
Amnon Lord

Lately I have been occupied with what may be called a search for the roots of the leftist experience in Israel. Such a topic naturally leads one to ask after the causes of the polarization that Israeli society has undergone in recent years. Understanding this experience of polarization—some would say schism—may be the key to understanding most of what is happening in Israeli politics and society today.

The more I explore the subjects that divide the Israeli public, the more an obvious conclusion emerges: The fundamental conflict, the focal point at every historical juncture of the State of Israel and, even before, of the *yishuv*, is the question of the Israeli identity. And not in the way people prefer to present the question—“What kind of Jews will we be?”—with some saying we will be Jews of this sort, and others saying we will be Jews of another sort—but in a much more extreme formulation: The recurring issue in every generation since the debate between A.D. Gordon and J.H. Brenner is whether we will live here as Jews, in a society that fosters Jewish culture, at all.

In dealing with such a weighty topic, I prefer not to make hasty declarations or offer a specific program. All I can say is that my experience of studying and writing about the sociopolitical polarization in Israel has set me upon a trail, one which, for me at least, is perhaps itself the most important thing.

In coming to terms with this question, I feel like a new recruit in an elite fighting unit who has parachuted into the heart of the jungle armed with only a machete and a compass. After it seems I have reached my destination, I discover a path there, a sort of worn, old elephant trail. Others have been here before me. Suddenly I find on the wayside an old map left by someone long gone—and it turns out that the path I am following is marked on the map; others have already traveled it. Yet this is no highway, traversed by half of humanity. Those who take it are neither solitary nor great in number. And I discover that it is good to be among them. The question which affixes me to this path: How to preserve and foster a Jewish identity and culture in the face of the intense efforts being made now to reject or even erase them.

One of those who passed along this path, one of the great ones, is the philosopher Eliezer Livneh, whose name has not been mentioned much in recent years. In his book *Israel and the Crisis of Western Civilization*, Livneh argues that the Six Day War returned the Israelis to their Judaism and cured them of their “spiritual malaise,” as he describes their situation in the generation leading up to 1967. Ever since, the Jewish people have increasingly returned to the roots of their Jewish identity and culture.

Many others, however, have undergone the reverse process. These, whom we are accustomed to call “the Left,” came upon the 1967 experience of crisis and rebirth completely lacking the tools necessary to grasp the period’s meaning on a national-Jewish level. As a result, a profound emotional and intellectual alienation began to develop among them, to such an extent that by now an entire ideology has emerged which presents the progressive values of universalism as fundamentally opposed to the values of the Jewish state. The fashionable question is whether we will be an “enlightened democratic” state or an “unenlightened, nationalistic, ethnic theocracy.” Once again, it was Eliezer Livneh, along with others such as Irving Howe, Albert Memmi and Eliezer Schweid, who years ago took note of this issue—namely, Western liberalism as a path to assimilation.

To the extent that I can judge from the perspective of one navigating the jungle on his own with a machete, all this universalistic-democratic-Americanistic-Palestinianistic jazz is nothing more than a front for what can only be called “the closing of the Israeli mind.” It is no coincidence that the emergence of such thinking parallels the gradual attenuation of the country’s Jewish spirit. The explanation for many of our everyday problems lies, in my opinion, in the weakening of the Jewish idea among those who set the tone of public discourse. But this also has implications on the national level, and even on the diplomatic one.

Our spiritual condition in the Land of Israel is born of a contradiction: In order to protect ourselves, physically and spiritually, we had to loose our bonds with the rich traditions and culture we had created during our lengthy exile. As groups which had been the standard-bearers of Zionism immigrated to the Land of Israel, they turned their backs on what until then had been their Jewish world. A revolution was needed to reach this turning point in Jewish life, and revolution always leads to at least some of the dissolution and destruction that characterize revolutionary cultures. The fire of Communism and socialism, alien messianic ideologies known to us from Zionist history, kindled the revolution. After igniting it, however, it also burned much else in its path.

Zionism has long since emerged from its revolutionary phase. Now firmly established, it is laying new roots. In such a time, the basic need for cultured tradition has come to the fore once again. We in Israel live on Jewish soil that in cultural-spiritual terms, as a consequence of the revolutionary phase of Zionism, has become scorched earth. This means we must re-irrigate the social soil in Israel with Jewish culture, even if the latter cannot be defined precisely just yet. The attempts to fill Israel's spiritual realm using only foreign cultural sources will necessarily fail, because they will cause it to wither away, not flower and grow.

Sadly, one can actually measure the destructive effects of alien ideologies, using the barometer showing the rising popularity of reactionary movements such as Shas. The majority of Israelis are people with some connection to Jewish tradition, and they relate to attacks on religion and the religious, and to placing humanism and universalism above Judaism, as nothing more than trampling upon the roots of their soul and identity. This, then, has fostered the polarization that has so poisoned life in Israel: The more the "enlightened" groups engage in militant atheistic propaganda, the more they dissuade the public, some of whom flee, seeking spiritual and political refuge at the opposite extreme. If all segments of the population shared a common spiritual ground, the political disagreements would not end in such polarization and division. But, since the various sides of the public debate in Israel no longer occupy the same Jewish ground, we are witness to increasing extremism, particularly in two directions: On the one hand militant secularism, which has rid itself of Jewish culture and to a great degree even negates it, and, on the other, groups that have coalesced around fundamentalist religious ideas.

Israel's future in the next half-century, therefore, depends upon new groups fostering a cultural environment with a spiritual vocabulary that all, or at least most, segments of society can share. This is essential not only to serve the existential need for intellectual and political discourse based on Jewish ideas, but also in terms of daily life and communal solidarity at its most basic level. Unless we water our social soil with Judaism, the very fabric

of Israeli society will disintegrate, as has already begun to happen. Then we will be left with a democracy devoid of Jewish culture and the traditions of Jewish life, which will likely end up as a coercive, totalitarian regime that will not tolerate behaviors and values defined in the political dictionary as anything other than “progressive.” The bottom line is this: Destroying Jewish identity in Israel will lead to the identity of the country itself being destroyed, and then we will all be strangers in a strange land.

Amnon Lord is a journalist and film critic living in Jerusalem.