Israel at 50: An Israeli Perspective

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IN 1945, THE JEWISH PEOPLE faced oblivion. Eastern Europe, the major center of Jewish religious and ethnic creativity, was gone; the Western Jewish communities lacked vitality and self-confidence; and several million Soviet Jews were being forcibly assimilated. The most intact Jewish communities existed in the Muslim world; but their golden era had long passed, and they now faced a shattering encounter with modernity and physical threat in post-colonialist Third World states.

Psychologically, the Jews were a defeated people. Perhaps the most devastating long-term trauma of the Holocaust was the Jewish sense of aloneness, of exclusion from humanity, just as the Nazis had insisted. The old stigma of Jewish cowardice had also seemingly been validated. And no amount of apologetic literature, of books with titles like "Jews Fight Too," could erase that shame and even self-loathing; for surely there must be something terribly flawed in a people that was so singularly hated and so passive in the face of assault.

Finally, Judaism—which identified Jewish history as the arena in which God's power and presence would be manifest—had, in the eyes of many Jews, been discredited by reality. Judaism's deepest vision, the redemption of history, was threatened with a fatal irrelevance. The Nazis had proven far more successful at imprinting their vision on history: choosing the Jews—but for a demonic fate, ingathering them from the four corners of Europe—but not for redemption. How many Jews in 1945 could believe in the all powerful God of Israel?

The State of Israel's role as post-Holocaust rescuer addressed the Jewish people's physical, psychological, and spiritual crises.

By salvaging fragmented and endangered diasporas, Israel began the difficult, sometimes traumatic process of restoring the Jews from separated communities back into a people. The ingathering of the exiles has occurred in three great waves, which may be compared to concentric circles gradually being absorbed into Israeli society: Holocaust survivors, Jews from Muslim countries, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Israel fulfilled the post-Holocaust Jewish commitment to rescue endangered Jews in any part of the globe, no matter how inaccessible. Saving Jews in "countries of distress"—the official Israeli designation for persecuted Jewish communities—remained a central goal of the state, be-

ginning with Yemenite Jewry in 1948 and culminating with Ethiopian Jewry in 1991. Perhaps the single greatest cause for celebration in Israel's 50th year is that, thanks to the Jewish state, the concept of "countries of distress" has become almost obsolete. (Iran, with an estimated 15,000 or more Jews, remains the lone "country of distress.")

Psychologically, Israel saved the Jewish people from the dissipation of its will to live. By restoring the Jews to the community of nations and creating the symbols of national normalcy—a parliament, a flag, army marching bands—Israel offered them reassurance of their membership in the human race, a premise not at all taken for granted by survivors after Auschwitz. Likewise, by re-arming the Jews and proving that they were no less willing and able to defend themselves than any other people, Israel restored their self-esteem. The fact that, only one generation after the Holocaust, Jews no longer need reassurance of their ability to fight and even feel a certain unease with power, confirms how successful Israel has been in healing the trauma of Jewish defenselessness.

Finally, by challenging the ingathering into Auschwitz with the ingathering into Zion, Israel salvaged the credibility of Judaism. For many Jews, Israel's existence restored faith in the God of Israel. For if Jews could see the Holocaust as proof that God had abandoned his people, then the sudden restoration of Jewish power meant that he had returned to them.

Inevitably, each of Israel's "rescue missions"—ingathering diasporas, psychologically healing the Jews, and re-empowering Judaism—has generated unforeseen dilemmas, which threaten to undermine those remarkable achievements. Israel has yet to successfully complete the transition from state-building to nation-building. Instead, it remains a fragile federation of "tribes" divided over the most basic understanding of Israeliness. Despite the astonishing resurrection of Hebrew and the emergence of the only dynamic secular Jewish culture left in world Jewry, Israel has yet to resolve its increasingly pressing identity questions. We endure government crises over defining who is a Jew, but we have yet to begin defining who is an Israeli. Fifty years into statehood, we still cannot agree on our external borders, or on the internal borders between Israeliness and Jewishness, democracy and faith.

The Concentric Circles of Ingathering

Of the three great immigrations to Israel, the quarter of a million Holocaust survivors who arrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s were the most successfully absorbed. The extent of that success is evident among their children. Unlike the Diaspora, Israel has scarcely produced any organized "second generation" activity to collectively confront a

sense of dislocation. Partly that is because, until recently, Israeli society did not encourage introspection, valuing instead a stoical pragmatism. But the more important reason is that children of survivors easily entered the economic, cultural, and military elites, becoming virtually indistinguishable from the children of the pioneers.

The survivors' success is so taken for granted by Israeli society that it is hardly invoked. Yet when the survivors first arrived, they were received with indifference, even hostility. Survivors were seen as the antithesis of Zionism's "new Jew," passive victims who threatened the daring spirit on which Israel's birth and continued survival depended, as if they carried a contagious weakness. Survivors—whom sabras derisively nicknamed *"sabon,"* soap—were even accused of having been collaborators, their very survival suspect.

In part, survivors succeeded despite the hostility because Israeli society was familiar enough for them to absorb its codes. Unlike Sephardim, or immigrants from Arab countries, who came expecting the Holy Land and discovered instead a secular socialist state, survivors did not experience a drastic disorientation. Israel's ideological obsessions and schisms, and almost all its political parties, were rooted in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe. The fact that at least some survivors had acquaintances among those who had immigrated before the war and now occupied positions within the state bureaucracy further increased their advantage over Sephardim.

But the decisive factor in the survivors' integration was their ability to see in Israel's struggles and triumphs a projection and a vindication of their own lives. Far from being an enervating influence, survivors infused Israeli society with the certainty that failure was not an option, that Israel's role was to deprive the Nazis of the final word on Jewish history. The survivors' grim optimism, coupled with the naive vigor of the native-born, insured that Israel would overcome the external threats and internal chaos of its early years. Together with the sabras, survivors formed the core of an emerging Israeli identity.

The process of absorbing the Holocaust itself into Israeli identity began with the 1961 Eichmann trial, the first time Israelis collectively confronted the Final Solution. Unlike the earlier trial involving wartime Hungarian Zionist leader Rudolf Kastner, suspected of collaborating with Adolf Eichmann and thereby confirming sabra stereotypes about survivors, this time the murderers rather than the victims were in the dock.

The 1967 Six Day War freed Israelis from any lingering insecurities about Jewish passivity; the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which nearly ended in Israeli defeat and produced televised images of Israeli POWs with padlocked hands, enabled Israelis to identify with the vulnerability of Europe's Jews. A more mature Israel confronted the Holocaust without the

need for heroes and myths; Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations stopped focusing obsessively on partisans and ghetto fighters and allowed the nation to mourn its dead. Survivors were finally celebrated as a national resource. For many young secularists, the Holocaust became the most compelling part of their Jewish identities—ironic, given the initial sabra contempt for Holocaust victims as the antithesis of Israeliness.

The final chapter in Israeli reconciliation with the Holocaust and its victims began with the 1977 election of Likud leader Menachem Begin, the first Israeli prime minister to have spent at least part of the Holocaust years in Europe (as a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag). As if deliberately overcompensating for the imposed silence of the state's early years, Begin incessantly invoked the Holocaust, citing it as justification for his hard-line policies.

Crucially, Begin broke the Holocaust's ethnic barrier, expanding the circle of mourning to include Sephardim and transforming the Holocaust from a dividing to a unifying factor. Until Begin, many Sephardim saw the Holocaust as an "Ashkenazi," rather than a "Jewish," trauma. No real effort had been made by the Labor Party's Ashkenazi leadership to draw Sephardim into a common grief. By becoming the first Ashkenazi politician to acknowledge the social wrongs done to Sephardim, championing their grievances and emotionally embracing them as fellow Jews, Begin enabled Sephardim to reciprocate and vicariously share his trauma. In opening up Holocaust memory to all Jews, Begin reinforced national cohesiveness and accelerated the integration of Sephardim into Israeliness.

THE SEPHARDIM

Unlike Ashkenazim, who moved to Israel singly or as constricted nuclear families, the nearly one million Sephardim constituting the second great immigration wave came en masse, as extended families and communities. The Jewish state rescued ancient diasporas that faced almost certain uprooting and disintegration in the post-colonialist era, retrieving them from the peripheries of the Jewish world back to its Israeli center.

Within Israel itself, though, Sephardim were largely relegated to the nation's physical and cultural peripheries. Many were brought without consent to isolated border settlements with little hope of economic advancement; in schools, Sephardi children were routinely shunted onto trade rather than academic tracks. An entire culture was dismissed by the Ashkenazi Labor establishment as primitive and irrelevant to Israeli reality. Sephardi music was not played on the radio; Sephardi history was not taught in schools. A generation of young Sephardim were raised in shame and self-loathing.

Even more than economic and social dislocation, Sephardim suffered a spiritual trauma: In fulfilling their deepest religious myth of return to Zion, they experienced their first mass religious breakdown. In the early years of the state, an active policy of secular coercion was aimed at the bewildered Sephardi immigrants. Young people were sent to kibbutzim where they were forced to work on Shabbat and eat nonkosher food; the sidelocks of Yemenite children were cut by absorption officials. There were instances of parents being denied employment for not sending their children to secular schools. Though no conclusive proof has emerged to substantiate persistent charges that Yemenite children were kidnapped by government officials in the state's early years and adopted by Ashkenazim, the "stolen children" serve as a useful metaphor for the cultural fate of an entire generation.

The Labor establishment—which had, after all, initiated the rescue and resettlement of the Sephardim—meant well. Its intention was to hasten the integration of Sephardim by turning their children into its vision of model Israelis. In the prestate years, Labor's Ashkenazi leaders had assumed they were preparing the infrastructure for the eventual absorption of the masses of Jews they had left behind in Europe; after the Holocaust, though, the masses who appeared in Zion were Sephardim. They were the "wrong" Jews: mystical, poorly educated, lacking socialist enthusiasm. In its awkward and ultimately counter-productive way, Labor tried to remake them into the "right" Jews.

Labor leaders were riveted to what they saw as the two essential dramas of Zionism: the transition from "Holocaust to rebirth" and the creation of a socialist state. In both those dramas, Sephardim were largely extraneous. And so they became extraneous Israelis.

In recent years, though, Sephardim, who today form about half the population, have made some significant inroads. Membership in the mainstream is no longer defined by ethnicity but class: Sephardim who make it into the middle class are considered fully "Israeli." Increasingly, Israeli culture, especially popular music, is becoming a fusion of East-West influences, replacing Western dominance. Politically, Sephardim occupy half the cabinet positions in the Netanyahu government, an unprecedented achievement. Within the Labor Party too, chairman Ehud Barak is attempting to open party leadership to activists from "the neighborhoods"—the Israeli euphemism referring to working-class Sephardi areas. Barak's 1997 public apology to Sephardim for Labor's old patronizing attitude was a courageous attempt to heal ethnic bitterness; not since Menachem Begin had any Ashkenazi politician spoken so movingly about the traumatic Sephardi experience of homecoming.

Tragically, however, just as Israeli society is finally becoming openly pluralistic, increasing numbers of Sephardim are opting for ultra-

Orthodox separatism. With its ten parliamentary seats, the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Shas has become the country's third-largest party. Its short-term goal is leading the tradition-minded but religiously flexible Sephardi working class into ultra-Orthodox separatism; its long-term goal is transforming Israel into a theocracy. By emphasizing religion over peoplehood as the essential criterion for defining Jewishness, Shas excludes its constituency from a mainstream Israeli identity. Shas's network of elementary schools stresses religious, not secular, studies, insuring that its graduates will remain economically marginal. (Those schools also ignore the Holocaust, undermining Menachem Begin's achievement of drawing Sephardim into Holocaust memory.) Increasing numbers of Shas's young men opt for yeshivah deferments from the army, depriving them of another key entry point into the Israeli mainstream.

Shas has succeeded politically because it addresses the Sephardi longing for a return to their lost Diaspora intactness, for a way to the elusive Holy Land. Shas is the inevitable backlash, one generation later, against Labor's cultural coercion, the counter-revolution against secular Zionism. Ultra-Orthodox Yemenite rabbi Amnon Yitzhak, who has inspired thousands of Sephardim to abandon secularism, likes to end his revivalist-style rallies by cutting off young men's pony tails—avenging the shearing of Yemenite children's sidelocks in the state's early years. And yet, however understandable, the Shas backlash poses one of the most serious threats to Israeli cohesiveness, joining Ashkenazi-Sephardi tensions to the far more explosive secular-religious divide.

The Soviet Jews

While Israel saved Sephardi communities from potential physical threat, its rescue mission of Soviet Jews preempted their cultural and spiritual disappearance. The very existence of Israel saved Soviet Jewry from oblivion: Without the decisive pull of Zionist pride to counter the forced assimilation of Soviet Jewry, that last repository of Eastern European Jewish genius would have been lost to the Jewish people, and its disappearance almost certainly made irreversible by the time the Communist regime fell. For most Soviet Jews, raised in an atmosphere of militant atheism, Judaism was inaccessible; and so the Soviet Jewish renaissance focused instead on national identity. Israel and its military victories, especially the Six Day War, emboldened thousands of young Jews to form the Soviet Union's only mass, nationwide, dissident movement.

The immigration of one million Soviet Jews—nearly 200,000 in the 1970s and the rest since 1989—completes a historical process begun a century ago, when the first Zionist pioneers set out from Russia and pre-

pared the foundation for a Jewish state. No group of immigrants has been absorbed more quickly into the Israeli economy than the former Soviets; no other immigration has brought with it such prosperity and cultural abundance. The economic boom of the 1990s was largely generated by the new immigrants, who included a significant segment of the Soviet elite, its scientists and engineers and classical musicians.

And yet no immigration faces as problematic an absorption into Israeli identity. Seventy years of enforced Soviet assimilation have produced the least Jewishly identified and most heavily intermarried of any Israeli immigration. Indeed, many newcomers lack an instinctive empathy with Zionism's most basic myths—including the myth of "ingathering the exiles," the very motive for Israel opening its doors to them. "The Russians," as all immigrants from the former Soviet Union are known, are the mirror image of the Sephardim: While Sephardim arrived poorly equipped to adapt to a modern society but with an instinctive Jewish sense of belonging, Russians tend to be highly educated secularly but almost completely ignorant Jewishly. Sephardim came seeking the Jewish homeland; Russians came seeking the West. The result is that the two groups have experienced opposite absorption problems. Many Sephardim lag economically but retain an organic connection to Israeliness; indeed, it is hard to find another group anywhere so loyal to a state that had treated its members as second-class citizens. And while Russians are rapidly entering the Israeli middle class, many remain ambivalent about their relationship to the state.

Ironically, Russian absorption might have benefited from the kind of concerted attempt to educate immigrants into an ideological Israeliness that Sephardim experienced so traumatically in the 1950s. The collapse of an officially approved "ideal Israeli" has left Russians without a clearly defined identity to aspire to. The result is a growing assertiveness of a separatist Russian culture.

That trend toward self-ghettoization is reinforced by frequent Israeli stereotyping of Russian immigrants as mafiosi and prostitutes. All immigrant groups are subject to stereotyping: Successive waves of immigration have so frequently and profoundly altered Israeli society that stereotyping becomes a psychological survival tool, a way of managing excess diversity. But precisely because so many Russians are severed from Jewish identity, they are especially vulnerable to the stereotypers' message that they do not belong. So far, Israeli society has failed to convey to the Russians that their presence among us is a miracle, that they have come home to be healed from their Jewish amnesia.

Perhaps the most difficult impediment to absorption is the large percentage of non-Jews within the Russian immigration. The failure of the

Orthodox rabbinate to relax its stringent standards and enable Russian non-Jews to convert may further encourage Russian separatism from the Israeli mainstream. An alternative scenario is that the tens of thousands of non-Jewish Russians who have entered the secular Israeli educational system and the army will join the mainstream and transform it, making Israeli identity less automatically synonymous with Jewishness.

Ethnic-Religious Diversity and National Identity

Israel has ingathered the Jewish world's most concentrated ethnic diversity. Part of the adventure of the Israeli experience has been expanding the limits of national identity, discovering new, unimagined components of the Jewish people. Only a few decades ago, many Israelis were not even aware of the existence of Ethiopian Jews; now they live among us (though still largely as strangers). In recent years, Israel has begun absorbing its first Far Eastern "Oriental" immigration: several dozen ethnically Burmese families, members of the Christian Shinlung tribe on the Indian-Burmese border, who believe they are descendants of the Israelite tribe of Menashe and who have undergone rigorous Orthodox conversion. (So far, some 5,000 Shinlung out of a tribal population of two million identify as Jews.)

The ingathering of exiles has reversed the Diaspora concept of ethnicity: For Diaspora Jews, ethnicity means Jewishness; for Israelis, it is defined by the countries we abandoned. We are not just "Ashkenazim" and "Sephardim" but Indians and Yemenites and Russians and South Africans. Israelis would be perplexed by Diaspora jokes that end with the punch line, "Funny, you don't look Jewish." In Israel, there is no such thing as "looking Jewish." Nostalgic memories of grandparents and "Jewish" foods do not unite Israelis, as they do American Jews, in a common Jewishness, but divide us in our varied ethnicities.

Beginning in earnest in the 1980s, ethnic and ideological "tribalism" has grown, partly as a backlash against the imposed uniformity of the state's early years, and partly in response to the decline of the socialist Zionist ideology that was supposed to unite us into a single people. The intensifying debates over the future of the territories and the place of religion in public life have further encouraged the emergence of distinctive "tribes." There is an ultra-Orthodox Sephardi tribe and an ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi tribe, a religious Zionist tribe and a secular left-wing "Tel Aviv" tribe, a Russian tribe and an Arab Israeli tribe. Though they live in such close proximity, those tribes manage to maintain a remarkable level of mutual ignorance, often defining each other by the most negative stereotypes. Israel's diversity can either enrich a common national identity, or it can destroy any hope of fashioning an Israeli

people sharing the same myths of origin and committed to common goals.

Ultra Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs

Among all of Israel's cultural and political communities, the two least assimilable into a common Israeliness are the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Israeli Arabs. Neither identifies itself as Zionist; neither sends its young men for military service, a key factor in defining Israeli identity. Together they form 25 percent of Israel's population of six million (18 percent Arab, 7 percent ultra-Orthodox). And they maintain higher birthrates than any other Israeli community.

In recent years, however, each community has been absorbed into a particular kind of Israeliness—sectoral, rather than national. Ultra-Orthodox Jews increasingly identify with right-wing Israel, Arab Israelis with left-wing Israel. The result is a conditional Israeli identity, the emergence of a new category of "almost Israelis."

Except for a persisting anti-Zionist minority, the ultra-Orthodox community has moved from prestate anti-Zionism, to disinterested non-Zionism, to far-right nationalism (though acceptance of Zionism is de facto, not theological). Menachem Begin, the first Israeli prime minister to repeatedly invoke God and religious symbols, enabled ultra-Orthodox Jews to feel at home within the right-wing coalition. That process culminated in the 1996 elections, in which the ultra-Orthodox united around Benjamin Netanyahu, the first time the community endorsed a secular Zionist candidate.

Still, the ultra-Orthodox remain deeply ambivalent about their relationship with Israeli society. On the one hand, the fact that most ultra-Orthodox routinely speak Hebrew among themselves—reversing earlier insistence on maintaining Hebrew as the language of devotion and Yiddish as the language of the street—is a tacit acknowledgment that Zionism won. Indeed, there are increasing signs of ultra-Orthodox accommodation to Israeli reality. Even members of the anti-Zionist Eidah Haredit, for example, are now volunteering for the police department's civil guard, once considered anathema. And yet at the same time, the growing strength and self-confidence of the ultra-Orthodox community is leading to increased autonomy: Separate ultra-Orthodox towns and shopping malls and bus lines are reinforcing the community's self-ghettoization.

What Menachem Begin was to the ultra-Orthodox, Yitzhak Rabin was to Arab Israelis—the first prime minister to incorporate them into some form of Israeli identity. The Rabin government attempted to redress decades of discrimination by intensively investing in the Arab commu-

nity (especially in education); de-emphasizing the Jewish aspects of Israeli identity; and initiating the Oslo process, which promised to make peace between the Israeli and Palestinian components of Arab Israeli identity.

Arguably, a majority of Arab Israelis want to be absorbed into Israeli identity—but an ethnically neutral one, emptied of Jewish resonance. The deeper problem in fashioning a common identity for Arabs and Jews is that the two groups perceive the very founding of the state in opposite ways: For Jews, 1948 means redemption; for Arabs, disaster. Some Arab Israeli leaders even contemplated commemorating Israel's 50th anniversary with a day of mourning for the Palestinian "holocaust." For Arabs and for Jews, then, the meaning of Israel's founding myth—"from Holocaust to rebirth"—is essentially reversed.

Any attempt at circumventing that fundamental clash of memory by creating a dejudaized Israeli identity embracing Arab Israelis will inevitably exclude that other "conditional Israeli" community on the opposite side of the cultural and political spectrum, the ultra-Orthodox. Conversely, any attempt to draw the ultra-Orthodox closer to the mainstream by emphasizing Israel's Jewishness will exclude Israeli Arabs. Both outsider communities are poised between accommodation and alienation; the tragedy for Israeli society is that integrating one community almost certainly means alienating the other.

The Psychological Transformation of the Jews

After the Holocaust, it could have taken the Jews generations, if at all, to break free from the self-image of victim. Yet, in a single generation Israel has transformed the Holocaust from raw wound to historical memory. Thanks to Israel's military victories—and also to the traumatic experience of becoming occupiers—arguably most Israelis outside of the hard right no longer perceive themselves as victims.

A crucial step in helping the Jews to place the Holocaust behind them and internalize their transition from victimhood to normalization was David Ben-Gurion's audacious decision to accept reparations from West Germany in the early 1950s. Menachem Begin, who led the violent opposition to reparations, was proven right by events that Israel was opening the way to German-Jewish reconciliation; yet that process was necessary to convince the Jews that the creation of Israel decisively ended the experience of exile. Only Israel had the moral authority to impose a peace process with Germany on the Jewish psyche.

Zionism intended not only to return the Jews to the land of Israel but to the community of nations. The gradual lifting of the diplomatic siege

against the Jewish state has reinforced Israelis' psychological integration into humanity, breaking the stigma of the Jews as a people eternally set apart. One of the cruelest weapons used by the Arabs in their war against Israel was the isolation and demonization of the Jewish state, which evoked for Jews their aloneness during the Holocaust—and helped reinforce the rise of the right in the 1970s and '80s. Israel's diplomatic successes in the early '90s, along with the repeal of the "Zionism=racism" resolution in the UN General Assembly, restored Israeli confidence in the promise of Zionism to end Jewish ghettoization—and helped create a positive atmosphere enabling the Rabin government to initiate the Oslo process.

Young Israelis are less inclined than ever before to divide humanity into "*goyim*" and Jews. The very word *goyim*, suggesting a homogeneous Gentile world united by its antipathy to Jews, sounds increasingly ludicrous in modern Hebrew. Becoming a nation among nations means accepting human diversity beyond a simplistic division of the world into "us and them." The extraordinary desire among Israelis to travel to the most remote places is one indication of their growing ease in the world (along with a desperate need to periodically escape the pressures of Israeli life).

In certain basic ways, Israel has transformed the Jewish character beyond recognition. The relief of homecoming, of becoming a majority, has allowed us to relax into ourselves—or, if not quite relax, to at least be fully ourselves without self-consciousness. Jewish timidity has given way to a brash, even arrogant exuberance. That transformation is evident in the way seemingly any Israeli child will spontaneously and effusively speak in public gatherings or before a TV camera, in the way teenagers celebrate Independence Day by bopping strangers over the head with plastic hammers—and also in the way we shout at each other in public places and do not care how "pushy" or obnoxious we appear on lines at the bank or the post office.

The re-formation of the Jews into a nation has shattered some cherished self-images. Jews, we have discovered, are child-molesters and rapists and murderers—just like any other people. No doubt that was always so; but where we once tried to hide our flaws from hostile eyes, now we broadcast them on the front pages of our newspapers. That lack of self-consciousness may also have tempered somewhat the Jewish drive for excellence. Indeed, Israeli education is often disappointingly mediocre. One Russian immigrant offered this insight: "When I came to Israel I was amazed to discover dumb Jews. In Moscow all the Jews I knew were high achievers. At first it made me very depressed. But then I realized: In Russia we were a minority that had to constantly prove itself. Here, we are a people."

A Nation of Soldiers

Israel's most profound impact on the Jewish character has been in altering its relationship to army service. In their prestate debate with Labor Zionists, the right-wing Revisionists insisted that the essence of the Zionist revolution would be transforming the Jew not into a farmer or worker but a soldier; and the Revisionists won. The ongoing Arab siege turned the Jews from a people lacking the most minimal military skills into a permanently mobilized nation in which the borders between civilian and military life are often blurred. An ironic measure of Zionism's success is that traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes have been reversed: from cowards to militarists, from wandering Jews to usurpers of another people's land.

In a nation that was born resisting invasion and has never known the absence of threat, that marks its history by the years in which wars were fought, and whose enemies offer mere recognition as their major concession in peace talks, the army inevitably dominates. Military service is never far from people's consciousness—whether it is the fate of a son or a neighbor's boy in Lebanon, or the more mundane intrusion into daily life of the plain brown envelope in the mail announcing reserve duty, a periodic reminder of the illusion of a citizen's sovereignty.

The impingement of the military on civilian life also works in reverse: Israel's citizen army is remarkably relaxed, especially in the reserves, where officers are not saluted and are routinely called by their first names. The intimacy between civilian and military sectors has helped keep the army committed to government authority and to democracy. During the *intifada*, for example, the army became the arena where the Jewish people confronted itself; each unit serving in the territories became in effect a mini-parliament debating the limits of security and morality.

The army has been the prism through which has passed a random, even anarchic, assemblage of fierce individualists, divided and subdivided by background and ideology, and has emerged resembling a people. Wave after wave of immigrant recruits has been imprinted with a common experience and mission. The unit I served in for my basic training, for example, contained new immigrants from 18 countries. Most of us were in our 30s, indelible civilians in ill-fitting uniforms. And yet, toward the end of our training, when we were formally sworn in and handed Bibles in a ceremony attended by our families—including kibbutzniks and West Bank settlers and Ethiopian women with blue tattoos on their foreheads—we were somehow transformed into a unit. Afterward, we painted the flags of our countries of origin on our bunk walls, as though we were leaving behind something of our old identities.

The experience of sharing the same tent with soldiers from radically different backgrounds has tempered the intensity of Israel's internal di-

visions. Though Israeli society is one of the most heavily and casually armed in the world, and its life-and-death political debates are passionate and unrestrained, only two instances of politically motivated murder among Jews, however traumatic, have occurred since the War of Independence: the grenade attack on a Peace Now rally in February 1983 that killed demonstrator Emile Grunzweig, and the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995.

Repeated warnings of civil war—between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the early 1980s and between leftists and rightists after the Rabin assassination—have proven unfounded. The one real danger of civil war among Jews, or at least of total estrangement, is the conflict between ultra-Orthodox and secular Israelis—which only reinforces the point that Israelis who serve together in the army are unlikely to fight each other on the streets. It is largely because the ultra-Orthodox lack that shared Israeli experience of all-night border patrols and summer desert maneuvers that their disputes with secularists turn so easily from resentment to hatred.

The army has established the emotional parameters of Israeliness. When a Russian immigrant soldier named Nicolai Rappaport was killed in Lebanon in early 1998, he was mourned by the nation as one of its heroes even though he was not halakhically a Jew (only his father was Jewish); when Rappaport's body was returned to Russia for burial, partly because he would have been denied interment in a Jewish cemetery, even many traditional Israelis felt outrage and shame. Rappaport, after all, had fulfilled the ultimate mitzvah of Israeli citizenship; and he belonged to the national consensus far more than the ultra-Orthodox rabbis who would have denied him burial.

And yet, inevitably, as the country distances itself from its collectivist beginnings and gropes toward a Jewish and Middle Eastern version of normalcy, the army's charisma is lessening. The peace process, consumerism, the decline of ideology, the burdens of occupation—all have encouraged the "civilianization" of Israel and undermined Israelis' patience for the endless demands of life in a besieged fortress. Increasing numbers of reservists opt for easily obtained exemptions; according to one astonishing report, only 30 percent of eligible men now serve in reserve units. And while 18-year-old recruits in the standing army continue to vie for places in elite combat units, the primary motive for most of them has shifted from Zionism to self-fulfillment, the need to test oneself against experience (though patriotism certainly reinforces the desire to serve). Only religious Zionists, who are increasingly prominent in elite combat units and the officers' corps, and who have replaced kibbutzniks as the army's ideological elite, continue as a group to be primarily motivated by Zionist values.

With each successive war, the army has lost a little more of its glow. The Six Day War was the last conflict to produce victory albums; the Yom Kippur War, the last to produce rousing battle songs. Israelis' attitude toward the army is a mixture of affection and resentment and wry acknowledgment of its human limitations: the army, for better and worse, is us.

We no longer delight, as we did in the early years of statehood, in martial prowess and military parades, no longer require proof of our own vitality, our radical break with Jewish fate. We no longer wrestle with the ghosts of the Holocaust but with the very real dilemmas of how to secure the long-term existence of a Jewish state in the Arab world.

The shift in Israelis' relationship to the army is best expressed on Yom Hazikaron, Remembrance Day for the Fallen. On Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, we mourn the consequences of powerlessness; on Yom Hazikaron, we mourn the consequences of power. School and community services emphasize not the glory but the pain and loss of war. The TV documentaries are not about battles but individuals: three brothers who died in the 1948 War of Independence, the Holocaust survivor who lost two sons in the Yom Kippur War, a widow who every night writes letters to her dead husband. Those who fell are recalled not as patriots and martyrs but as fathers, sons, friends. Love of country and heroism under fire are valued, but always defer to personal grief. In the sad songs that play relentlessly on the radio, no enemies are invoked to unite the country except death itself.

Preoccupation with Survival

Despite the shift in Israelis' relationship with the army, security remains a central concern. Fifty years into statehood, we still cannot take permanence for granted. Israel has empowered the Jews with the will and means to resist their enemies; but it has not ended our preoccupation with survival. Israel is the only country in the world that provides gas masks for every citizen, one of the few countries in the post-Cold War world that faces a real prospect of nonconventional warfare. According to a recent poll, fully 57 percent of Israelis are not sure the country will survive in the long term, citing both external threats and internal divisions. We live between fear of destruction and sudden reprieve, moving from the ecstasy of 1967 to the despair of 1973 and back again to the euphoric relief of the Entebbe rescue of 1976. Emotionally, the trajectory of Israel's history is not from Holocaust to rebirth but repeated wavering over the ultimate fate of the Zionist experiment.

Beginning with the Lebanon War and intensifying with the *intifada*,

large numbers of Israelis came to believe that their government was at least partly to blame for the absence of peace; and so the security threat shifted from uniting Israelis to further dividing them. In recent years, Israel's apocalyptic fears have been increasingly internalized, directed toward rival political camps rather than the Arab enemy. Both leftists and rightists agree about this: that if their ideological opponents prevail, the country will not be merely diminished but destroyed. Leftists argue that time is on the Arabs' side, and that an Israel under permanent siege will eventually fight one war too many; and so the right, by blocking any opening for peace, is dooming the country to destruction. Rightists counter that only by convincing the Arabs of Israel's resolve will it secure peace, and that vital territorial concessions will expose the country to a final assault; and so the left, by encouraging enemies who have not genuinely accepted Israel's existence, is fatally undermining its security.

Apocalyptic fears, however subtly, also animate the secular-religious debate. Secularists see in the growing power of the religious parties the threat of a Jewish theocracy, which would alienate most American Jews and eventually the U.S. Congress and result in Israel's total isolation. At the same time, Israel's secular elite, which maintains the army and the high-tech companies and the universities and the science labs, would flee en masse, depriving the country of its crucial edge over the Arabs and eventually leading to its destruction. Ultra-Orthodox Jews counter that secular hedonism is a provocation against God, who twice before exiled the Jews for not fulfilling his commandments and who will certainly do so again if we continue to spiritually pollute the Holy Land.

The result of all those mutually exclusive apocalyptic scenarios is the inability of Israeli society to create a civic culture of tolerance—and more profoundly, a sense of common purpose crucial to a cohesive national identity. When both sides are convinced that the other's positions threaten the nation's existence, real tolerance or national unity is impossible. Inevitably, then, when either a left-wing or right-wing government comes to power, the opposition feels not just disenfranchised but desperate, as if the country has been usurped by mad adventurers. That despair is reinforced by the overlapping of political and cultural agendas: The right not only destroys the peace, as the left sees it, but draws theocracy closer; the left not only fatally weakens the country physically, as the right sees it, but also spiritually, by dejudaizing Israeli identity.

The extremes of the right and the left tend to demonize opponents. Hard-line religious rightists often refer to leftists as *"erev rav,"* the Gentiles who joined the Israelites going out of Egypt and whom some rabbinic traditions blame for instigating the construction of the Golden Calf and corrupting Jewish purity. For its part, the hard-line left often labels

its opponents as fascists and even Nazis. One columnist in the left-wing daily *Ha'aretz*, denouncing an innocent billboard campaign featuring mainstream left- and right-wing leaders smiling together and urging tolerance, mockingly wrote, "What Jewish glue can create a bond between the fascist and the humanist? How about billboards emblazoned with the visages of Josef Goebbels and Thomas Mann?"

The country's security pressures, then, affect its social intactness in paradoxical ways. On the one hand, the shared army experience reinforces a common Israeliness. Yet the mutually exclusive positions on how to save the country undermine the emergence of an Israeli people whose factions perceive each other as partners in preserving Israel rather than as its potential destroyers.

Security pressures affect the Israeli psyche in basic ways. Everyone is engaged in the national debate; even elementary-school students passionately argue about the peace process. Everything matters; little buffer exists between politics and daily life, public and private domains. When police cordon off a public area to examine a "suspicious object," we do not flee what may be a bomb but press against the barricades for a closer look. We drive with contempt for each other and for our own safety, a nation of soldiers intimate with killing machines and unable to respect the lethal potential of mere cars. We do not simply go on vacation abroad, we escape; the intensity of living on the edge is alternately exhilarating and unbearable.

The intimacy in which Israelis live with danger and death, the repeated reversal of the natural order whereby parents bury children in military cemeteries, has created a deep spiritual need, an urgency among many to know if there really is a God and a soul and a life after death. Some explore the plethora of "new age" and eastern religious movements, which are thriving in Israel; others turn to Orthodox Judaism. (A growing hedonism is yet another response to the spiritual crisis.) The "return to Judaism" movement has been energized by war. One wave of "penitents" came after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israel glimpsed its own mortality; another followed the 1991 Gulf War, when 39 Scud missiles fired at Israeli cities claimed only one fatality, convincing many Israelis of God's protection. The seemingly endless conflict, along with Israel's unique status as a country whose right to exist is still unresolved, reinforces the appeal of ultra-Orthodoxy's theology of despair, which insists that only Torah observance and Divine intervention can save the Jews.

The security situation's ongoing domination of the national agenda also empowers religion politically: Both Labor and the Likud are willing to defer to the sectarian demands of religious parties in exchange for support on the territorial issue. The result has been the corruption of both democracy and faith.

The Transformation of Judaism

By empowering Judaism's essential myths of the return to Zion and the ingathering of the exiles, Israel inspired a worldwide Jewish religious revival. That revival did not begin immediately with the founding of the state, when Jews were still too stunned by the Holocaust; instead, it was deferred until the biblical-like victory of the Six Day War, which seemed to shatter Israel's mundane facade and reveal the country's miraculous essence. 1948 revived the Jewish body, which reveled in its physical resurrection; 1967 revived the Jewish soul.

For many Jews, the abrupt transition from absolute powerlessness to military mastery was too overwhelming to be processed in mere political terms. The result was the first outburst of messianic enthusiasm among Jews in centuries. The religious Zionist camp became the center point of redemptive expectation, with largely negative consequences. By focusing their messianic hopes on the retention of Judea and Samaria, religious Zionists subtly displaced the theological centrality of Jewish peoplehood with the land of Israel—culminating in the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir, who violated the unity of the people to preserve the unity of the land.

Many religious Zionists, inspired by messianic fervor, have become more religiously stringent and distanced from secular culture, undermining the community's traditional moderation and its crucial role as bridge between Orthodox and secular Israelis. Rabbis have assumed increasingly central roles in the religious Zionist community, which once insisted on restricting their authority to halakhic issues. The 1995 ruling by 15 leading religious Zionist rabbis forbidding soldiers to participate in any West Bank withdrawal attempted to impose rabbinic over military authority and threatened Israel's key unifying institution.

Yet since the Oslo process, and especially the assassination of Rabin, redemption has quietly faded from the religious Zionist theological agenda; the community is far more preoccupied with apocalyptic fears than with messianic hopes. And religious Zionists have finally begun a long-deferred debate over their commitment to democracy and their relationship to the secular mainstream. The consequences of that debate could be an historic schism between Orthodox democrats and theocrats, with the former drawing closer to the Israeli mainstream and the latter to the ultra-Orthodox separatists.

Besides inadvertently triggering a messianic movement, Israel restored Orthodox Judaism, nearly destroyed in the Holocaust, to centrality in Jewish life. Orthodoxy became the state religion, its rabbis incorporated into government bureaucracy and granted a monopoly over marriage, divorce, and conversion. For Orthodox and even many non-Orthodox but

traditionally minded Israelis, some form of religious control over public life is essential for granting "Jewish legitimacy" to the state. Until it assumed political form in the late 19th century, the dream of return to Zion was inseparable from the dream of returning Judaism to Zion. Along with the Jewish people, Judaism too was in exile. Only in the land of Israel could it be completely fulfilled, its commandments and prayers attuned to the seasonal and spiritual rhythms of the Holy Land. Most of all, only in Israel could Judaism resume its classical role as the state religion of the Jewish people. And so what seem like acts of religious coercion to many secularists—for example, banning public transportation and commerce on Shabbat—are perceived by Orthodox Jews as the logical, indeed inevitable, expression of Jewish statehood.

Zionism won the loyalty of the Jews in part because it offered to fulfill their contradictory longings: to be chosen, and to be like everyone else. Zionism simultaneously actualized biblical myth and created a normal nation-state. Israel has tried to mediate between its people's opposing desires by devising the so-called "status quo," which allowed some measure of religious control in an essentially secular society. Israel is not a theocracy; it is, rather, a democracy burdened by an official state faith and by religious legislation.

Initially at least, secular leaders like Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion saw the creation of statist Orthodoxy as a magnanimous gesture to Jewish unity, a concession by a triumphant secular Zionism to a defeated Orthodox minority. In allowing its democracy to be compromised by religious intervention, Israel insured the passionate loyalty of religious Zionists and also neutralized anti-Zionist theology in the mainstream ultra-Orthodox community.

And yet, as the power of statist Orthodoxy has grown, augmented by legislation and coalition politics, secular resentment has grown along with it. The result is that at least some secularists have become alienated from the most basic Jewish identity. Though dogmatic secularists represent only a small minority, they include a large part of the Israeli cultural elite, and their influence far exceeds their numbers.

In recent years, the Israeli paradox of a secular state in Zion has begun to unravel. Increasing numbers of both Orthodox and secular Israelis are dissatisfied with the status quo's inevitable compromise of both the state's democratic and Jewish identities, and want Israel to unequivocally decide between the two. The danger is that any decision resolving that ambiguity in favor of either the Judaists or the absolute secularists will alienate the losing side from Israeli identity.

Though most Israelis are more ambivalent than dogmatic on religion-state issues, two growing constituencies on opposite sides of the divide could determine Israel's future character. If the Russian immigration

continues at its current steady pace of 60,000 a year, Russians will eventually form a pivotal voting bloc, one of whose key issues will be ending rabbinic control over marriage and divorce. And if Shas continues to grow at its phenomenal rate, pressure will increase to expand the power of statist Orthodoxy. The result will be a Russian-Sephardi confrontation further linking ethnic to religious tensions.

Ultimately, the greatest damage committed by statist Orthodoxy has been to Judaism itself. By expropriating Judaic authenticity, statist Orthodoxy has divided the nation into artificial "secular" and "religious" identities. Though most Israeli Jews believe in God, circumcise their sons, give their children bar and bat mitzvahs, place mezuzahs on their doorposts, celebrate the Passover seder, and fast on Yom Kippur (70 percent last year, according to polls), anyone who is not Orthodox is automatically categorized as secular. Even the Hebrew language has conspired to reinforce the Orthodox monopoly on Judaism: the Hebrew word for "Orthodox" and "religious" is identical—*dati*.

The message that Judaism belongs to the Orthodox alone has spiritually disenfranchised non-Orthodox Israelis, who are made to feel self-conscious and inadequate around religious ritual and study. As a result, Judaism in Israel remains the Judaism of the ghetto, the rigid faith of an embattled minority.

The promise of Zionism for Judaism was to restore it to majority status. Only a Judaism that belonged to the entire people would feel self-confident enough to risk innovation. Yet Zionism brought the Jews home from exile, but not Judaism. In its rituals and prayers, Israeli Judaism scarcely reflects this century's convulsions of Holocaust and homecoming—the most intense Jewish experiences since the destruction of the Second Temple, and perhaps since the Exodus from Egypt. Statist Orthodoxy's theology of separation from the Gentiles remains appropriate for a persecuted minority, not for a majority confronting its own non-Jewish minorities. Ironically, Judaism, the religion of history, has become ahistorical, frozen in an earlier time. So long as Judaism remains in exile, it will lack the freedom and vitality to evolve into its next, Israeli, stage. And Israeli society will remain caught in a no-win clash between a rigid Orthodoxy imprisoned by the past and a spiritually depleted secularism incapable of creating a Jewish future.

The Future of Israel

The main work of the coming decades will be imprinting Israeli society with a national identity that respects diversity but offers shared values, myths, and goals.

Israel has yet to fully implement the essential message of the Zionist

revolution: that the Jews are no longer disparate communities but a people again. Peoplehood requires each of its components to respect the inviolate needs of the other, precluding mutual secession. In the Diaspora, Hassidic sects or the Reform movement can adopt any decision or life style without needing to consider each other's reactions. But in Israel, no community is entirely self-referential; anything done by one part of the people resonates in the whole national body.

Perhaps Israeli society needs to redefine Zionism: Acts that reinforce a national Israeli identity are "Zionist," acts that undermine it, "anti-Zionist." In the recent debate over "Who is a Jew?" for example, the government-appointed Ne'eman Commission offered a "Zionist" compromise that respected the bottom-line needs of each side: Israel would empower Conservative and Reform rabbis to teach Judaism to potential converts but would leave the actual conversion in Orthodox hands. In contrast, those Orthodox Jews who rejected the Ne'eman Commission's attempt to reconcile Halakhah with Jewish unity were acting like a separatist community without responsibility to the Jewish people as a whole. By that same measure, the American Reform movement's recognition of patrilineal descent as a way of defining Jewishness placed denominational over national Jewish interests. (Not coincidentally, the Israeli Reform rabbinate rejected patrilineal descent, which would preclude marriage between Orthodox and Reform Jews.) Both Orthodox opposition to the Ne'eman Commission and Reform advocacy of patrilineal descent were in effect "anti-Zionist" positions.

Too often, Israeli governments make crucial decisions without considering their effects on the nation's cohesiveness. When the Begin government embarked on the 1982 Lebanon War, and when the Rabin government recognized the PLO in the 1993 Oslo accord, neither bothered to address the most basic concerns of its opposition; and so those two radically different approaches to the Palestinian problem ruptured the nation and produced at best inconclusive results. Israel can succeed in war or peace only when its leaders seek broad consensus.

A Zionist approach to Israel's left-right schism would acknowledge the legitimacy of both sides: that the right's insistence on wariness of our enemies' intentions, and the left's insistence on respect for our enemies' humanity, equally invoke truths learned from Jewish history. That acknowledgment does not mean obscuring the debate between them with a false unity or avoiding the necessity of making difficult political choices. But by creating an atmosphere of minimal mutual respect, we can begin defusing the apocalyptic fears we direct at each other and realize, perhaps, that dividing the Jewish people into irreconcilable camps poses far greater danger to Israel's survival than the victory of either right or left.

Another crucial step toward healing Israeli society is replacing statist

Orthodoxy with religious pluralism. Expanding the possibilities of Jewish observance will help avert Israel's descent into two warring cultural camps—a superficial secularism that sees little of value in Judaism, a xenophobic Orthodoxy that sees little of value outside Judaism.

Along with Israeli Judaism, Israeli national identity needs to become more expansive.

Israel lives with an increasingly untenable irony: that a Diaspora Jew who has no intention of ever moving to Israel can feel far deeper affinity with the country than an Arab citizen born and raised in it. The de facto exclusion of the Arab minority from Israeli identity was, perhaps, initially inevitable. Preoccupied with refashioning a people from a bewildering diversity of immigrants and defending the country from external threat, Jewish Israel had little psychic space for a minority that identified emotionally, if not tangibly, with its enemies. Indeed, so long as the Arab-Israeli conflict persists, mutual suspicions between Israel's Arabs and Jews will impede full Arab integration.

Still, no society can remain healthy when a large percentage of its citizens are emotionally disenfranchised from the national identity. And while there are no definitive solutions for resolving the place of Arabs in Israeliness, Jewish society and the nation's institutions can encourage a process of gradual identification—for example, by ending formal discrimination in government funding and implementing some form of national (nonmilitary) service for young Arab men, reinforcing the concept of "equal rights for equal responsibilities."

In fact, the Arab community is itself ambivalent: Arab Israelis increasingly feel nationally Palestinian but culturally Israeli. Many non-Jews—Russian immigrants as well as Arabs—speak fluent Hebrew and live, at least on some level, according to the Jewish year cycle. Devising ways of incorporating them into Israeli identity is an opportunity to further the psychological transformation of the Jews from embattled minority to relaxed majority.

While Israeli peoplehood can no longer be entirely synonymous with Jewish peoplehood, the national identity must remain connected with the country's founding Jewish myths. Only a self-consciously Zionist state would have dispatched planes in the midst of an Ethiopian civil war to extract thousands of barefoot African Jewish tribesmen and turn the rescue into a national celebration. An Israel that is no longer in some sense Jewish would cease to motivate its own people, who, more than citizens in any Western country, are expected to sacrifice for the nation.

The consequence of ingathering the exiles is that no one group, no single political or cultural vision, has been allowed to monopolize Israeli identity. And so there is deep unease. Secular Jews fear a theocratic Israel, while Orthodox Jews fear a hedonistic Israel that is losing its soul;

leftists anguish about the collapse of the peace process, rightists about the collapse of their biblical dream. All sides share a growing sense of tenuousness, of "their" Israel slipping away, a fear of homelessness.

The Israeli experience proves that there are no absolutist solutions, no single ideology capable of effectively addressing the nation's crises. Instead, solutions will come when each group is allowed to see something of itself, its ideal Israel, in the nation's reality—and when those groups abandon hopes of hegemony over Israeli identity. That means accepting the inevitability of our paradoxes: that we are at once an Eastern and a Western people, a democratic and a Jewish state a secular entity and a holy land.

The logical conclusion to the ingathering of the exiles is the emergence of a multifaceted Israeli personality, absorbing the society's contradictions and embracing paradox as the vitalizing force of Israeliness. The creation of an integrated Israeli culture, reflecting the varied traditions and insights Jews have brought with them back home, will finalize Israel's transition from rescue to renaissance.