

# Dusting Off the Jewish Bookshelf

When it comes to Judaism, Israel is a staunchly conservative country. Contrary to the overwhelming conventional wisdom propounded by many of the country's own pundits, professors and cultural gurus to the effect that the nation's Jews can be neatly pigeonholed into a large "secular" majority (perhaps 80% of the population) and a presumably divisive and over-empowered "religious" minority (certainly no more than 20%), the truth is that most Israelis maintain a healthy respect for religious tradition and even a high level of Jewish observance—as has once again been demonstrated in recent months by a number of new cultural "phenomena" which make it clear just how alien Jewish tradition *is not* to Israel's supposedly "secular" Jews.

Take, for example, the decision in January by Meretz, Israel's cutting-edge "peace" party, to try to jettison its venomous anti-religious image in favor of a new style more appealing to traditional voters. Since the 1996 elections, which saw Meretz's Knesset faction dwindle from 12 seats to 9, while the religious parties swelled from 15 seats to 23, Meretz has been searching its electoral soul. "How could I have misread Israeli society?" lamented MK Dedi Zucker, who concluded that the party's ultra-secularism was a substantial portion of its electoral problem and spearheaded the effort to recast the party's image. His efforts proved successful, and in January it officially adopted Zucker's initiative: "Meretz will have great difficulty appealing to the Sephardic community, which is predominantly traditional, if it paints itself as extreme on matters of tradition and heritage," went a party report whose signatories included Zucker as well as long-time Meretz heavies Shulamit Aloni and MK Amnon Rubinstein. "We have to

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present the party's positive attitude toward religion," the report continued. "Meretz can see tradition as a source of inspiration."

For a party which has long harbored some of Israel's most notorious anti-traditionalist elements, the shift in Meretz's self-image is no less than breathtaking (after all, if Meretz isn't going to be hostile to traditional Judaism, then who is?). Yet Meretz's tilt towards traditional voters is but a milestone in the odyssey of Tel Aviv's community of strident secularists, whose long, slow rediscovery of Jewish sources and traditions has recently been dubbed by the press as the "return to the Jewish bookshelf." Over the past few years, dozens of high-profile learning groups, radio talkshows, educational programs and interviews on unabashedly Jewish subjects have dotted the mainstream cultural landscape, offering the devoutly secular a no-pressure, no-promises portal to the sources of Jewish tradition. In one weekly talkshow called *Beit Midrash Leili* ("Nighttime Study Hall"), Israel's most popular radio station treats its prime-time listeners to a selection of Talmudic wisdom, translated into modern Hebrew and analyzed by a panel of commentators selected with an eye toward variety, wit and controversy. In another forum known as *Shaharit* ("Daybreak"), well-known journalists, cultural critics and academics gather together with rabbis and religious thinkers to discuss matters of religion, society and culture in a spirit of respect for Jewish traditionalism. What unites the Jewish bookshelf movement is a public show of respect for Jewish tradition and thought by certain members of the cultural elite, in brazen defiance of that elite's prevailing norms.

What is going on? Explanations abound: Some claim a general cultural shakeup since the Rabin assassination; others cite a backlash against the overwhelming victory of the post-Zionist left within the Israeli cultural and intellectual establishment; still others see it as an attempt to "take back the Tora" from an Orthodox establishment that has presumably been monopolizing the Jewish heritage for its own purposes.

Certainly, all these factors may be in play. But the Jewish bookshelf movement may also represent something far more interesting: A new

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rejoinder to the dissolving Labor-Zionist ethos which until recently dominated Israeli culture. Labor Zionism's originators, men such as Ben-Gurion and Berl Katznelson, were themselves rebels against the yeshiva educational system of Eastern Europe. Without ceasing to be inspired by the Bible, Jewish history and a Jewish nationalism ultimately predicated on conservative premises ("the Bible is our Mandate," Ben-Gurion told the Peel Commission in 1937), Labor Zionism nevertheless rejected the "exilic" Judaism embodied in the rabbinical literature, along with other hallmarks of the diaspora such as the Yiddish language and the Jewish inclination towards mind-intensive professions, all in an effort to create a rifle-and-Bible-toting "new Jew." Yet the new Jew which Ben-Gurion had hoped to create failed to appear, and the children of the first Labor-Zionist settlers grew up—to the consternation of their parents—possessing a lot more "new" than "Jew." So while a majority of today's culture-cobblers have rejected the essential Jewish component of Labor Zionism in favor of a rabid ultra-secularism, the Jewish bookshelf movement offers a thoroughly *conservative* rebuttal, one that draws more upon an emotional, pro-Jewish impulse than any articulable "philosophy." At long last, some of Israel's cultural elite has begun groping its way back to the rejected heritage of its grandparents.

Predictably, the trend has met with a fusillade of naysaying from those who are desperate to show that bookshelf buffs are really "only browsing," and that such a fad must quickly fade. Yet unlike other trends in Israeli popular culture, the long-term prognosis for the Jewish bookshelf movement is excellent, since cultural figures who adopt a more Jewish posture, to the derision of all their friends, are nonetheless likely to earn the approval of the Israeli public at large—a public that is far more *Jewish* than most people think.

According to the well-known 1993 study conducted for the Avi Chai Foundation by the Jerusalem-based Louis Guttman Institute, fully 80% of Israeli Jews keep kosher at home. No fewer than 78% attend a Passover seder, 71% fast every Yom Kippur, and 98% affix a mezuzah to their front doors. As for their Jewish identity, the numbers are equally surprising: Fully

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68% believe that the Jews were “chosen among the nations,” 63% believe that “the Torah and Mitzvot are God’s command,” while as many as 94% take pride in being Jewish, and 96% feel a connectedness to Jews around the world. In short, the oft-promulgated 80-20 split between the “secular” and the “religious” may have something to it, but that something is the *reverse* of what is generally believed: If four-fifths of Israelis keep kosher at home and feel connected to the Jewish people the world over, then the real 80-20 split is in favor of those who want their children and their country to be not “secular,” but Jewish.

Popular figures who have “come out of the closet” for Judaism are not merely peddling a pop-traditionalism whose moment will quickly pass. Far from it: The return to the Jewish bookshelf is also a return by members of the cultural elite to the people of Israel and its traditional identity, a bridging of the gap between Israel’s intelligentsia and a general public whose respect for tradition has probably never waned, but whose views were rarely taken seriously by the oligarchy that sets the tone of Israeli society.

Participants in the movement are to be lauded not only for their courage. By granting a new legitimacy to Jewish tradition in the public eye, they are giving expression to the spiritual longings of a nation. In that respect, theirs is an immeasurable contribution to the building of a Jewish state.

David Hazony, for the Editors  
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