. The feelings of alienation and disconnection that Gen-Xers have developed in response to a reality they feel has no room for them have led them to channel their energies into the passive euphoria of the trance. As Yaron Tan-Brink describes it:

> For youth in Thatcheristic Britain, Reaganistic America, materialistic Japan and even in Intifadistic Israel, there were no longer any Sixties dreams about struggling against a corrupt establishment and changing the world.... All they wanted at this stage was to change their own impossible personal lives. Naivete gave way to cynicism, hope to despair. Probably the only thing the world's youth collectively decided to do was to cut out and dance until all the crazy people got sick of their money and their wars.[37]

This tragic element gives the new movement its authentic Dionysian hue, which was absent from the utopian dreams of the 1960s. Like the ancient devotees of the god of wine and fertility, today's youth display a fundamental lack of faith in man's ability to shape his own future. The Dionysian impulse, as Nietzsche wrote long ago, flourishes and feeds upon the sense of nothingness:

> The Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: Both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint.[38]

III

The new Dionysian revolution, which was born in Ibiza and quickly spread throughout the Western world, found fertile soil in the Jewish state. The speed with which it caught hold, and the enthusiasm with which it was received among Israeli youth, were phenomenal. The ecstatic gospel was brought to Israel by backpackers who had been caught in its spell at the wild beach parties in Goa or on islands off Thailand, and immediately found a waiting audience among Israeli fifteen- to twenty-five-year-olds.

One expression of this wave was the sudden popularity in Israel of the drug ecstasy. "A very intensive drug culture has developed in Israel in recent years, even by world standards," claims Yoav Ben-Dov of the Institute for History and Philosophy of Science at Tel Aviv University. "We are talking not only about a tremendous growth in the number of users.... Drug abuse is connected with widespread societal phenomena, and appears today as a unifying and identity-defining factor among different groups of the youth population, and not only in a criminal context."[39] Unlike heroin or cocaine, ecstasy is perceived as a "soft" drug, and this has allowed it to reach a growing market and to become the "lifeblood" of nightclubs throughout the country.[40] "The pills are a hit with the youth, and are given out primarily at schools and parties," noted Yaron Tan-Brink and Tal Ariel-Amir in *Tel Aviv*.[41] Similarly, Itzik Nini of the Allenby 58 club in Tel Aviv reports that the drugs have "come on strong over the past five or six years, and every year they get stronger.... Sometimes it really seems like someone poured large

quantities of ecstasy into the country's water supply and made everybody happy."[42]

Today's Dionysian youth culture finds its fullest expression, however, at the "raves," enormous trance gatherings held out in the midst of nature. "Mass trance parties... are the form of recreation preferred by Israelis of all walks of life and of all ages," writes journalist Felix Frisch in *Ma'ariv*.[43] Whereas the influence of Israel's flower children in the 1960s was limited to a relatively small, if vocal, group of Tel Aviv bohemians, the current trance culture has captured a far wider audience, drawing clientele from across the spectrum of ages and social backgrounds, bringing together people from widely divergent sectors of the Israeli public who previously had little or nothing in common culturally.[44] As the Tel Aviv weekly *Ha'ir* reports:

> Trance cuts across ethnic and economic classes. Whoever took part in one of the raves last summer surely noticed an amazing thing: That everyone was there. Druggies from India and greasers from the suburbs, girls from development towns with their tank tops and platform shoes dancing alongside buttoned-up BA students. This is the true power of the rave: It creates an unstoppable surge of humanity. At the raves there is no fighting, no arguments; the atmosphere is saturated with love. Trance helps people erase their brains, to lose their ability to think—that is its purpose.[45]

It would be hard to overstate the extent of the "trance" phenomenon in Israel. In the last few years, this country of six million has become a major focus of the global rave culture, in certain respects surpassing even Britain, Holland and Germany. Trance music has become a major Israeli export—a fact expressed in the number of Israeli recording artists who have gained worldwide recognition in this area, including names such as Astral Projection, Indoor, Sandman (Itzik Levi), Chakra and Oforia (Ofer Dikovsky). "It seems we got the biggest trance scene in the world (per population)," enthuses Amit Eshel in one of the Internet sites devoted to the subject, a claim confirmed by a survey of world media.[46] "Trance Casts a Spell over the Youth of a Worried Israel," proclaimed a *New York Times* headline last October,[47] while the

French television channel ARTE reported that trance in Israel has become "a mass movement" and aired an interview with the head of a British record company specializing in trance music who reports better sales in Israel than in his own country.[48]

"The phenomenon exists in other countries as well, but it seems to be particularly well developed in Israel," says Yoav Ben-Dov of Tel Aviv University. "The quasi-tribal organization of the crowds at the parties... has led to a situation in which the vast extent of the trance culture's popularity in Israel is difficult to measure. Nevertheless, even in the city streets and along the highways of Israel, there are numerous signs of trance culture which are clear to anyone who knows the language (music heard from cars and stores, clothing and record outlets, announcements of parties, graffiti, the manner of dress of young people and so on), and are indicative of its penetration into various social strata and its widespread geographic appeal."[49]

The rapid growth of the trance movement in Israel has been met with a surprising degree of acceptance, of which the most striking example has been the public outcry in response to police efforts to put a stop to it.[50] Leading the protest are a number of politicians and media figures who have railed against what they see as brutal intervention in the right of Israeli youth to cultural self-definition. MK Avraham Poraz of the liberal Shinui party protested the "demeaning" treatment trance devotees have received from the police. In Poraz's opinion, "drugs were never the reason for having the parties," and therefore "we cannot tolerate having the police forbid parties at which this type of music is played."[51] "This is a battle for a person's right to enjoy himself and to have a good time as he sees fit,"[52] said then MK Dedi Zucker of Meretz, who also appraised the trance approach as "the most universal way of thinking, post-Zionist and individualistic."[53] High-profile encouragement of this sort has led trance advocates to mount a mass campaign against police pressure—exactly the type of public involvement they had sought to avoid—which reached its height in a massive "Give Trance a Chance" rally in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square in August 1998. According to reports, nearly thirty thousand protesters attended.[54]

Intensive law-enforcement efforts have succeeded in driving much of the trance movement underground in the last year, and the massive Bacchanalia have given way to events of a more limited nature. Yet this has not meant a significant setback for the Dionysian revival. If anything, the return to nightclubs, where the movement first developed in Israel, has given it an even more intense character. The club culture, which in the last decade has expanded beyond Tel Aviv to all parts of Israel, has none of the dreamy innocence of the public raves. Nightclub operators have raised the precise and nuanced manipulation of the ecstatic experience to the level of a science. Many of these clubs are designed to foster a stunning audio-visual experience, triggering a state of physical excitement and cognitive confusion. The *Jerusalem Post*'s Leora Eren-Frucht offers the following account of the Tel Aviv nightclub scene: "The flashing strobe lights are blinding. A spooky-sounding tone—like a violin note held indefinitely—is soon overtaken by a frenetic thumping beat. The pounding electronic music either wears on your nerves or whips you into a frenzy—it's hard to remain apathetic. The partyers... are jumping and gyrating, leaping and lurching in all directions."[55]

The result is a kind of sensory overload, which charges the nightclubs with an overwhelming sensual energy that unites the participants into a single, pulsating mass, orchestrated by the DJ from his high altar. Sharon Freundlich, a disc jockey who goes by the name of DJ Choopy, describes the disc jockey's achievement with pride:

> The entire club is like a ball of fire. Like an atom bomb.... It's as if you touched a thousand people all over their bodies, and you see all the blood flowing through them, and the sweat pouring from them, and they are completely yours.[56]

IV

How did Israel become a hothouse of Dionysian youth culture? To begin with, it is not too difficult to find among Israelis under the age of thirty the same pessimism and dark apathy that characterize their American and European counterparts. In 1997, the young Israeli cultural critic Gadi Taub published *A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture*, in which he analyzed the world of what he called Israel's "dispirited generation." He discerned in his contemporaries a feeling of "rootlessness and meaninglessness," an anguish that derives from the fact that "we have no influence on all of the truly important things, that which will determine our destiny, in the most literal sense. They are above us and beyond us, and we can only sit here quietly, go about our business and wait for the knock on the door, the announcement on the radio, the signing ceremony on television, or the emergency draft call-up."[57]

The depression and frustration that Taub attributes to Israelis in their twenties is felt no less by adolescents. "We are a screwed generation"—the battle cry of rock singer and teen idol Aviv Gefen—has been embraced enthusiastically by many younger people who, even as they enjoy a degree of prosperity and security unknown to their forebears, continue to show ever greater manifestations of nihilistic despair. Although some of this is a matter of bowing to the current international fashion, which has been promoted by a global, media-driven popular youth culture, there is nonetheless an element of genuine distress as well. Like their counterparts in London, Amsterdam and Berlin, Israeli youth feel the malaise characteristic of "late capitalism": In a prosperous society which responds to all their material needs, they are condemned to live under the perpetual threat of apathy and ennui.

Still, the Bacchanalian impulses of Israeli youth are not solely the result of global trends. They are also the product of Israel's own past, of unique historical elements which today act as a powerful catalyst for the Dionysian spirit. It is among young people that these forces most fiercely are felt, due to the intensity

with which young people experience the current dissolution of traditional Israeli norms—a process in which youth themselves have played no small role. It was, after all, youth who always took the lead in shaping Israeli culture: The Zionist revolution itself was a rebellion of youth against the older, "exilic" norms, and it is the youth who have been at the forefront of every cultural development since then. In a society that adopted the modernist cult of youth from its very founding, young people serve as the heart which—to paraphrase Pascal—the head has trouble comprehending. At the same time, no other group is more sensitive to the most profound changes taking place in society, or is more capable of formulating a response to them.

This fact was particularly striking in the last two decades, when Israel's cultural and political leadership underwent a series of demoralizing collective crises—including the war in Lebanon and the protracted deployment there, the Intifada, the Scud attacks during the Gulf War and the suicide terror bombings in the mid-1990s. It was under the pressure of these traumas that a sense of impotence began to take hold, a disbelief in the possibility of having an impact on political and societal realities. These sentiments left deep scars, especially among veterans of combat units. The fighters who had played cat-and-mouse with Intifada rioters in the territories and with Hizballah guerillas in Lebanon felt that they had personally suffered the consequences of the weakness of spirit demonstrated by the political leadership, and by the public in general. One result was the steady withdrawal of young adults from engagement in national concerns, and their retreat into the sphere of the exclusively private. The only two cases in recent years in which young people have turned out in substantial numbers for any cause—the mourning following the Rabin assassination, and the students' strike in 1998—are remembered, in the final analysis, as efforts that produced no tangible results, and as such contributed even further to feelings of impotence. "My idea is that I have no ideas," writes the young journalist Yair Lapid. "The trouble is that somehow or other, we have become convinced that no matter what we do, someone will always be there to stop us."[58]

For the Israeli youth, whose world has been taken over by a sense of chronic passivity, the Dionysian promise of ecstatic self-abandonment offers a powerful

temptation. The habits of Israelis between the ages of twenty and thirty—the often reckless search for adventure overseas, the attraction to Eastern mystical cults, the steady rise in the consumption of recreational drugs—are all examples. The fact that these symptoms are most frequently the province of recently discharged soldiers may well point to the central role played by the experience of military service. The conventional wisdom holds that the army matures the young Israeli, but the truth may well be the opposite: In many respects, the military framework forces upon the young Israeli just about all the discipline, order and duty he can handle. Once he escapes into civilian life, he feels an immense need for release, an overwhelming desire to "let go." At times, one gets the impression that the typical freshly discharged soldier views his new civilian status not as representative of new obligations, but as a license for anarchy.

The intense pressure of Israeli life, felt especially by a youth grown increasingly resentful of the heavy burden of responsibilities to society, has fed the Dionysian impulse. The eagerness with which they cast off their inhibitions is evident at the clubs and outdoor parties: "Your people celebrate as if every party might be their last," commented a Dutch disc jockey on the unusual intensity of the Israeli scene.[59] "The public here has an enormous need for this," DJ Choopy concurs, offering his own explanation: "Maybe because of the wars, the pressure, maybe because of the sea. The weather. The atmospherics here. But what is certain is that the Israeli audience has an amazing hunger that no other audience in the world has—a totally indescribable hunger—and so it just runs with it. All the way."[60] A similar sentiment is expressed by journalist Assaf Gefen of *Ma'ariv*:

> Trance is fundamentally an extreme genre: From the style of dress down to the pace of the beat. Its emergence as the most popular kind of music in Israel, far more than in the Western world, is apparently due to the fact that we are no less extreme. There must be some total experience—like army service, for example—to make people want to free themselves by throwing themselves into a similarly intense Eastern experience, only from a different direction. Japan is considered our most serious rival for the title of "superpower of trance," and it too is not exactly a normal Western country.[61]

V

There is nothing new about moralizing over the state of Israeli youth. As early as 1960, the novelist S. Yizhar coined the term "the espresso generation" to express his scorn for what he saw as the hedonistic mentality of the youth of his day, and for their pursuit of things "fast, sweet and cheap."[62] A similar ring can be heard in the frequent complaints voiced today about young people by society's older members. But most of this criticism fails to capture what has truly gone wrong in Israeli youth culture over the past decade. The real problem is not the hedonism, materialism and egocentrism that are characteristic of any bourgeois society. It is the culture's deep Dionysian tendencies.

The force that motivates post-modern youth is not egoistic. On the contrary, it tends in the opposite direction—towards the death of the ego, the dissolution of the individual in favor of ecstatic self-abandonment.[63] "First and foremost they are saying something in the somewhat desperate effort they are making here," writes the respected journalist Ari Shavit in *Ha'aretz*, "in the attempt to arrive, on the dance floor, in the bathrooms and in the dark places, at some sort of epileptic authenticity, in a time and place that offer them no other kind of authenticity—and in their half-innocent surrender to the totality."[64] Pessimism, passivity and disengagement from everyday life have become the most prominent features of Israeli youth, who prefer to lose themselves in psychedelic festivals rather than come to terms directly with the complex realities of personal and public life in a country in conflict.

The burden Israeli society places upon its youth has played, no doubt, a decisive role in the Dionysian outburst of the past decade. The political, social and economic realities that surround the young Israeli have made him particularly vulnerable to the charms of the god of wine and fertility. However, the response to his call would not have been so overwhelming had Israeli society not failed to provide its young with a viable alternative ethos. The

neo-pagan ecstatic revival has filled the vacuum left by the demise of the old Zionism, and has been fueled by a mistrust felt by many youth towards anything reminiscent of the grandiose slogans and utopian promises of an earlier day. Given this state of affairs, it seems that the only hope for those who are troubled by the rise of Dionysus in Zion is to nurture the same kind of countervailing cultural force which allowed past societies to ward off similar threats—not new technologies, but a new faith.

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Notes

1. *Ma'ariv*, October 3, 1999.

2. *Z'man Tel Aviv*, October 8, 1999.

3. *Ma'ariv*, October 3, 1999.

4. Pierre Brunel, ed., *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes, and Archetypes*, trans. W. Allatson, J. Hayword, T. Selous (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 303-304.

5. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1967), book iv, lines 15-18, p. 81.

6. Most of the festivals in honor of Dionysus were conducted outside of the city limits, in the forests or mountains, after nightfall. Some of the festivals involved only women—the Bacchantes or Maenades ("the wild ones")—whose unrestrained behavior is preserved in Euripides' *The Bacchae*.

7. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. W.B. Hills (Chicago: Ares, 1987), p. 258.

8. Erik Lund, Mogens Pihl, and Johannes Slok, *A History of European Ideas*, trans. W. Glyn Jones (London: C. Hurst, 1971), p. 22.

9. The merging of the believer and the god turns the person into one who is *en-theos*—"including the god"; thus the term *enthusiasmus*, i.e., "enthusiasm."

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), pp. 36, 59.

11. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1993), vol. ii, p. 115.

12. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton, 1959).

13. Shlomo Giora Shoham, *Rebellion, Creativity and Revelation* (Tel Aviv: Urian, 1986), pp. 16-17. [Hebrew]

14. See Ioan M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (New York: Penguin, 1971). For an excellent survey of contemporary shamanistic culture, see Nahum Megged, *Gates of Hope and Gates of Fear* (Tel Aviv: Modan, 1998). [Hebrew]

15. The outstanding examples are the rituals of Demeter in Eleusis, Attica and Arcadia.

16. Among other things, the Dionysian cult enjoyed official status in Corinth in the days of Periandros, in Sikyon in the days of Kleisthenes, and in Athens in the days of Peisistratos. Cf. Michael Avi Yonah and Israel Shatzman, *Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Classical World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 164-165.

17. Nietzsche argued that the refined, rational, Apollonian element protected Greek culture from the expressions of barbarism and licentiousness that characterized Dionysian outbursts in other cultures. "For some time, however, the Greeks were apparently perfectly insulated and guarded against the feverish excitements of these festivals, though knowledge of them must have come to Greece on all the routes of land and sea; for the figure of Apollo, rising full of pride, held out the Gorgon's head to this grotesquely uncouth Dionysian power—and really could not have countered any more dangerous force." Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 39. These two cultural forces, argues Nietzsche, "run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance," and they "continually incite each other to new and more powerful births...." Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 33.

18. It must be emphasized that ecstatic phenomena continued to exist in the framework of the great monotheistic religions, and can be seen in the activities of biblical prophets, certain Christian saints and mystics (such as Julian of Norwitch, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and others), the Hasidic masters or the Muslim dervishes. Nevertheless, these are lacking in the frenzied element that is an inseparable part of Dionysian ecstasy. Regarding this, Abraham Joshua Heschel drew a distinction between the state of ecstasy of "the wild and fervid type,... a state of frenzy arising from overstimulation and emotional tension," and "the sober and contemplative type, which is a rapture of the soul in a state of complete calmness, enabling a person to rise beyond the confines of consciousness." Abraham J.

Heschel, *The Prophets*, part II (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 105. Even if such "complete calmness" is not always characteristic of the ecstatic practice to be found in Judaism, Christianity or Islam, it is still obvious that these religions are constrained by a strict moral ethos that distinguishes them from the Dionysian craze of the senses. For a discussion of mystical ecstasy, see Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Noonday, 1955); Ben-Ami Sharfstein, *The Mystical Experience* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1972). [Hebrew]

19. Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. R. Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991).

20. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche expressed his hope that German culture, and especially Wagnerian music, would be the bearer of the Dionysian message. Later on in his writings he abandoned these hopes, and focused his longing on the return of Dionysus in the figure of the Superman.

21. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 112, 119. Emphasis in original.

22. Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1970), p. 59.

23. Martin Buber, "Zion and Youth," in *Selected Writings on Judaism and Jewish Affairs* (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 1961), vol. 2, p. 105. [Hebrew]

24. Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 212. Paglia argues that the flower children, in giving a Rousseauian spin on the Dionysian spirit, mistakenly identified it with the Freudian pleasure principle while ignoring the cruel and destructive aspect that is an inseparable part of its essence. This distortion, according to Paglia, is shared by the nineteenth-century Romantics' understanding of the god of wine and fertility.

25. *Tel Aviv*, July 17, 1998.

26. Unlike such psychedelic drugs as LSD, which change the user's state of consciousness and give him intense experiences, but of a type that it is difficult to express or to assimilate within everyday life, ecstasy is said to leave the user in a normal but intensified state of consciousness, thereby enabling him to remember and absorb his experiences while under the influence. The result is a gradual change in the person's lifestyle. *Guardian*, July 22, 1995.

27. *Tel Aviv*, July 17, 1998.

28. *Guardian*, July 22, 1995.

29. *Tel Aviv*, July 17, 1998.

30. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 37.

31. This is the significant difference between the escapist Dionysian trance culture and the spiritual pretensions of the "New Age." Whereas the New Age movement consciously attempts to reconstruct some of the mystical elements of the pagan era, the world of raves and clubs revives the wild ecstasy of the Dionysian cult without ascribing to them any deeper significance.

32. Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991).

33. Ryan Moore, "'... And Tomorrow Is Just Another Crazy Scam': Post-Modernity, Youth, and the Downward Mobility of the Middle Class," in Joe Austin and Michael Nerin Willard, eds., *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University, 1998), p. 254.

34. Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton, 1985), vol. 2.

35. Francis J. Lescoe, *Existentialism: With or Without God* (New York: Alba House, 1974), p. 36.

36. Irvine Welsh, *Ecstasy: Three Tales of Chemical Romance* (London: Vintage, 1997).

37. *Tel Aviv*, July 17, 1998.

38. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 60. Emphasis in original.

39. Yoav Ben-Dov, "Waiting for Ben-Ami," in *Newzeek*, August 1999, pp. 58-59. [Hebrew]

40. "Ecstasy—illegal and problematic as it may be—has benefited Tel Aviv nightlife. It opened up and liberated the scene, for when people are turned on, they desperately need a dance floor, like air to breathe. And there's always someone ready to provide it." *Tel Aviv*, July 17, 1998.

41. *Tel Aviv*, September 25, 1997.

42. *Ha'aretz*, November 26, 1999.

43. *Ma'ariv*, June 28, 1998.

44. Moreover, "The ages used to be above twenty-one. Today it has gone down drastically. Fourteen-year-olds," says DJ Miko, "are among the leading figures of the nightclub scene." *Newzeek*, August 1999, p. 29.

45. *Ha'ir*, June 5, 1998.

46. Chaishop Internet site.

47. *The New York Times*, October 24, 1999.

48. ARTE, July 9, 1999; *Ha'aretz*, June 6, 1997.

49. Yoav Ben-Dov, "The Trance Culture in Israel: Aspects and Contexts," in *Makom L'mahshava* 2, November 1998, pp. 26-32.

50. *Ha'aretz*, September 11, 1998.

51. *Ha'ir*, June 19, 1998.

52. *Ma'ariv*, June 28, 1998.

53. *The New York Times*, October 24, 1999.

54. Associated Press Internet site, July 10, 1998.

55. Leora Eren-Frucht, "A Night on the Town," in *The Jerusalem Post Magazine,* August 9, 1996, p. 15.

56. *Ha'aretz Supplement*, November 26, 1999.

57. Gadi Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame'uhad, 1997), p. 16. [Hebrew]

58. Yair Lapid, "Mug Shot," in *Politika* 23, October 1988, pp. 22-23. [Hebrew]

59. *Ha'ir*, October 15, 1999.

60. *Ha'aretz*, November 26, 1999.

61. *Ma'ariv*, September 4, 1998.

62. S. Yizhar, "The Espresso Generation," speech before the Mapai Central Committee, June 30, 1960.

63. Mordechai Rotenberg argues that the abandonment of the soul in ecstasy is a kind of immunization against the fear of death. See Mordechai Rotenberg, *Dio-Logo Therapy: Psychonarration and Pardes* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp. 80-82.

64. *Ha'aretz*, November 26, 1999.