

Secular Judaism in Israel: Speech

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According to the 1999 survey of the Jewish population of Israel by the Guttman Center,¹ 43 percent of Israeli Jews defined themselves as non-religious, i.e. secular and an additional five percent defined themselves as anti-religious. Respondents were also asked about their observance of the tradition. The relevant question for us is whether the secular respondents report that they observe a small part of the tradition or whether they observe nothing. Twenty nine percent said they observed a small part of the tradition, 18 percent said they observed nothing (this is not true as we shall see), and an additional four percent reported that they were anti-religious and observed nothing. (The handful of anti-religious who reported that they did observe the tradition in part were excluded from the analysis). In the study that follows, these three groups comprise the *hiloni* the secular, as distinct from the *masorti* (the traditionalist) Jews of Israel.

Ethnicity played a major role in our study of *masortiim* and its impact is equally evident among the secular. Based on Guttman Report data we can divide the Jewish population of Israel into Israeli born whose fathers were also born in Israel (17 percent of the total sample) who are not identified by ethnic origin. The remainder are *mizrahim* (46 percent of the total sample, those born in Moslem countries or those whose fathers were born there) and *ashkenazim* (36 percent of the total sample, those born in the west or those whose father's were born in the west). *Mizrahim* constitute 28 percent of the secular who observe something, 15 percent of the secular who observe nothing and 12 percent of the anti-religious who observe nothing. By contrast *ashkenazim* constitute 56 percent of

the secular who observe something, 65 percent of the secular who observe nothing, and 59 percent of the anti-religious.² In other words, *mizrahim* are dramatically underrepresented among secular Jews in Israel. In addition, the less traditional the secular group is, the fewer *mizrahim* are to be found in the group.

Secularists and the Jewish Tradition

In the tables that follow we report the percentages of observance or belief for secularists who report they observe a small part of the tradition, secularists who report they observe nothing, and the anti-religious who report they observe nothing.

Table I: Percentage of Secularists Affirming Traditional Judaism and Jewish Ties

Aspects of Traditional Judaism and Ties To Jewish People	Partially Observing secularists	Non-observing secularist	Anti-Religious secularist	Total of all secularists
Special meal on Shabbat	29	16	8	23
Lighting Sabbath candles with a blessing	25	7	4	17
Avoiding non-kosher meat	38	15	8	28
Participating or leading a Seder in accordance with <i>halakha</i>	50	26	12	38
Fasting on Yom Kippur	55	19	4	38
Using Special Dishes on Passover	30	11	8	22
Has a <i>mezuzah</i> in every room in the	65	44	39	56

house				
Believes there is a God	45	20	9	33
Want a State that is Jewish, not necessarily <i>halakhic</i>	88	80	79	84
Wants more Jewish study in state (non-religious) schools	47	24	10	36
Want more Jewish content on Israeli television	48	29	22	39
Feels part of world wide Jewish people	57	43	34	50
If reborn would want very much to be reborn as a Jew	45	29	22	38

Daphna Canetti questioned a sample of over 2,200 college and university students from most institutions of higher education in Israel. Eighty percent of them reported they were secular.³ She found an even higher incidence of traditional observance and belief among her sample of secularists. For example, 43 percent believed in God and 36 percent believed that the soul continues to exist after death. Over a quarter believed that the Jews were a chosen people, that the Torah was given at Sinai, and that Jewish history is guided by a supernatural force. Forty three percent refrained from eating bread on Passover, and 35 percent lit Sabbath candles with a blessing. The overwhelming conclusion is that a sizeable minority of Israeli secularists observe at least some Jewish traditions, share the basic beliefs of the religiously observant, and feel strong ties to the Jewish people. Furthermore, the less traditionally observant the group, the more tenuous their ties to the

Jewish people. This finding is consistent with the larger finding of the Avi Chai study and with every other study that looks at how closely different groups of Israeli Jews identify with the Jewish people. Elsewhere⁴ we have written about the most recent studies of Israeli Jewish identity all of which yield, more or less, the same conclusions.⁵ First, although there are significant differences between groups of Israeli Jews in terms of both their Israeli identity and their Jewish identity the two identities, Israeli and Jewish are positively related except in the case of the ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*). Yair Auron found that the attitudes of the secular toward the Jewish people and the self image of the secular as part of the Jewish people is much less meaningful to them than other identity components such as their attitudes toward the State of Israel or to the land of Israel.

The correlation between the strength of the Israeli and Jewish identities suggests the second major finding. Respondents who define themselves as religious have stronger Jewish and Israeli identities than respondents who define themselves as traditional and these in turn have stronger Jewish and Israeli identities than those who define themselves as secular. But in an unpublished study by Kopelowitz and Franco that surveyed a group of secular college students at a small Israeli college, many not only reported some observance of Jewish ritual (a quarter are careful to eat only kosher outside their homes) but also testified to the depths of their own religious beliefs.

The third and perhaps most important finding is that whereas secular Jews have the weakest identity both as Israelis and as Jews, the vast majority of them do observe at least some traditional Jewish practices, do see themselves as part of the Jewish people, and do feel loyalty to the State of Israel. Ninety percent of the secular college students in the Kopelowitz and Franco study reported that they were proud to be Jewish. Seventy nine

percent of the non-religious respondents in the Auron study reported that being Jewish played a very important or a very very important role in their lives. And as already noted, in the broadest set of studies of Israeli Jewish attitudes toward religious practice and religious beliefs, studies conducted by the Guttman Institute, a majority of non-religious reported that they would like their children to be more observant than they themselves. The overwhelming majority felt some attachment to the Jewish tradition; celebrated at least some Jewish holidays, and some customs and rituals. Even among the Russian immigrants who arrived in the last decade from the former Soviet Union, immigrants who continue to define their Jewishness in ethnic-secular rather than religious terms, there is evidence of adaptation to the Israeli pattern of Jewishness. Twenty two percent report they are more religious today than in the past, only nine percent report they are less religious, and seventy six percent want their children to observe the tradition in one form or another. But there are exceptions. A minority of young secular Jews express negative attitudes toward religion and the Jewish tradition and alienation from Diaspora Jews

When we try to get behind these identities and ask what they really mean to the respondents themselves, the survey data is less helpful and the authors of these studies less confident. Yair Auron, whose studies of students in teachers' seminaries is most instructive, feels that for his secular respondents, the Holocaust is the central element in their Jewish identity. Attitudes toward the Jewish people, he says, are mediated by way of the Holocaust and the tie to the Jewish people is a tie to a dead people. His analysis recalls that of Amos Elon who, in the 1970's stressed the importance of suffering and victimhood in the Jewish identity of Israelis.⁶ Laura Zarembski describes this crisis in terms of a lost sense of defining characteristics – what it means to be an Israeli. She

contrasts the insecurity of the secular community to the self-confidence of the religious community.⁷ What this suggests to us is that the root of the problem does not lie in the dissociation from religion or from tradition but a loss of belief, by significant numbers of secular Israelis, in secular Zionism – an ideology that until now had nourished their sense of identity with Judaism and the Jewish people. A sizeable minority of secularists continue to report high levels of traditional behavior and strong ties to the Jewish people. But most of them do not. So let us look more carefully at Israeli secularists.

Distinguishing Types of Secularists

What does it mean to be a secular Jew in Israel? We suggest two distinctions that are important to make in trying to fathom the meaning of secularism in Israel. First, the distinction between those who are ideologically secular, those to whom their secularism is a matter of conviction and a way of life, and those whose secularism is a kind of default position. By default secularism we refer to the person who labels him or herself as secular because it is clear that they are not religious or traditional, they keep few if any of traditional observances, the vast majority if not all their friends consider themselves secular, so they are, by default, secular. The line distinguishing the ideological secularist from the secularist by default may not always be clear and there are surely those who fall on both sides of the line but in my judgment it is a fair and important distinction because it reminds us that when we turn to hearing how secular intellectuals describe their secularism we are hearing the voices of an intellectual elite which, however, constitutes only a small part of the secular public. But those who are ideologically secular are in turn divided into what we call the Jewish-secularists and the universal-secularists. The former

feel strongly Jewish, their secularism is in some cases is tied to their Jewishness, they feel themselves to be part of the Jewish people and they are anxious to retain and even strengthen the Jewish components of the state of Israel. On the other side of the divide is a smaller group of ideological secularists to whom Judaism is at best increasingly trivial and at worst a barrier to their aspirations for a state based on liberal universalistic principals, in which distinctions between Jews and non-Jews are of no bearing. The distinctions between these two groups is also not clear cut. There are some who find themselves on one side of the line in terms of their political preferences and on the other side of the line in terms of their personal behavior but there is no doubt in our minds that most ideological secularists can be categorized as either Jewish-secularists or universal secularists

Secularists by Default

Our impression is that the majority of Israeli secularists fall into the category of secularists by default. The ideological secularists consist primarily of intellectuals, the remnant of what was once the backbone of secular-Zionism, and they are almost by definition a small group. As we shall see they certainly think of themselves in that way and some of them are engaged in efforts to strengthen the Jewish identity of the secularists by default.

Endnotes

¹ Shlomit Levy, Hanna Levinsohn and Elihu Katz Beliefs, Observance of the Traditions and the Values of Israeli Jews – 2000 (Jerusalem: Avi Chai foundation and the Israel Democracy Institute, 2002).

² Levy, Levinsohn, Katz, Israeli Jews..., p.14.

³ Daphna Canetti, Democracy and Religious and Parareligious Beliefs in Israel: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives (University of Haifa: doctoral dissertation, 2002).

⁴ Charles S. Liebman and Yaacov Yadgar, “Israeli Identity: The Jewish Component,”

with Yaacov Yadgar in Anita Shapira (ed.), Israeli Identity in Transition (Connecticut:

Praeger Press, 2004), forthcoming

⁵ In addition to the Guttman Report 200 already noted the studies include” Shlomit Levy, Hanna Levinsohn, Elihu Katz, Beliefs, Observances and Social Interaction Among Israeli Jews (Jerusalem: The Louis Guttman Institute of Applied Social Research, 1993) [the Highlights of that Report are reprinted in Charles Liebman and Elihu Katz (eds.), The Jewishness of Israelis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), which also includes an analysis of the 1993 Report]; Yair Auron, Jewish-Israeli Identity (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim Publishing House, 1993); Michal Shamir and Asher Arian. “Collective Identity and Electoral Competition in Israel,” American Political Science Review 93 (June, 1999) pp. 265-277; Uri Farago, “The Jewish Identity of Israeli Youth, 1965-1985,” Yahadut Zmanenu 5 (in Hebrew, 1989), pp. 259-285; Uri Farago, National identity and Regional Identity in Israel,” Azmi Bashara (ed.), Between I and We (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and the Kibbutz Hameuchad, in Hebrew, 1999), pp. 153-168; Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Stephen Sharot, Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in Israeli Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Yochanan Peres and Ephraim Yuchtman-Yaar, Between Consent and Dissent: Democracy and Peace in the Israeli Mind (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, in Hebrew, 1998); an unpublished study by Ezra Kopelowitz and Hadar Franco of 160 students in Rupin college in 2001 (for a report of the study with a summary of the findings see Haaretz, September 12, 2002, p. 3B) ; Jacob Shamir and Michal Shamir, The Anatomy of Public Opinion (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000); Stephen Sharot, “Jewish and Other National and Ethnic Identities of Israeli Jews,” Steven M. Cohen and Gabriel Horenczyk (eds.), National Variations in Jewish Identity (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), pp. 299-316; Eliezer Leshem, “The Aliyah from the Former Soviet Union and the Religious-Secular Cleavage in Israeli Society,” Moshe Lisak and Eliezer Leshem (eds.), From Russia to Israel: Identity and Culture In Transition (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, in Hebrew, 2001), pp. 125-148; and Alec Epstein, “Continuity and Change in the Characteristics of the Identity of Russian Speaking Jews in Israel,” Gesher 147 (Summer,2003, in Hebrew), pp. 19-33.

⁶ Amos Elon, The Israelis (London: Penguin, 1971).

⁷ Laura Zarembski, The Religious-Secular Divide in the Eyes of Israel’s Leaders and Opinion Makers (Jerusalem: The Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, 2002).