

## The New Secular Jew in Israel — A Profile

Meir Yoffe

DURING THE SUKKOT FESTIVAL last year, 5,000 mostly young and secular people gathered in Ramat Efal for the ninth consecutive year to participate in approximately 100 workshops, lectures, and events about Judaism in contemporary Israeli society.

On Shabbat evenings, in downtown Tel Aviv (Israel's secular and hedonistic city), in Nahalal (the mythological community that symbolizes the country's pioneering secular settlement), and at many similar events across the country, scores of mainly secular men, women, and whole families congregate for prayers to welcome the Shabbat together.

Hundreds of activities are planned each month by dozens of organizations and groups involving thousands of Israeli citizens. The common denominator is an expression of a great powerful voice rising from many non-religious Israelis: our Judaism is important to us. It is a central part of our lives, and we actively engage in its interpretation and design for our personal, communal, and national experiences.

This phenomenon is part of a slow but steady and profound process, and while it has simmered in Israel's secular community over the past 40 years, it is now gathering strength.

The Israeli media is increasingly acknowledging this trend, as is the state school system that serves the secular community. Leading Israeli singers and musicians are drawing inspiration from traditional Judaism, creating hit songs, and book publishers are responding as well.

Secular *batei midrash*, study groups, classes on the week's Torah portion, the scrupulous marking of religious holidays, and social justice as a Jewish imperative are an inseparable part of the normative secular Israeli agenda.

Even in the recent past, in Israel, Judaism was identified solely with Orthodoxy. A secular person wanting to connect with Judaism generally had to cross the line and become *chozer b'tshuva*, newly religious. Today, it is much more common to find Israeli Jews who are not God-fearing or observant of religious commandments (mitzvot), whose secularism is undoubted, but who nonetheless study Torah as a way of life, keep traditions, sometimes involve themselves in religiosity and spiritual-

ity, and who perceive their Judaism as a central and binding component of their lives.

Many of these secular Israelis have been influenced by the various streams of American liberal religious Judaism, which offers an alternative model of religious Judaism.

This wave of secular Judaism is influencing broad circles of the secular public and creating a new type of conflict and dialogue between Israel's secular and Orthodox communities. It undermines the very problematic "status quo" that has characterized the central Israeli agenda since independence in 1948, in which the 20 percent of the Israeli population that is Orthodox held responsibility to preserve, interpret, and control Judaism in the Israeli public sphere. Some observers muse that this perspective — where religious matters would not be in the hands of the Orthodox alone — would be opportune for a majority of Jews who live here and would offer a means to recreate the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic country, a condition that is essential and existential for the state's future.

The appearance of the "new secular Jew" not only affects the secular community, but also the varied Orthodox communities; it challenges Orthodoxy and offers an opportunity to reformulate the historic Jewish-Zionist narrative in Israel.

While the phenomenon is still fairly small-scale, it just might influence deep processes within Israeli society.

## **Discussion Guide**

To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas in this issue, we offer the following questions:

- 1. What motivates the recent thirst for exploring identity questions among Israel's secular population?
- 2. What are the avenues for exchange between Israeli and Diaspora Jews, and how can we best facilitate them?
- 3. To what degree, and how, does the question of Jewish identity among Israelis shape the nature of Jewish education in Israel?

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