

The First Israelis

Y ou can hardly open a paper in Israel these days without being confronted with the claim that the traditional solidarity of Israeli society has come to an end, having given way to a fragmentation of identity usually referred to as “tribalism”—a phenomenon understood to be manifest in, among other things, the success of sectoral movements such as the Sephardic Shas party and the immigrants’ party Yisra’el Ba’aliya headed by Natan Sharansky. As critic David Ohana put it in his recent book *The Last Israelis*: “A terrifying spirit is on the move in Israel. From all sides they have joined together—the settler and the post-Zionist, the Sephardic newcomer and the Russian immigrant, neo-Canaanites from both right and left, Haredi old-timers and *nouveaux-riches*, the PR woman and the stockbroker, the high priests of privatization, the worshipers of graves and the traders in foreign labor, the devotees of Iran and the idolizers of Singapore—all have joined in an all-out holy war against the ‘last Israelis.’ Israel has been reduced to a series of enclaves, as if its very flesh has been hacked apart. Each group speaks in its code, cordons off its own territory, takes its pound of flesh, and ‘*après moi—le déluge*’.... With no agreed-upon Israeli ethos, Israelis are particularizing themselves to death.” Or, as historian Saul Friedlander suggested in an interview in the daily *Ma’ariv* (October 9, 1998): “Tribal structures are becoming more rigid, they are regressing instead of progressing. Each group, every tribe, has become militant and aggressive, and is governed by its own internal principles.”

Against such detractors of fragmentation stand the *proponents* of fragmentation, individuals such as *Ha’aretz* columnist Gideon Samet, who praises the “normalization” of post-Oslo Israel, in which the shattering of the “old wall of national identity” is leading, at long last, to “the end of our

terrible fear of everything foreign and ‘other’” (*Ha’aretz*, July 28, 1995). Views of this sort have been aired almost daily in recent years: In the well-known Israeli sociologist Oz Almog’s applause for the “disappearance of the Zionist worship of nation and homeland” (*Ha’aretz*, December 29, 1995); in proposals for adopting alternate post-Jewish versions of the national anthem “Hatikva,” as proposed in Shimon Peres’ “hundred-day plan” in advance of the 1996 elections (*Ha’aretz*, May 29, 1998), and by former State Comptroller Miriam Ben-Porat (*Ma’ariv*, May 27, 1998); or in the suggestion of Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow activist Yossi Yona, in the current issue of the prestigious journal *Alpayim*, that Israel should simply give up on its singular Jewish identity and become a binational state.

It may be the case that the Jewish state has indeed reached the end of an era. Yet a closer look at Israel’s history reveals that both those who mourn “fragmentation” and those who thrill over it are probably wrong. Both describe what is taking place as the cashiering of Israel’s original, unifying ideal in exchange for a dissolute, fractured and “normalized” non-identity. But looking back at what has come before, one has to wonder whether something different is not taking place. These changes in Israeli society seem to represent not a departure from the Israeli past, but rather the beginnings of a new stage, not entirely different from those that preceded it—one in which the unique identity of the Israeli will evolve into something no less unified, and possibly no less admirable, than ever. It may even be said that only today are the first Israelis really being born.

Over the generations, certain Israelis have regularly heralded the arrival of the “final” Israeli, usually cast in their own image. The pioneers at the turn of the century, the leftist veterans of the Palmah in the period following independence, and the “blue-blazer” generation of technocratic Peres acolytes in the mid-1980s are only three examples. Each of these groups claimed that it was fashioning the final, cohesive Israeli society. Every time, however, a new wave of Jewish immigration or a shift in

the cultural tide (or sometimes both) came along, throwing fresh ingredients into the pot and creating a different mix that was unique and even more complex. The waves of immigration from Poland and Germany in the 1930s and 1940s turned the vision of Israel as a pioneering-agricultural society into an irrelevant dream; the immigration from Arab lands after the state's establishment put to rest any effort to base Israel on the values of the Palmah; and the absorption of Russian and Ethiopian immigrations over the past decade ended any hope of "normalizing" Israel as it had existed a few years earlier.

It is no surprise, then, that in every period of such change, there were always members of the threatened elite who sought to put a stop to things. Those in power always cloaked their intentions in the rhetoric of concern for the "quality" of the immigrants and the damage that "low-quality" immigration might do to society. Underneath the hubris, however, was fear, as expressed in *Ha'aretz* soon after independence, when the issue was the massive Sephardic immigration: "With such a population, what character and qualities will the State of Israel have? These poor, illiterate, primitive masses will absorb us, and not we them...." (*Ha'aretz* published a series of articles around this theme, April 22-28, 1949). In content and style, this language was strikingly similar to statements made only a decade ago by those who feared that the highly educated and anti-socialist Russian immigrants would undermine the existing, more genuinely "Israeli" order. But each time, it became clear after the fact that, far from auguring the death of the Israeli, the new influx of Jewish traditions, abilities and potentialities only prepared the way for the birth of a new Israeli, often stronger than the one that came before.

It is in this light that we should understand current trends in Israeli society. The division of Jewish Israel into "tribes" does not necessarily mean the disintegration of society—particularly since the tribes in question expressly identify themselves with the country *as a whole*. The new power wielded by the Haredim or the Russian immigrants may suggest the dissolution of the country to some, but if one listens to what these groups are

actually saying, it turns out that what they want is just the opposite: They want to have an impact on Israel as a whole, as a Jewish state and as a Jewish society. This is particularly glaring in the case of the accusations against the Haredim to the effect that they do not identify with the experience of the “genuine” Israeli. In fact, the opposite is true: Whether one is sympathetic to these circles or not, it should be obvious that the supposedly “anti-Zionist” religious parties are identifying more and more with the Jewish state and its interests, as was demonstrated by this community’s unprecedented political mobilization in support of the Likud’s Benjamin Netanyahu in the last prime-ministerial election, because it was believed he was “good for the Jews” (as their campaign slogan had it); by the increased involvement of Haredi volunteers in the chilling task—which nonetheless evoked such emotional reactions of appreciation from other Israeli Jews—of collecting shards of human bodies for proper burial after terror attacks; by the proposals by Knesset members Shlomo Benizri of Shas and Avraham Ravitz of the United Tora Judaism party to establish frameworks in the army that would enable the enlistment of young Haredi men not studying in yeshivas (*Ha’aretz*, January 25, 1998). A similar trend can be observed in the national-religious “tribe,” where calls are finally being heard from individuals such as MK Benny Elon to dismantle the National Religious Party because, in his opinion, it is essential that the religious-Zionist community involve itself more directly in the affairs of the general public (*Ma’ariv*, November 27, 1998). And Russian immigrant leaders such as Ministers Sharansky and Yuli Edelstein have been outspoken in their involvement on issues of foreign and economic policy—matters far beyond the sphere of the immediate Russian “tribal” interest. In other words, these groups want to be included in determining the fate of Zionism as a whole, even if at times—as in the case of the Haredim—they still have difficulty uttering the word.

Until now, every version of “Israeliness” was necessarily an incomplete, even premature, identity, since it was based on only a small fraction of the Jewish people. Only now that so many of the diaspora’s Jewish communities

have immigrated to Israel—it appears likely that within a handful of years, Israeli Jewry will be the largest Jewish community in the world—is it for the first time credible to say that the real formulation of the “final” Israeli identity is *beginning* to take place. And much as this may pain some to hear, the fact is that the emerging identity of the Israeli Jew will *not* be one that is defined by any one group of Jews. On the contrary, the contribution of each group to the Jewishness of the Jewish state is pronounced, from the willingness shown by the Jews of the kibbutzim, moshavim, and religious settlements in Judea and Samaria and elsewhere to fight and sacrifice for the security of the country; to the ability of the Sephardic population to balance rising social success with family stability and the respect for tradition; to the resistance to government coercion and adherence to Jewish identity of the Russian immigrants; to the unbending commitment to principle exhibited by the Haredi public; to the tremendous entrepreneurial, creative and technical abilities of second- and third-generation Israelis centered in Tel Aviv; and so on. Obviously, all of these qualities may at times manifest themselves in negative ways, but from the good and the bad together, from “the heritage of the community of Jacob” and the way we come to terms with this heritage, the new Israel—and with it the renewed Jewish people everywhere—will be fashioned.

What will this new Israel look like? Above all, if the Jewish state is to preserve its reason for existing and its ability to survive, it will have to give up on the idea of being “normal.” There was already one “normal” Jewish state, a state like all others. This was during the First Temple period, when the northern Kingdom of Israel threw itself headlong into the regional arena. In culture, religion and politics it more or less resembled its neighbors: Like them, it knew periods of ascendance and decline; like them, it was eventually conquered by a stronger power; like them, it vanished, along with its ideas and beliefs, and its population was scattered to the winds, leaving no remnant. That Israeli kingdom became

“normal” the moment it resolved to turn its back on gadflies such as the prophet Elijah who insisted that it preserve its uniqueness. Those of the Jewish people, on the other hand, who managed to survive the destruction of the First and Second Temples—and the thousands of years which followed—were those who held fast to the idea of Jewish uniqueness, and refused under any circumstance to be “normal.”

Zionism sought to continue this ancient Jewish tradition: While it sought to create a “normal” instrument for the pursuit of the goals of the Jewish people—a sovereign nation-state—it nevertheless remained that these goals themselves were highly *unn*ormal. Why renew the Hebrew language when one could speak a “normal” language like German, Russian or English? Why insist on building a Jewish state in a parched land devoid of natural resources when one could have the milk and honey of Uganda? Throughout its history, the Zionist leadership understood that this was no normal people, and that to meet its most fundamental needs would require a state that would be not just a safe haven, but one suited to the fostering of its unique qualities. Indeed, without such an approach the Zionist movement would never have been able to mobilize the resources needed to fulfill its mission.

Looking to the future, we know for certain that the degree of Israel’s “normality” will in great measure determine the relationship between Israelis and their diaspora brethren. Many have already despaired of Israel’s ever becoming a major attraction for Western Jews. Yet one cannot help noticing these are often the very same people who argue that Israel must at all costs become a normal country: From here on in, they say, there is little hope of any new waves of immigration (and perhaps we’re better off that way), and therefore the Law of Return has no purpose and should as a consequence be abolished or gutted of meaning. The purveyors of this line of thinking never stop to consider the fact that their proposition is self-fulfilling: For why *should* a Jew living in a normal, affluent country such as the United States or France want to leave it for a normal, slightly-less-affluent country called Israel? Normality—and the mediocrity which this

goal necessarily entails—is itself the key to eliminating any possibility that the Jewish state will be attractive to anyone, near or far.

It is easy to imagine the mediocre, normal, *boring* country that Israel can become. Yet the first Israelis of a maturing Jewish state have the option of choosing the opposite: Uniqueness. The new Israeli character, more diverse and rich than anything that came before, can embrace the exceptionalism that has been the burden and privilege of the Jewish people throughout its history—through a constitution that expresses the Jewish nature of Israel; through a commitment to and responsibility for diaspora Jewry; through education that brings new generations to a deep appreciation for both Jewish and world culture; through an economy built on freedom, private charity and proper business conduct; through a culture whose literature, music and other elements draw upon our unique heritage, not as antique ornaments, but as living ideas which foster original Jewish creativity; and, above all, through Jewish morals in the public and private spheres which can be an example for the entire world.

In an age when distinctions among peoples and countries are increasingly blurred, Israel could stand out in its uniqueness—in being more Jewish, not less. In the long run, such a choice is not only reasonable, but essential. If normality and mediocrity take root, Israel will inevitably lose its value, and the result will then be the erosion of Israeli identity that is so much talked about today. But if Israel takes pride in its uniqueness—even as the rest of the world chases the supposed charms of a global village—it will remain a place worth living in, and a source of pride—both for its own people, and for the world.

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