Features

Jewish Identity Reconsidered

A. B. Yehoshua

A. B. Yehoshua, one of the most acclaimed novelists in Israel, also writes on contemporary Jewish issues. Beginning with his 1980 collection of essays In Favor of Normalcy (Bizkhut ha-Normaliyut) *in which he sharply criticized the Jewish historic proclivity towards wandering and exile, and even blamed the Holocaust on the victims themselves for refusing to leave the Diaspora and emigrate to Eretz Yisrael when they still could, Yehoshua has continued to dabble in Israel-Diaspora affairs. As this latest article reveals, several of his earlier Israel-centered views, which were considered by some as neo-Canaanite — albeit not anti-religious — in character, have undergone serious change. Readers will judge for themselves whether he succeeds in solving the dilemma of Jewish identity in Israel.*

Some of the ideas expressed below may be seen as a "capitulation to the religious public". Indeed, my argument is that the secular camp must seek renewed contact with the national religious camp and engage constantly in expanding the dialogue with it. Secular Israelis, particularly those from the liberal sector, must pay heed to the problem of national identity, even if they would rather not deal with the issue at all, assume that it does not exist, and adhere to the comfortable and attractive possibility of viewing Israel as another branch of "Western culture", another sector of the global CNN village.

If I may suggest a rather simplistic definition, national identity is the total of the values, behaviors, and moral codes shared by all the members of a nation. All these are the result of a common collective life in a historic continuum and a defined geographic territory. When a national identity lacks a minimum unifying nucleus, separate enclaves are created in it that are alienated from each other. Such alienation not only reduces the expanse of an individual's national territory, but it sometimes constitutes a real threat to his/her peace and security. In the United States, divisions in the American national identity have already made the black neighborhoods in large cities

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dangerous for white people, just as it is becoming impossible in Israel for secular, or even moderate religious Jews, to reside in some extreme religious neighborhoods. It is therefore vital to maintain a stable and expanding core of national identity — sometimes even at the expense of extreme pluralism.

NATIONAL SURVIVAL FORGED OUR COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The central pillar on which Israeli identity is based is the more than 120 years of Arab-Jewish conflict. The amazing capacity to consolidate over fifty years a unifying Israeli identity common to Jews of different origins, despite different languages, large cultural gaps, and a deep chasm between their religious approaches, was derived almost entirely from the common threat hanging over them all. Thus it is surprising that in the course of a century of numerous upheavals and crucial decisions, among a people divided by extreme differences of opinion, only twenty Jews were killed by other Jews for ideological or political reasons. This is not because fanaticism among us is more moderate than in other nations, or because tolerance and good democratic habits are ingrained in us, but because we were all united in face of the threat from outside. Many years ago, a few clever Arabs said that had the Arab world offered Israel a modest peace, this might have succeeded in destroying the Jewish state more efficiently than all the wars waged against it.

This principal reason for national solidarity will gradually disappear, as peace is consolidated. Furthermore, considerable ties of identity that were always associated with the defense struggle will also vanish — for instance, the values of communal settlement and *aliyah*. In recent years the star of settlement has waned; certainly in peacetime it will cease to be considered an Israeli consensus and will be examined only for its expediency and economic success. It is possible that in a small country like Israel opposition may arise to establishing new settlements that steal vital acres from the nature reserves, of which there are so few. A Frenchman is little concerned by the fact that there are large uninhabited areas on the French-Swiss border, and possibly the Israeli will no longer see uninhabited areas as a threat or a security deficiency.

Aliyah and *klitah* (absorption) may also cease to be an agreed and unifying value. At the beginning of the year, an astonishing survey was published, in which a small majority of Israelis said that they were against continued *aliyah*, since the country has no further absorptive capacity. Such a response is unprecedented. *Aliyah* was always conceived as a supreme value because the necessity of demographic superiority of Jews over Arabs was so obvious. Thus *yeridah* (emigration) from Israel was considered a sin. In a state of peace,

aliyah and *klitah* may no longer serve as agreed values of Israeli identity, since we will no longer need to pit ourselves numerically against the Arabs — just as Denmark with its four million inhabitants is not concerned about the number of Germans dwelling within its borders. The end of unifying values will leave an immense vacuum in Israeli identity and will lessen a commitment to the ethical demands that sometimes accompanied these values: fellowship and self-sacrifice, making do with little, a desire to further equality and economic partnerhsip, aid to new immigrants, and openness to people coming from different cultures.

Physicists have taught us that any vacuum in nature must be filled; thus, good or bad values will immediately vie to fill the emptiness in our feeling of identity. The great problem will be to direct the growth of new positive values that will take the place of old vanishing ones. This is necessary, since the disappearance of old values will not only shatter the current common core of identity, but will also widen existing cracks in Israeli society.

CRACKS IN ISRAELI IDENTITY

The first and deepest crack is the one between religious and secular Israelis. The conflict between the people's religious code and its national code is in fact the most basic conflict lying at the heart of Jewish identity. This is the primary rift in the foundation of Jewish peoplehood. Paradoxically, it is this phenomenon that has created the uniqueness of our people and their rejection by the nations with which they have come in contact.

By nature, religion must be universal, namely, accessible to all. If those who believe in it consider their religion to be true, guiding man to what is good and desirable, it is only right that it be proposed to all people, whatever their language and nationality. It is inconceivable that admission into a given religion be made conditional on joining a given nation. This is like telling someone who accepts Kant's philosophic principles, that he must first become a member of the German people. Nationality is founded on biological and historical origins, on a shared collective life in a given territory, and in a defined national framework; it is not possible to restrict one's national belonging and to make it conditional on prior religious consent.

The Jewish religion, however, is proposed only to members of the Jewish people. Anyone who wishes to become a Jew must change his nationality to a Jewish one and commit himself to full solidarity with the Jewish nation. The other side of the coin is also true. A Jew who adopts a different religion is immediately dismissed from the Jewish nation even if he is tied biologically, historically, and experientially to it. However, it is inconceivable that if my

son does not believe in what I believe, I will no longer consider him my own!

This contradiction is at the basis of the tension and unrest in defining a Jew. It is also what drives a Jew to leave the framework of national life in Israel, his country, and go to the Diaspora, to live in countries that are not his, among foreign peoples. For only where there is no national sovereignty can these two codes coexist. Like the hermaphrodite who has within him both male and female attributes, and in fact is neither male nor female, and thus cannot establish family life in his own home, and might wander to foreign domiciles and rely on the tables of others — so did the Jewish people try for thousands of years to evade the unresolved contradiction in their identity by staying away from their country. In a life of wandering in foreign lands and among alien peoples, the question over the contents of Jewish identity is replaced by an initial conflict over the very legitimacy of Jewish collective existence. This existential struggle unites all Jews and thus pushes aside the other more substantial internal struggle between the two codes fighting for the Jewish national soul. It is no accident that religious Jews rejected Zionism; they felt that a return to normal elements of national identity — territory, language, and the reality of a shared national life — would lessen the need for religious elements of identity.

Clearly, the fight between the national and religious codes over our people's soul is liable to be revealed in all its severity during a state of peace, because when at war, both religious and secular Israelis had to show tolerance towards each other. Furthermore, given the delicate parliamentary balance existing between the large political camps in Israel, both of them require the support of the religious bloc, and they have not released all the secular potential within themselves. When the great ideological conflict over Eretz Yisrael ends, the differences between the two major blocs will be like those between Democrats and Republicans in the United States, or between the Conservatives and Labour in England. Once the conflict is over, the increased involvement of Israeli Arabs in the country, and the continued immigration of immigrants with a very weak Jewish identity from areas of distress, will also increase the blurring of Israel's religious character. Certainly, ultra-Orthodox circles, who are already building ghettos for themselves in which they seek to lead a separate lifestyle, will be increasingly isolated from mainstream society, and their alienation from events in Israel will continue to increase, particularly as a cosmopolitan national identity takes hold, and seeks ever more forcefully to fill the new identity vacuum with its secular contents.

The extreme religious groups, who live in the State of Israel as they once lived in foreign countries, without national identification or belonging, are likely to be joined by members of the national religious camp, disappointed

and defeated in their struggle for a Greater Israel after having invested close to thirty years in the hope of guiding the entire Jewish nation in the fulfillment of their dream. In their bitter discontent, they will relinquish the desire to struggle with the enhanced secular reality or attempt to introduce religious contents into it, and will become more extreme in their religious corner.

THE LEVANT VS. THE WEST

A second crack that is likely to widen exists between Levantine and Western Jews. This gap is mainly cultural, but since it is also expressed in the social sphere, it may become extremely painful. The dialogue between Levantine and Western cultures is full of tension. It is sometimes productive and creative, and at others difficult and bitter. As the peace process progresses, this question, already raised on several occasions by our Arab neighbors at the political level, will again be asked by them in a cultural context: Do you Jews see yourselves as a natural and organic part of the Middle East, or only as exiles whose heart and spirit are constantly drawn to the West?

Over the years, Levantine Jews have complained of cultural discrimination, and with the advent of peace I think this criticism will become increasingly vocal. The opening of the borders with Arab countries will encourage Jews who emigrated from them to see the legitimacy of their fathers' culture restored to a considerable extent. Those who feel nostalgia for this culture — and they are fairly numerous — will be able to satisfy their longings to reconnect with it through commercial and tourist relations. This cultural renaissance, together with a natural flooding of Israel with Palestinian visitors, will make the Jewish homeland a country with a far more manifest Levantine identity than it possesses today — but this may be rejected by Israelis who take New York, Los Angeles, or London as their cultural model. Some Levantine Jews in Israel will now demand more forcefully that amends be made for the cultural discrimination of the past. Since the cultural gap between East and West in the Jewish state is generally also related to a class difference, this tension, without the ties of defensive solidarity, will widen the cultural gap in Israel, and increase alienation among groups of Israelis.

Another gap likely to widen with the advent of peace is between Israeli and Diaspora Jews. An Israel at peace, enjoying extensive international recognition and approval, will no longer require Jewish lobbying and fund raising and will leave Diaspora Jews without a rich source of Jewish activity and collective identity. On the other hand, given the contemporary chaotic and weak condition of Jewish identity that is based subjectively on defining

a Jew as "one who defines himself as a Jew", the Israelis' feeling of group solidarity and national identification with Diaspora Jews will become increasingly abstract. Israel will no longer need Diaspora Jewry existentially, and thus the alleged link of collective fate will lose much of its meaning.

NEW CHALLENGES FACE THE JEWISH SOCIETY

I believe in the peace now taking shape; it consists basically of territorial concessions and recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination in exchange for full peace and strict security arrangements. There is no other way. However, intellectuals and leaders engaged in understanding the formation of Israeli identity must now begin to reflect deeply on more correct and essentially more creative ways to deal with what may develop, and not permit nature to go its own way. What I mean is that Israel must spread new wings, not related to monetary goals but to a deeper understanding of the tensions within Israeli society. These wings must include creative investments in several old and new directions.

First and foremost the Left and the Labor camps must spell out clear platforms of action for greater social justice and equality. At the same time, in the national cultural arena, a new kind of pact must be made between the Jewish majority and the Israeli Arab minority, while making it clear that Israel will continue to be not only the state of the Jews but also a Jewish state. Here the alliance between secular and national religious Jews must be revived, even at the price of what will be seen as "concessions" by secular Israelis.

In the last twenty years, the Israeli liberal and Left sectors have devoted all their energies to one question only: peace, including recognizing the Palestinians' right to self-determination, and ending the rule over them. Political and social forces with different, and sometimes even conflicting, views on economic and social policies united around this objective. In its early years, Israeli society was distinguished for the narrow economic gap between its classes; in the last two decades, however, Israel has become a country with ever widening economic gaps. With the inroad of cheap Palestinian labor and the rapid rise of American economic assistance, inequality has increased in our society. This trend continues, and today Israel does not occupy a place of distinction in the family of Western democracies with regard to class differences.

An Israel at peace cannot allow itself American-style social inequalities. Israel will continue to be a small nation surrounded by foreign peoples who regard it with suspicion even if they have recognized its existence. Thus, if Israeli energy formerly devoted to the Palestinians' right to self-

determination is directed henceforth primarily to the rights of homosexuals or of battered women, namely, to questions of civil rights and "political correctness" alone, and not to improving the economic condition of the lower classes, even at the expense of the pace of economic development — the defensive national solidarity will no longer exist to allay hatred and social tensions. The classical Zionist Left must again find its social-democratic identity, even as it distances itself somewhat from its cosmopolitan liberal enthusiasm.

The coalition of the Zionist Left with the national religious camp is a classical alliance that was for many years (until the Six-Day War) one of the most important underpinnings of the political and intellectual center in Israel. Every effort must be made to renew this alliance. The national religious camp was for many years at the center of the political map, and even showed more moderate positions than those of a large segment in the Labor movement. Today, every attempt must be made to smooth things over, particularly with the national religious element that always endeavored to be a partner in the overall Zionist enterprise. The initiative for settling differences must be taken by the winning secular camp, particularly its liberal sector which must curb its secular hedonistic appetite — not for national appeasement on political issues that now divide the nation, but in order to develop and enrich Israeli identity.

Today, we see the relations between the groups in the context of political conflict over Greater Israel. Since a decision has already been made, the peace accords and the division of Eretz Yisrael between the two peoples living there will become a recognized political reality. The dialogue between religious and secular Israelis will no longer be a political discourse but a spiritual and cultural one, since the absence of shared unifying elements of Israeli identity will make it even more exposed to the outer cosmopolitan manifestations of American culture (not the desirable inner kernels of that civilization). The measure of such exposure will be very great given the development of a world communications network. The problem of maintaining cultural ingredients of national identity occupies larger and more firmly established peoples than ours; yet, the French, Italians, Dutch, Japanese, and others continue to maintain enduring cultural traditions. They sustain and nurture valuable and culturally powerful assets that preserve the richness of historic awareness and its specific cultural dimension. This is true of the Chateau of Versailles in France, the museums of Amsterdam and Florence, and the traditional Japanese temples that continue to exist in the midst of modern life. These serve to effectively safeguard the inner kernels of one's national identity, and guide its organic and natural development.

We have no such material assets. We spent most of our history among many and different peoples, and so our material culture was attached to

that of others and for the most part was destroyed. What remains of our historic testimonies, in the world and in Eretz Yisrael, are mainly ancient texts. Therefore, if even the most secular among us wish to seek roots for their identity, they must do so mainly through texts, which in their great majority are immersed in religious experiences. Access to these texts can be facilitated by those national religious individuals who have a more natural attachment to them and also have a shared interest with us in finding in them elements of our common national identity.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ARABS

The basis of Zionism included the notion of a spiritual and cultural return to the region of our roots. We did not come to Eretz Yisrael only because Europe hated us; we have returned to the source of our origins, in the hope of finding there an old-new synthesis for our collective identity. We still remember the picture of Chaim Weizmann wearing a *keffiya* on his head, next to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, after they formulated an announcement of joint friendship between the Zionist movement and the Arab National movement following the Balfour Declaration. Some of the founders and leaders of Zionism saw in this reconnection to the Levant both a return to the authentic ancient origins of Jewish nationalism and a challenge for new cultural development. Therefore, it is not surprising that eminent Jewish scholars specialized in Middle-Eastern studies and several of them became internationally famous Orientalists. The years of hostility, the wars and terrorist activities, eroded the latent romanticism towards the Arabs. Now, with the advent of peace, we must make sure that our return to the Levant will not represent merely a regression of Near Eastern Jews to their roots.

We must enunciate an all-embracing national position that will also oblige Western Jews to seek a way to communicate with the Near East. This is not easy. For centuries, the political and cultural situation of the Arab world has been poor, and the future is far from rosy. The Arabs are deeply suspicious of anything Western and foreign, and this fear has increased many times over in relation to the Jews. Nonetheless, one can hope that with the conclusion of the conflict with Israel, which appropriated valuable resources from the Arab nations and caused them humiliating defeats, a new spark will awaken the great Arab people that many centuries ago was the leader in world culture, to its own modern renaissance. It is the role of intellectuals and artists to make a special effort to understand and penetrate the Arab mentality and not to despair too quickly of it. We in Israel are neither Oriental nor Western, but Mediterranean. However a meaning must

be given to this special Mediterranean character. Regional identity still has some value, not only for trade and tourism, but for roots and identity.

Our attitude towards Israeli Arabs must be firm and clear, precisely because with the arrival of peace they will rightfully demand full equality in Israeli society. As effective arbitrators between Israel and the Arab world, they are likely to seek a blurring of Jewish identity and to focus on a civil state for all Israeli citizens, as in America. Here, we cannot grant concessions. Israel must remain a Jewish state in its symbols and contents, while granting a recognized cultural status to its Arab minority. This does not mean governmental or territorial self-rule (since the Israeli Arabs are not a territorial minority like the Basques in Spain or the Corsicans in France), but rather cultural autonomy, with agreed representation in several centers of governmental authority, and, of course, full, equal, civil rights. The integration of Israel's Arab citizens must in no way lead to a blurring of the national identity of its Jewish population.

On the other hand, the Law of Return must be meticulously applied particularly since this is an issue of granting Israeli citizenship to newcomers. However, we should no longer grant automatic citizenship to Jews, but wait a few years until the new immigrant proves that he/she adopts an Israeli identity, at least by learning the language and clearly knowing Israeli laws and customs, in the same way that citizenship is granted in other modern countries. The Law of Return will continue to prevail and give every Jew the right to live in Israel — but this right should be conditional.

ISRAEL'S MISSION TO THE WORLD

I now come to a final aspect of our identity problem, and offer a suggestion that has been made before. In essence, it is a possible answer to a great and noble question: What will the mission of the Jewish people be in the twenty-first century?

When in the 1920s Martin Buber asked his friend, the German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, to support the Zionist movement, the latter refused. "Do the Jews really wish to relinquish their great mission to the nations", he exclaimed in amazement and anger, "and just seek to be happy? Do they wish to establish merely another Albania in the Middle East?" Only a few years later, having experienced the depths of hell on earth, Jews came to understand that there is nothing wrong in seeking a little happiness. Following the Holocaust, they realized very painfully the importance of giving up such visions as a "chosen people", in exchange for the security of dwelling in their own land like all peoples. Such is the essence of normalcy for both individual and national life.

However, do we thereby relinquish the feeling of mission and destiny that accompanied us for so many generations? Should we move from the extremism expressed by Hermann Cohen to a counter-extremism, and say: let us deal only with ourselves, and leave the complicated and confused world that expects nothing from us, to its own resources?

Talk of historic destiny and of the Jewish people's mission to the nations of the world has often been heard during the last two centuries. This is not an idea espoused only by dreamers; practical leaders like Ben-Gurion also expressed it. Even after the establishment of the State of Israel, leaders and intellectuals continued to ask: "Shall we really make do with a kind of Albania?" A secular and realistic scholar like Gershom Scholem once responded to this provocative thought in an interview: "If Israel is like all countries and peoples, it will not exist in the next century."

In truth, even I sometimes feel that it is perhaps better for Israel and the Jewish nation to abandon dreams of a mission, and lofty talk of being a collective ethical light to mankind. We know today, after decades of political independence, that the morality in which we took such pride in the Diaspora was essentially theoretical, and was manifest principally in pretty turns of speech. Morality looks completely different once it is put to a practical test — in managing an economy, an army, treatment of minorities, a Secret Service, social policies, etc. I think it is very damaging to abandon the consciousness of mission and destiny and to embrace only a limited national egoism. It is not good for us to relinquish the belief that we have something special to give to the world. We have learned on both the individual and national levels that the giver is only strengthened by giving. The question is, what is the practical mission that Israel can assume, and toward which nations?

In recent years, the difference between First, Second, and Third World countries has become progressively more frightening and dangerous. The worst of it is that the First World states have come to terms with this terrible situation. Since there is no longer an Eastern bloc denominated by Russia, and the competition between the two ideological blocs no longer exists, there is no longer any need to buy the political support of poor countries by foreign aid. The tension between the First and Third Worlds is becoming increasingly dangerous. In an age when nuclear weapons are beginning to fall into private, generally deranged, and vindictive hands, we may all find ourselves in the not too distant future in a situation where poor countries will threaten rich ones with disaster.

We can help the weak countries not with money but by raising their inhabitants' living standards — helping them develop constructive production lines, so that they can be good producers and consumers — as is already being done in several South Asian countries. Israel must participate in this First World mission, particularly since we ourselves are located on

the seam between the two worlds; a few score kilometers from the villas of the thriving Sharon region and Tel Aviv lies Gaza, for instance, which is the Third World in every sense of the word.

We Jews have always excelled in the field of teaching, and I suggest that we act in accordance with this national tradition and skill. Israel today can contribute know-how to the Third World, and I come back to the idea of creating a "teaching corps", like the Peace Corps created by President Kennedy in the early 1960s. Teachers from Israel will go to the Third World to teach everything from chemistry and mathematics to computers, economics, and music. It is not a tremendous operation financially; it requires only salaries for educational "soldiers". This can be a joint mission of Israel and of world Jewry. Where will the soldiers be found? The Jewish people has a reserve of unemployed intellectuals both in Israel and in Eastern Europe. Teaching is a gift that is always welcomed, and those benefitting from it will understand that it is not an attempt at economic control or military intervention. In Israel, this world-wide project can be based on money that was earmarked for immigrant absorption and unemployment compensation.

Such a "teaching corps" will also bear fruit at the international level. We will no longer be self-righteous victims wallowing in memories of the Holocaust, nor involved in vain arguments with Arabs and ordinary anti-Semites. We will be doing something that can transform the hollow rhetoric of a "light unto the nations" into something modest but real.

I have tried to outline several directions that will give new content to Israeli identity. Others may have complementary ideas, but I adhere to John Scalley's excellent saying: "The best way to foresee the future is to invent it." □