
Avraham Burg

What are the building blocks of common identity? Atmosphere, heritage, sounds, people, bereavement and joy, weeping and happiness—all these together form a viscous human blend that holds a nation together. But within the national home, spirits rage, generating tidal waves that soon will come crashing upon our shores.

How did this happen? How did it come to pass that Judaism, which in our not-so-distant past was the common denominator connecting the most distant of brethren, from the ends of Germany to the center of Yemen, has become the principal cause of Jews' alienation from their Jewishness? The common answer makes the (correct) distinction between Judaism and the establishment that represents it, that malignant, unforgivable alliance between the institutions of religion and the institutions of government. Jewish identity, and identification with the Jewish people, still constitute the spiritual underpinning of the Jewish whole, while the religious establishment, which could have been the most faithful representative of that identity, repels Jews from their Jewishness. This is the glaring picture which presents itself, at least at first glance. Another reality, however, new and surprising, has begun to stir beneath the surface.

Israel in its "middle period"—the time between the great excitement when the state began, and the current era of cynicism marked with despair—was the Israel of the melting pot, an estranged, arrogant time. We took two Yemenites, two *yekkes*, two Romanians and two Moroccans, shook well before using, and in the end we got Dan Ben-Amotz: A uniform, stereotyped image of the Israeli *sabra*. Everyone had to look alike, sound alike and be alike. In between, all differences great and small among immigrants from the ends of the earth were expunged.

Today's Israel no longer wants a melting pot. We have moved from the model of forgetting one's heritage to one that sanctifies tradition. Israel is returning to its constituent elements. The results of the 1996 elections are, to a great degree, to be seen as a protest against the melting pot. The immigrants have their organizational frameworks, the ethnic communities have their movements, the ideologies have the parties allotted to them, and the belief in one God is also represented by four or five political parties. Now Israel is striving toward a new founding principle: The mosaic. Each Israeli has a last name: "Israeli." And each one also has a first name: "Jewish," "Muslim," "Druze" or "Christian." A few even have several names: Ashkenazic-Jewish-Israeli from Poland, or Sephardic-Jewish-Israeli from the Caucasus, or any of a number of other combinations. The weakness inherent in this return to particles of identity, to molecules and atoms, also offers a great opportunity for renewed strength: When each one brings different traditions and memories to the Israeli salad, and learns from the strengths of the others, the whole is enriched.

To make the transition from melting pot to mosaic, we must dispense with another sanctimonious principle, the principle of "tolerance." Everyone talks all the time about "tolerance for the sake of Jewish unity, for the sake of unifying the people." This kind of talk often gives me the same unpleasant, prickly feeling I get when people use euphemisms rather than talking about things as they really are. "Tolerance" sounds too much like "tolerate." And what is unity? A situation in which I divest myself of views and positions in order to preserve uniformity with all the errant masses around me. Uniformity is not unity. Unity is the ability to act together despite dissimilarities and differences, to override disagreements. How is this done? Simply by replacing the principle of tolerance, because it is arrogant, with the principle of pluralism. When I say I am tolerant, I am actually saying, "I tolerate you." I reject your opinion, I am convinced you are wrong, at times grievously so, yet despite all this I am so magnanimous that I am willing to tolerate you, for the sake of "us." So, I accept you, you and all your foolishness. This is a poor foundation for unity, one that guarantees constant

tension. The positive foundation that should replace tolerance is pluralism, the acceptance and sanctification of a multiplicity of truths, where everyone else's truth has standing equal to my own.

A pluralistic society enables those holding every opinion and belief to live as they wish, without compulsion or persecution. The secular Jew is equal to the Haredi, the traditional layman is not inferior to the Orthodox politician, and the rabbi is as respected as the professor, because all are situated on the same plane, that of equality among individuals and their opinions. So it is for the Arab and the Jew, the rich and the poor, the longtime resident and the newcomer, the woman and the man.

A modern Israeli society based on these two principles—the mosaic and pluralism—will also be a society in which major reforms can be implemented in the area of national identity, adapting religion and tradition to modern life, and institutionalizing spiritual moderation as a civic duty.

Religion in Israel is far from most Israelis' spiritual experience. Classical, Orthodox halacha does not answer the needs of the majority of the public which does not believe in God, does not observe the Sabbath, ignores the laws of family purity and eats non-kosher food. My halacha was not written for my mother, my wife, my sisters, my daughters or my women friends, who in this century have become full members of society with rights and obligations equal in all respects to those of Jewish men. Modern Judaism means a reality based on spiritual values which, along with its rabbis, have something to say—something relevant to the modern Jew. But neither is the modern Jew exempt from the obligations imposed by his identity. The excuse that the "black-hats" distance and seclude themselves does not pardon you, secular citizen, from involvement in and responsibility for your roots, for our shared past. A religious Jewry that is attentive to developments in the modern world, is integrated into it and does not flee from it, and a secular Jewry that is aware of and respects its past and its sources—these are the key to the new Israel, an Israel embodying neither Teheran-style fundamentalism nor identity-shattering, Greenwich-Village-style universalism. This will be a traditional democracy,

incorporating the best of democratic dialogue with what is most precious in tradition and heritage.

Who will lead this change? Who will build the bridges and wait there for our Israel to walk over them from a dissent-riddled present to a future of dialogue? I have a double answer: Religious Zionists on one side, and Jews from Muslim lands on the other. (I purposely do not use the term *mizrachi*, “eastern,” which seems ludicrous to me if only because Casablanca and Fez are so far west of Moscow and Kiev.)

Religious Zionism is returning to its natural course. In my mind, the last thirty years were a needless mutation in the evolution of religious Zionism. Those who had, and have, more to offer modern Israel than those professing any other ideology locked themselves into a distant, irrelevant corner of our lives. Their leaders erroneously stood the entire Tora on one leg—the leg of “Greater Israel”—and from the moment they shut themselves up in the ghetto world of the settlements, their influence came to an end. Only now that it seems the Land of Israel will not remain as great, territorially, as they dreamed, are tangible signs appearing that religious Zionism is beginning to assume once again its historical role as a bridge between opinions and communities. Haredism offers no real answer, only division and fragmentation. In clinging to their way of life, the various Haredi communities abdicate responsibility for Israel as a whole: One who is unwilling to sacrifice his life in Israel’s wars cannot live together with those who, with their sons, are liable to be sacrificed on the altar of the people and its land.

The role of Israeli Jews from Muslim lands also has not been realized. Shas and other political movements take cynical advantage of the needy to establish their power in government, and in so doing they perpetuate this neediness for generations. Withholding general education and modernity from their supporters ensures an uninterrupted cycle of ignorance and poverty. But worst of all, Sephardic Haredism ignores the most important of the spiritual qualities of Jewry from Muslim lands. Because of social and historical circumstances, Ashkenazic Jewry evolved into a set of communities characterized by division, extremism and factionalism, while Sephardic

Jewry adopted a moderate, far more tolerant way of life. In Israel this is described as “*beit kneset* (synagogue) on Sabbath morning, and Betar Jerusalem (i.e., going to soccer games) on Sabbath afternoon.”

The most profound expression of how the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities differ is their attitude toward Zionism. European Jewry regarded Zionism as a total revolt against ghetto Judaism, against parasitism, against ethereal discourse, against the rabbis, and against national passivity. Ashkenazic Zionism was, among other things, a protest vote against Judaism. Sephardic Jewry is quite different. For it, Zionism is the realization and fulfillment of Judaism. Those who for two thousand years prayed: “May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy” did indeed return to Zion the moment that the Zionist opportunity presented itself.

The idea of combining religious Zionism, which joins spiritual rootedness with worldly progress, with the positive elements in the Zionism of Sephardic Jews, can be the human and ideological compound to fertilize the soil of our pluralistic mosaic. Together these will transform Israel into an exemplary society that will be, at the very least, a “light unto the Jews,” and attractive to those potential immigrants who recoil from it today, out of fear of the religious night which threatens to engulf the landscape of our lives.

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