

Reconceptualizing the Culture Conflict among Israeli Jews

THE BI-POLAR DESCRIPTION OF ISRAEL'S CULTURE CONFLICT

IT IS COMMONPLACE TO DESCRIBE the primary conflict in Israeli-Jewish culture and society as pitting religious Jews and their culture against secular Jews and their culture. Secular and religious Jews, it is argued, live in separate worlds of thought, of ideals, of norms. Virtually all Israelis who address themselves to the topic of political culture agree about the existence of these two competing cultural-political camps; the disagreement is whether dialogue or conciliation between them is desirable. Those who think it desirable are inclined to describe the differences in moderate terms or stress the dependence of each side on the other. Those who oppose conciliation tend to caricature the other side by portraying it in terms of its own extremes.

The latter strategy has been characteristic of *haredi* (ultra-orthodox) leaders, but following the Rabin assassination one found frequent caricatures of the religious on the part of the non-religious. Menachem Brinker, for example, writes that the basis for a dialogue between the two cultures no longer exists. He attributes this to the consequences of the Six Day War and the manner in which the young generation of religious Zionists understood that War.¹ Brinker goes on to challenge those who sought to further dialogue and national conciliation following Rabin's assassination. In his terms:

... all those who believe in national reconciliation must explain actually, how dialogue is possible between those who believe in saving lives and ending the conflict [with the Arabs] through rational instrumentalities, and between those, like the Amir brothers, for whom all understanding and activity stems

from a few biblical analogies and *halakhic* decisions intended for other times and places.²

The assassination of Yitzchak Rabin provoked some of the most extreme expressions, mostly by the left, of the notion that Israeli society is divided by two irreconcilable cultures. Naomi Rifkin, chairperson of Ma-pam's Central Committee, in an article headlined "My Hands Did Not Shed This Blood,"³ writes that, as opposed to her camp which educates its youth toward pluralism, democracy, open-mindedness, and intellectual curiosity, the other camp educates "its young people in an alien spirit, on fanatical racist fundamentalist slogans removed from the democratic process."⁴ Referring to the assassin Yigal Amir, the author notes that "he is not a black sheep," but the product of this other culture, "nurtured by the halacha, and by rabbis and teachers in the community, at the yeshiva and at Bar-Ilan University."⁵

This essay argues that, whereas one can appropriately describe Israel-Jewish society as bi-polar with regard to some issues, and whereas public perception supports the notion of bi-polarity, the two-culture theory is misleading. One reason the media and members of the cultural elite persist in this description may be because it serves their own political agenda.

A TRI-PARTITE DESCRIPTION OF ISRAEL'S CULTURE CONFLICT

DEFINING CULTURE

I argue the case for the existence of three major cultural-political orientations among Israeli Jews, though each, of course, has its own sub-divisions. I first define what I mean by a cultural-political orientation.

Political culture is that aspect of culture directed toward the conduct and content of public policy. Most of us have a common sense notion of the term culture as harboring two meanings. We talk about culture in the sense of a cultured person; one who is cultivated, genteel, knowledgeable about matters of art, music, literature. Secondly, we talk about the cultures of various societies or various strata by which we mean something else. It is this "something else" which we have so much difficulty in specifying. I accept Christopher Clausen's recent definition:

The word *culture*, when used anthropologically rather than honorifically, refers to the total way of life of a discrete society, its traditions, habits, beliefs and art—"the systematic body of learned behavior which is transmitted from parents to children," as Margaret Mead summarized it in 1959.⁶

Culture, in other words, finds its most dramatic, but by no means exclusive, expression in its symbolic and especially in its literary and artistic product.

My contention is that there are three rather than two cultures, perhaps sub-cultures is a better term, and three rather than two publics that exist within the broader setting of Israeli society. None of the three cultures is the exclusive preserve of one distinct public. I will associate each of the three publics with each of the three cultures, but the fact is that the vast majority of Israeli Jews are influenced by, are subject to, or at the very least constitute audiences for elements in at least two, and in some cases all three, cultures.

THE RELIGIO-POLITICAL CULTURE

The first culture—the religio-political culture—and its attendant public is the easiest to describe. Under its rubric are two and perhaps three basic sub-cultures: that of the religious-Zionists and that of the haredim [the ultra-orthodox]. For our purposes there is no need to distinguish between haredim of *Ashkenazi* (European) and *Sephardi* (non-European) descent. The important differences separating them are not relevant to this discussion; likewise, the sub-cultures of haredim and religious-Zionists, which, though quite dissimilar at their extremes, increasingly converge and can be treated as one entity for purposes of this analysis.⁷

The culture of this religio-political society is expressed primarily in classical rabbinic texts and homiletical material transmitted in lectures, in print, on video, and diskette. The political religious culture is projected through an independent press, radio programs, periodicals, and books including works of fiction, poetry, children's stories, and even some art, and, of course, an extensive formal and informal educational network. It is the most self-contained of all three cultures though it is clearly subject, especially at its periphery, to the influence of other cultures. At its heart, it is driven by a series of beliefs which I would summarize as follows: Judaism is to be understood primarily as a halakhic system comprised of beliefs and norms that pervade all aspects of public as well as private life. Rabbis who are learned in sacred text are the arbiters of this system and they are, therefore, the final arbiters of all matters of any importance in public or private life.

CONSUMERIST-POST-MODERNIST CULTURE

The second culture prevalent in Israeli Jewish society is the consumerist hedonistic western post-modernist culture, which is basically indifferent, and at some levels hostile, to the Jewish tradition. At the private level, its extreme adherents are those who eschew any observance of traditional Jewish ritual and custom. Its political extreme is represented by post-Zionism, opposition to the notion of Israel as a Jewish state. The extremists are a distinct minority, but in broader terms hedonistic consumerism is a style of life and thought that attracts many if not most Israelis. Post-Zionists are not necessarily party to the consumerist-hedonistic orientations that increasingly characterize western and Israeli society. The connection between them is that the consumerist-post-modernist culture focuses upon the individual and denies the authority of the larger collective, thereby providing a foundation upon which post-Zionist arguments appear credible and even attractive. If individuals are all that count, and national identity no longer carries any authority, then the post-Zionist demand that Israel be "a state for all its citizens" is perfectly just.

Almost all areas of Israeli life are effected by contemporary patterns of western consumerism and by its emphasis on the individual and individual fulfillment rather than on the larger society. In addition, growing numbers of Israelis are ignorant of the components of the Jewish tradition. In many respects, therefore, one identifies this culture by what it does not contain (elements of the Jewish tradition) as much as by what it does contain. Consumerist post-modernism is the characteristic expression of much, probably most, of Israeli literature and television, including that which is locally produced. In its hostility rather than simply indifference to Judaism, it is most widespread in the Israeli theater and is often encountered among the academic elite.

I think it is very important to distinguish between the self-conscious effort on the part of a cultural and political elite to dissociate themselves, Israeli culture, and Israeli public policy from any special tie to Judaism, Jewish history, or the Jewish people, on one hand, and a broader Israeli public concerned with satisfying its private needs and increasingly indifferent to Judaism or Jewish history, on the other. To the first group, Democratic liberalism is a banner under which they seek to free Israeli society from the constraints of the Jewish tradition. Their political slogan is to transform Israel into "a state for all its citizens," a battle cry through which they hope to reform public policy by dejudaizing the state. Thus, Amos Elon writes that:

As a measure of, if you will, "affirmative action," Zionism was useful during the formative years. Today it has become redundant. There is need to move ahead to a more Western, more pluralistic less "ideological" form of patriotism and citizenship. One looks with envy at the United States, where patriotism is centered on the constitution; naturalization is conferred by a judge in a court of law; identity is defined politically and is based on law, not on history, culture, race, religion, nationality, or language.⁸

This program only appeals to a small number of Israelis, but many more adopt these notions by default. This is especially true of those who are convinced that this may be the only alternative to the religio-political culture described above. Consequently, it is in the interests of the elite of this Jewishly neutral culture, to press the issue of culture war between the secular and the religious, and to suggest that the only alternative to the religious culture is a Jewishly neutral secular one. Their strategy is to pose the values of the secular, humane liberal democratic culture against the values of Judaism, which is described as anti-democratic and anti-humane. Thus, for example, Orit Schochat, a prominent columnist for *Ha'Aretz*, writes:

From that day [Rabin's assassination] Israelis society should have split into two, primarily in accordance with this criteria. Democrats versus Monarchists (the kingdom of David renewing itself in Hebron), Democrats versus Fascists, Democrats versus the Religious . . .⁹

She goes on to say that not all the religious fall into this category (otherwise how could one account for such prominent ethically sensitive persons as a Yeshayahu Leibowitz or an Uriel Simon?), but the point of two cultures remains. There are more scholarly presentations of this argument as well.¹⁰

Post-Zionism and the celebration of post-modernist western consumerism merge in an important article by another *Ha'Aretz* writer, Gideon Samet. I find the article especially important not only because it combines both motifs, but because of the self-confidence it reflects. Post-modern culture is, in many respects, an incoherent culture, but that which it lacks in form or specificity of values, is compensated by the sense that it is the wave of the future, an irresistible force. Samet writes:

It is possible that we are ridding ourselves of that old bother; clarifying our national identity. In the past, so many efforts were made to examine what it is, what happened to it, how it was formed, whether it exists at all, and if it exists,

why isn't it visible . . . it now appears that just as this old question threatened to bore us to death, it has begun to be resolved.

For some time now, the commentators on identity put their finger on our [growing] normalization. They noted the growing tendency to move from nationalist slogans to simple individualism. . . . This is not the self-destructive inclination of a declining nation, as the ideologists of the right see it.

. . . Madonna and Big Mac are only the outer periphery of a far-reaching process whose basis is not American influence, but a growing tendency in all the west, especially among young people. It is a mistake to attribute this to the product of a foreign identity.

On the contrary, the new language is comprised of new forms of cultural consumption and leisure activity that have become supra-national. So it is with popular music, movies, trips abroad, dress and even the style of speech. Are the crowded pubs signs of Anglicization? The desire for pasta in the last decade a sign of Italianization?¹¹

SECULAR-JEWISH CULTURE

Identifying the third culture and its public is a more complicated task. Secular-Jewish culture is found among a variety of publics. Most members of these publics are also effected by either post-modernist or politico-religious culture, and some of them by both. This has led its opponents to deny its existence or its capacity to survive. I will first deal with the two challenges.

THE ARGUMENT THAT THERE IS NO SECULAR JUDAISM

First, so the argument goes, there is hardly any secular Jewish public or, others argue, no such thing as secular Judaism. One might expect that only the religious would mount such an argument, but, in fact, post-Zionists do so as well. Thus, for example, Tom Segev writes that a recent poll reported that 77 percent of Israelis believe in God and 73 percent report that they fast on Yom Kippur. "Anyone who says that he believes in God cannot be considered a total secularist."¹² The percentage of secularists, he goes on to complain, is even smaller, since 96 percent have *mezuzot* on their doors. And he concludes, "without enough real Israeli secularists—there is no hope of halting the influence of the religious." Two days later, another post-Zionist, Edit Zartal, who writes fairly regularly for *Ha'Aretz*, cites a recent survey of Knesset members which found that 91 believe in God and 20 more spoke about their belief in a "higher power" or some similar concept or refused to answer the question about their beliefs. "Only nine, less than ten percent of the nation's elected representatives, Jews and non-Jews, stated simply and

clearly that they do not believe in God.”¹³ She attributes these findings to “decades of improper education for Israeli secularism . . .” and concludes that “it isn’t easy to shake loose from the grasp of God or the grasp of those who see themselves as his representatives.”

Orit Schochat, to whom we already referred, writes of the “secular surrender [which] takes place almost without notice and from free choice.” She notes that secular politicians are “ill at ease, filled with guilty consciences because they don’t fast on Yom Kippur, don’t erect a *succah*, and don’t yearn for Hebron.”¹⁴

A more sophisticated argument is found in the important work of Boas Evron.¹⁵ Evron argues that Judaism is by its nature religious, that by its very essence it opposes national formation. Zionism, i.e.; Jewish nationalism, arose, according to Evron under very special circumstances and among a very special group of Jews who had dissociated themselves from Judaism but, for a variety of reasons, were unable to carry their own ideology to its logical conclusion. This left the state of Israel in an anomalous condition. The success of the state and a solution to the Israel-Arab conflict depends upon abandoning the association between Judaism and the state. The point of Evron’s study, for our purposes, is that, since Judaism is a religion and can be nothing else than a religion, there can be no such thing as secular-Judaism.

The sociologist Baruch Kimmerling argues his case on empirical rather than theoretical grounds. His claim is that:

There are secular individuals, groups, and even sub-cultures in Israel. Their daily behavior and their own identity is secular. There are even those who wage a cultural or religious war against this or that aspect of state efforts to impose this or that religious practice or *halakhic* norm on the general public or on one segment of that public. But when the vast majority of Israeli Jews refer to their collective national identity, that identity is defined for the most part by concepts, values, symbols, and collective memory that is anchored primarily in the Jewish religion. In other words, there are secular Jews in the world and in Israel, but there is grave doubt if there is such a thing as secular Judaism.¹⁶

All of these authors, I believe, misunderstand the meaning of secularism in general and secular Judaism in particular. Part of the problem is linguistic. In Hebrew the terms Jewishness and Judaism are interchangeable. Whereas secular-Judaism may be an oxymoron, secular-Jewishness underlies contemporary Jewish life in general and Zionism in particular. The efforts to deJudaize Israel are, in fact, efforts to erase its Jewish as much

as its Judaic character. A secularist is not necessarily an atheist, as Segev and others seem to think. What distinguishes Jewish-secularism from the religious-political culture described above is in the belief that there are areas of life, in our case the area of public policy, in which halakha has left an empty space. The secularist does not seek, in matters of public policy, for example, to determine God's will. If he believes in God, he will hope that the policies he favors reflect God's will, but at the conscious level, this is not how he arrives at policy decisions. In other words, a secular Jew is one who, at least in some aspects of his life and most likely in the area of public policy choices, makes decisions independently of halakha or of rabbinic decisors. The Jewish secularist is likely to understand Jewish history as a series of events that can be understood without reference to God's intervention. He may still believe that God did intervene. But the God hypothesis, he will add, is not necessary to explain that history. To be a Jewish secularist does not mean to be a Jew who is uninfluenced by Jewish values, untouched by matters of the spiritual or metaphysical considerations, and unconcerned with the Jewish heritage. Furthermore, secular Jewishness formulates its basic conceptions in religious language.

Since the post-Zionists are so admiring of American secularism and American democratic liberalism I want to illustrate my meaning by looking to the United States. As Robert Bellah has shown, the rhetoric of American presidents, even those presidents who were not regular church attenders, is filled with religious language.¹⁷

No President is quoted more often than Abraham Lincoln. His most famous speech is the Gettysburg Address, to which I will return. The speech that is next most often cited is his second inaugural address. There, he explains the nature of the Civil War as follows:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."¹⁸

Now, these terms are clearly religious, and few would deny that Lincoln intended them in this way. But the fact is that they resonate for the secularist. They express the notion that there is a moral order to the world and that sins (i.e., crimes against the moral order) must eventually be paid for. This is certainly an argument or a mode of thought anchored in religion.

Does one have to be “religious” to affirm it? Not unless anything transcendent or spiritual is by definition religious. Metaphysical formulations which we tend to identify as religious are really the only language we have for expressing conceptions of some ultimate goal or ultimate meaning. Thus, even the Gettysburg Address, with no reference to God and no specific reference to spirit, was interpreted by the great American poet Robert Lowell as “Christian without having anything to do with the Christian church,”¹⁹ because of its reference to the sacrificial act of death and rebirth (“... those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live”). Lowell may choose to see this as a Christian theme. Anyone who has heard a eulogy at a military funeral in Israel might think otherwise.

Lincoln has been referred to as the great theologian of the American nation. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on the other hand, was never suspected of harboring an excessively religious nature. Yet it was announced that he had composed a prayer for the Normandy invasion of 1944. The front page of the D-Day issue of *The New York Times* noted that the prayer was widely distributed; indeed it was reprinted on the pages of *The New York Times* itself, so that Americans could recite the words together with the President as he read them over the radio. The prayer asked for God’s help in the struggle for “... our Republic, our religion and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.”²⁰ When we are deeply troubled, deeply anxious, and dearly yearn for something, we are likely to express our emotions in religious terms. For most of us, no other terms are satisfactory. That is an attribute of human culture, not of our individual religiosity or lack thereof. When President Bill Clinton appeared before the families of those who died in the 17 July 1995 explosion of TWA’s flight 800, he expressed the hope that they would find comfort in their friends in their families and in God.²¹ Is this something in which even an atheist might find meaning? Some of them might remain unmoved, perhaps even resentful, but others would find their own interpretation of the term God.

My final citation is especially relevant to the Israeli context. It is found in Lyndon Johnson’s inaugural address where he refers to the immigrants to America.

They came here—the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened—to find a place where a man could be his own man. *They made a covenant with this land.* Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.²²

Would it not be easy to find a similar notion of “a covenant with this land” among the *halutzim* [pioneers] without our suspecting them of excessive religiosity? Religious language confers a treasury of words and concepts that express moral concepts in picturesque and dramatic form. There is no other language. If a religious believer wishes to interpret this language in exclusively and narrowly religious terms, he has every right to do so. But it isn’t always clear that this is the only way or, indeed, the most accurate interpretation. When the religious elite adopts secular concepts and places them in a religious context, and this is what religious Zionism has traditionally done, we accept that these concepts now become the legitimate property of the religious. But when secular Jews adopt religious concepts in their context, some Israelis insist that these concepts remain the exclusive domain of the religious and that the secular have somehow betrayed their ideology.

Concepts such as: “commandment,” “the rights of our Fathers,” “a light unto the nations,” even “messiah,” are not exclusively religious words or concepts. They are Jewish concepts originating in the Jewish tradition and the property of the entire Jewish people. We are entitled to understand them in different ways. This is so obvious that it need not bear repetition except that some contemporary writers conveniently refuse to acknowledge it. But this refusal, itself, is only recent. In the not too distant past, it was the least religious of all the Zionist movements which was most likely to adapt religious language and conceptions. As Shlomo Avineri says:

The one movement in Zionism that succeeded more than the others in reinterpreting the redemptive language of normative Judaism and adjusting it to the political purposes of Zionism, was the Labor movement. With all the militant anti-religiosity of Zionist-socialism in the early years of the *yishuv*, it was this movement that created a world of language and concepts, that for all their rebelliousness and newness, were anchored deeply in the symbolic language of the tradition.²³

Could it be that the objection to the use of religious language is really a consequence of a post-Zionist efforts to purge the Hebrew language of its Jewish overtones?

I do not mean to blur distinctions between religion and non-religion or between the world view and policy implications that stem from Israel’s religio-political culture and its secular-Jewish culture. Nor do I mean to diminish the particular and specific religious meaning that may lie behind

the use of religious language and religious concepts. I am saying that it is legitimate to term a culture or a public as secular even if it partially adheres to religious patterns of thought and defers to the religious tradition and is influenced by traditional Jewish values, consciously as well as unconsciously, in policy formation.

THE ARGUMENT THAT SECULAR JUDAISM IS DISAPPEARING

A second case against the prospects of secular Judaism (or secular Jewishness) is mounted from the opposite direction. The argument is made that whereas a secular Jewish culture exists, its public is disappearing.²⁴ I share many reservations about the capacity of secular Jewishness to sustain itself and about the ability of the secular-Jewish public to transmit its values. But one reason may be that we have not identified secular-Jewishness or its public properly. This itself prevents the strengthening of that culture.

Secular-Jewishness and that which was once called secular or national Hebrew culture are mistakenly treated as synonymous. Gershon Shaked is an important intellectual figure who, in discussing what he calls secular Jewishness, confuses it with secular Hebrew culture. I am in full agreement with Shaked when he writes that:

... alongside a culture based on faith and *mitzvah* observance, a Jewish culture has been created in Israel that is based on the tradition but is not a religious culture. The sources of this culture can be found in the Jewish culture, but the latter has undergone processes of secularization and sanctification which have changed its face—the sacred has been made profane and the profane made sacred.²⁵

But Shaked defines secular Jewish culture in narrow terms. He attributes its origins to:

... two main streams of thought, each of which had a broad base among the Jewish intelligentsia, and the basic assumptions of which filtered down to wider groups. In the context of Jewish thought in the modern era, the conceptual platform of Ahad Ha'am stood opposite that of Michah Yosef Berdichevski.²⁶

Although one finds in these thinkers, Ahad Ha'am in particular, notions similar to those which underlay all secular-Jewishness in contemporary Israel, the tensions reflected in their thought and the solutions which they offer are of conscious relevance to only one part of the secular-Jewish public.

Within the political left, that portion is represented by a generally older generation including some (many?) in Mapam. Their point of view is expressed, among other places in the volume *Regard and Revere—Renew Without Fear: The Secular Jew and His Heritage*, published by Sifriat Poalim.²⁷ It is found in higher proportion among adherents of the political right. It is experiencing a renewal today, in somewhat different form, in the many institutes and seminars under non-religious auspices for the study of traditional Jewish texts and thought.²⁸

Other forms of secular Jewishness are to be found among very different publics who emerge from very different sub-cultures. One of them is the public, which Yaacov Levi labels the back-benchers of the synagogue. Levi, after bemoaning the disappearance of the religiously traditional but non-orthodox Sephardi public, describes what he calls a widespread occurrence that for some reason or another is not widely discussed:

Observant Jews, raised in the orthodox world, but who belong culturally to the secular world. In the absence of a better definition, they still call themselves orthodox, but in so doing they commit an injustice to the concept and to themselves.²⁹

He claims that this public, those who fill the back benches of the synagogues, are characterized by their “critical attitude to *halakhic* decisions and their autonomous not to mention existential relationship to religion.”

. . . They don't see themselves as part of the Reform or Conservative movement . . . They have no desire to break the chain of “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and passed it on to Joshua.” etc. But they perform [the injunction from *Pirke Avot* to] “love labor and hate the rabbinate” to the letter. They accept, in principle, the status of the rabbi, but nevertheless have difficulty in dismissing the dictates of their own conscience and their own logic when confronted by an *halakhic* decision.

. . . Will this wave disappear, as the traditional Sephardim disappeared? It is difficult not to hope that the younger members of this generation will create a world without “secular” and “religious,” and where the synagogues will become houses of worship and congregation rather than centers of division and controversy.³⁰

Levi's article also points to another public, in addition to the back-benchers, who constitute or adhere to the culture of secular Jewishness—the Sephardi traditionalists. They are by no means orthodox, but they are

deeply respectful of religious tradition, and while they only observe it in part, they do not necessarily feel that their Judaism is inadequate. Their number is declining, but they still constitute the bulk of the Jewish majority in Israel that stands between the orthodox and the totally non-observant.

We can identify the secular-Jewish public with some degree of precision as a consequence of the 1993 study by the Guttman Institute of the religious attitudes and beliefs of Israeli Jews.³¹ According to Elihu Katz, one of the authors of the Report, the vast majority of Israelis are not “religious” in the conventional meaning of the term. But they do observe many traditional *mitzvot* and while their observance is partial and selective, it is not random, individual, and unsystematic, nor is it without intent. It may lack “proper” intent from a religious perspective; but those who perform these rituals are motivated by a conscious commitment to the continuity of the Jewish people. In addition, those who observe these *mitzvot* are not without belief. In their own minds, says Katz, that which they do practice is not dictated by God. They are aware of their “deviations,” and are unperturbed by them.³² In other words, contrary to what is sometimes said, those Israeli Jews who observe some but not all of the religious commandments (and they constitute the bulk of Israeli Jews), do not believe that their partial observance stems from laziness, laxity, or negligence. They are participating in a patterned form of observance that is not *halakha*, but which they have transformed into the folkways of secular Jewishness.

The question I find most troubling is whether Israeli Jews can continue to sustain these folkways or whether they might evolve into patterns which are no longer distinctively Jewish. The findings of the Guttman Report reassure us about the existence of secular Jewishness but are not reassuring with respect to its continuity. We do not know how important this form of observance is to those who participate in it, but we do have evidence, some of it in the Guttman Report itself, of the decline in the traditionalist Sephardi population—a decline to which Levi refers in the article cited above. Some former Sephardi traditionalists have been absorbed into the religio-political culture, while many more are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by post-modernist culture. The latter threatens secular Jewishness through indirection rather than through confrontation, by ignorance and indifference rather than hostility.

At the present time, therefore, secular Jewishness is not entirely well, but it is certainly alive. It tends to be overlooked or dismissed because we are looking elsewhere for signs of secular Jewishness—we have preconceptions, based on the secular Hebrew culture of the Yishuv about how it will look. Those who practice secular Jewishness are not *halutzim* [pioneers]

who plow the land with one hand while they hold a book in the other. They are certainly not the “enlightened public” in whom Chief Justice Barak places so much authority. Most of that “enlightened public,” which is in effect Israel’s “new class,”³³ is quite alienated from any kind of Judaism or Jewishness. The breeding grounds for Israeli secular Jewishness is more likely found among a population group that may be more familiar with the prayer *Adon Olam* than with Brenner. Their secularism is neither rebellious nor anti-religious.

One indicator of the presence of a secular Jewish public with a distinct orientation was the 1996 elections. The campaign, especially of Netanyahu and of the parties of the right, was directed toward the adherents of secular Jewishness. Even the religious parties, most noticeably the National Religious Party, pitched their campaigns to those non-religious who feared that the Jewish nature of society had declined as a consequence of the Meretz-Labor coalition. Their campaign slogan, “Zionism with Soul,” and their attacks on the coalition of the Labor party and Meretz (a party in which many post-Zionists are comfortable), reflected the effort to appeal to the Jewishly committed secular Israeli rather than to the religious Israeli. The other religious parties, SHAS and even Yahadut Hatorah, mounted campaigns that stressed their Jewish, rather than their narrowly religious, nature. And of course this came through in the campaign of the secular right. Although relations with the Palestinians played a primary role in the campaign of the right, the fact is that Netanyahu sought to minimize his policy differences with Labor, stressing instead differences of style and of basic allegiance. Netanyahu, projected himself as one who could be trusted more than Peres because Netanyahu, in the last analysis, was concerned primarily with the welfare of the Jews and the strengthening of Israel’s Jewish roots.

My argument is that, despite all the talk about a culture war between the secular and the religious—a culture war that the secular should certainly win at the ballot box where they outnumber the religious handily—the Israeli electorate and the parties themselves saw the campaign issues differently. The campaign posed secular Jewishness as described above against parties defined as indifferent if not hostile to Judaism and the electorate voted accordingly.

THE FUTURE OF SECULAR JEWISHNESS

I am well aware of the tenuous nature of secular Jewishness. Its future is by no means assured. But a prior question is: why does its role in the culture

conflict go virtually unnoticed? Why do Israelis continue to speak of two political cultures, that of the secular and that of the religious, and ignore the presence of this third culture?

There is a very real struggle worth waging against the religio-political culture with its desire to impose its norms and values on all Israeli society, its misunderstanding if not hostility toward basic tenets of democracy, its insistence that public policy must be formulated in accordance with rabbinic interpretation of Jewish law, and its confusion of paternalism with open-minded dialogue. One may love the Jewish tradition and other Jews, yet still feel beleaguered by those who claim a monopoly on the interpretation of Judaism, and even more so by those who claim a monopoly on the meaning of Jewishness. The easiest recourse is to reject Judaism along with the religio-political culture. In addition, the present political alignment in Israeli society, whether over issues of the Jewish Palestinian conflict or over issues of civil rights, aligns post-modernist and secular Jews against the religio-political elite.

Secondly, the secular-Jewish public lacks an articulated high culture. There have been some efforts to formulate a contemporary ideology for secular Jewishness; the work of Eliezer Schweid is outstanding in this respect.³⁴ But the thrust of Schweid's work in this area is the opposite of the tendency just described. Schweid bemoans the decline of secular Jewishness, and, because he is so concerned over the loss of Jewish components in Israeli culture, he neglects to address the threat that many Israelis sense in the religio-political culture. Other writers, poets, and artists, even a playwright here and there, are sympathetic to secular Jewishness, but they produce works of a post-modernist nature. Perhaps they sense that their audience and their reference group, especially at the international level, is in that direction. Although there are exceptions, the explicit relationship between the secular-Jewish writer or artist and one or more of the secular Jewish publics is never explicated. This too may stem from the conviction that there is only one enemy, the religio-political culture, whereas, in reality the post-modernist enemy may well be an even greater threat.

But articulating secular Jewishness and producing an appropriate art and literature is not enough. Secular Hebrew culture thrived as long as it was anchored in a society with an inspirational vision and a program that demanded that the individual give of him/herself. The religio-political culture does this. Post modernist culture need not. It can thrive on the indolence and ego satisfactions which it affords. Secular Jewish culture cannot compete with either cultural alternative if it lacks vision and purpose.

Strengthening secular Jewishness is necessary to secure a Jewish state and to make Israel a better place in which to live. It is a *sine qua non* for the flowering of Judaism. In order to compete effectively, it requires explicit exposition. Professor Ruth Gavison, writing in a somewhat different context, makes a similar point:

It is the opponents of *halakha*, [who are also] committed to the idea of Israel as a Jewish nation-state, who must explain the particular content of Jewish nationalism. They are the ones who must transmit this answer to the new generation of Israelis who didn't arrive here by virtue of the "Zionist revolution" as a consequence of a deep existential struggle with their personal identity. If they don't have an answer, we can anticipate two possible developments: the vacuum will be filled with Jewish religious content, with all its separatist principles, or all Israeli-Jews will be a people who speak Hebrew (and among some of them their Hebrew is poor and defective), but lacking any special orientation to the national Jewish culture.³⁵

The first step, however, is recognition by secular Jews themselves that they constitute a third force in the Israeli culture conflict.

NOTES

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1. Menachem Brinker, "Rabin After Rabin," *Ha'Aretz*, *Sefarim* (a weekly supplement), 29 May 1996, pp. 1, 14.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

3. The article by Naomi Riftin appeared in Hebrew in *HaDaf HaYarok*, 22 November 1995, and was translated and reprinted in English in *Kibbutz Trends*, 21 (1966) 21–2.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 21

5. *Ibid.*

6. Christopher Clausen, "Welcome to Post-Culturalism," *The American Scholar*, 65 (1996) 380.

7. Charles S. Liebman, "Jewish Fundamentalism and the Israeli Polity," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms and the State* (Chicago, IL, 1992) 68–87.

8. See pp. 27–8 in Amos Elon, “Israel and the End of Zionism,” *The New York Review*, 43 (1966) 22–30.
9. Orit Schochat, “Fascist Ecology,” *Ha’Aretz*, 25 October 1996, p. 1B.
10. For example, Avigdor Levontin, “‘Judaic and Democratic’—Personal Reflections,” in Ariel Rosen-Zvi (ed), *A Jewish and Democratic State*, published by The School of Law, Tel-Aviv University (Tel-Aviv, 1996) 55–82 [Hebrew].
11. Gideon Samet, “The Nation Goes Up a Grade,” *Ha’Aretz*, 28 July 1995, p. 1B.
12. Tom Segev, “Who is a Secularist?,” *Ha’Aretz*, 25 September 1996, p. 1B.
13. Edit Zartal, “Secularism—Who Can Number Thy Days?” *Ha’Aretz*, 27 September 1996, p. 1B.
14. Schochat, “Where are the Secularists Hiding?”
15. Boas Evron, *Jewish State or Israeli Nation?*, trans. with a foreword by James Diamond (Bloomington, IN, 1995).
16. Baruch Kimmerling, “Religion, Nationalism and Democracy in Israel,” *Zmanim*, 50–51(13) (1994) 129 [Hebrew].
17. Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” reprinted in Robert Bellah (ed), *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York, 1970) 168–89.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
20. The page, in its entirety, is reprinted in the fiftieth anniversary edition of *The New York Times* commemorating D-Day (7 June 1994).
21. I am relying on my memory of the talk, televised live, on CNN on July 18th or 19th.
22. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” p. 175 [emphasis mine: CSL].
23. See p. 14 in Shlomo Avineri, “Zionism and the Jewish Religious Tradition: The Dialectic of Redemption and Secularization,” in Shmuel Almog, Judah Reinhardt and Anita Shaprio (eds), *Zionism and Religion*, published by The Zalman Shazar Center (Jerusalem, 1994) 9–18 [Hebrew].
24. This argument, especially in the last decade, has been expressed by countless numbers of observers. Eliezer Schweid, probably more than any other writer, has provided an intellectual context for its formulation. See Eliezer Schweid, *The Idea of Judaism as a Culture* (Tel-Aviv, 1995) [Hebrew], and a number of essays in his more recent *Zionism in a Post-Modernistic Era* (Jerusalem, 1996) [Hebrew].
25. Gershon Shaked, “Israeli Society and Secular Jewish Culture,” in Charles Liebman and Elihu Katz (eds), *The Jewishness of Israelis: Responses to the Guttman Report* (Albany, NY, 1997) 159.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
27. Yehosua Rash (ed), *Regard and Revere—Renew Without Fear: The Secular Jew and His Heritage* (Tel-Aviv, 1987) [Hebrew].
28. Yossi Klein Halevi, “Zionism, Phase II,” *Jerusalem Report*, VII(17) (1996) 12–18.
29. See p. 25 in Yaacov Levi, “A Vanishing Breed,” *Meimad*, No. 8 (1996) 24–5 [Hebrew]

30. Levi, "A Vanishing Breed."

31. Shlomit Levy, Hanna Levinsohn and Elihu Katz, *Beliefs, Observances and Social Interaction Among Israeli Jews*, published by The Louis Guttman Israel Institute of Applied Social Research (Jerusalem, 1993). A fuller description of the meaning of the Report is found in Liebman and Katz (eds), *The Jewishness of Israelis*.

32. Elihu Katz, "Behavioral and Phenomenological Jewishness," in Liebman and Katz (eds), *The Jewishness of Israelis*, pp. 71–83.

33. For an illuminating discussion of this point, see Ronen Shamir, "Society, Judaism and Democratic Fundamentalism: On the Social Sources of Judicial Interpretation," in Rosen-Zvi (ed), *A Jewish and Democratic State*, pp. 241–60.

34. See note 27.

35. See p. 216 in Ruth Gavison, "A Jewish and Democratic State Political Identity, Ideology and Law," in Rosen-Zvi (ed), *A Jewish and Democratic State*, pp. 169–222.