

The Crisis of Israeli Culture

Yigal Alon

Statesman and military leader Yigal Alon was born in Kefar Tavor in the Lower Galilee in 1918. During the Arab riots of 1936-1939, he became active in the Hagana—the pre-state underground defense force—and in 1941 helped to found its commando unit, the Palmah. Alon commanded a series of decisive operations in the War of Independence, and came to be regarded as one of the IDF's most important field commanders. Elected to the Knesset in 1954 as a member of the Workers' Unity Party, Alon served as minister of labor from 1961 to 1968, and was a member of the inner cabinet that set Israel's strategy during the Six Day War. From 1969 to 1974, he held the post of minister of education and culture, and from 1974 to 1977 he was Israel's foreign minister.

The following speech was delivered to the Knesset in 1972 to mark the 23rd anniversary of the establishment of the Israeli parliament.

Mr. Speaker, honorable Knesset. On this, its birthday, the Knesset is to be congratulated for holding a special session on culture in Israeli society, a topic which, if I am not mistaken, has never been discussed in any formal manner in these halls before.

If we were to judge the state of our culture by the attention it has received from the Knesset, we would find little reason to celebrate. Perhaps

there are no objective criteria for such a judgment, but certainly the symptoms are not lacking. One is the growing withdrawal of philosophers, writers, and artists from involvement in setting the future course of our society, even in those areas in which they have the most to contribute. This is not because of indifference on their part. There was a time, not long ago, when their voices not only were heard, but played a leading role. Whether they have removed themselves from the public discourse or were forced out—and I fear it is more the latter than the former—their lack of involvement may not harm them, their thought, or their works, but it impoverishes us.

Who is to blame for this crisis? Is it their fault, or is it ours? Do they now simply have less to offer in shaping our society and culture, or should we view their absence as evidence that our society has become weaker, more alienated from cultural concerns, and therefore from matters intellectual as well? Or perhaps it is a combination of both?

“The creative spirit,” wrote President Zalman Shazar on the occasion of Haim Nahman Bialik’s fiftieth birthday, “draws its sustenance from the same wellsprings from which the nation’s heroic achievements emerge. Fortunate is the generation whose creative spirit and heroic achievements emerge at the same point in history, with great force, and in concert.” Indeed, it is precisely the coordination between creative acts and the creative spirit—without which the acts are meaningless—that has been undermined in our society.

This development should cause us concern, as should the fact that the men of creative spirit—philosophers, writers, and artists—are not being heard in this debate, just as they have not been heard in other matters that concern this parliament. This, too, is symptomatic of an absence of the kind of coordination that Shazar wrote about, and indicates a perilous alienation of the intellectual, the creator of culture, from the trends and movements in Israeli public life.

Honorable Knesset, although this discussion is taking place on the Knesset’s birthday, I hope that discussion of this subject will not be limited

to celebrations only. For the cultural and spiritual values of our people are not like the festive Sabbath *challa*, but more like our daily bread—indispensable to both man and society.

With your permission, then, I would like to focus on a few questions that are unique to Israeli society, and to show how they are manifest in a number of areas. I will avoid, to the extent I can, addressing the problems of education, although all education worthy of the name is both the bedrock of culture and the gateway to it, on the individual, national, and universal levels.

What I will say here should not be viewed as a clearly worked-out or finalized set of ideas, but rather as the kind of thinking aloud that will, I hope, serve more as an introduction to a broader discussion than as a conventional platform for parliamentary debate.

The word “culture” has many different meanings, especially in Hebrew, which does not make the fine but critical distinction between “culture,” on the one hand, and “civilization” or “enlightenment,” on the other. These concepts do not necessarily overlap in full, though they are interrelated. Yet in our language, there is a wonderful expression that is not used in other languages: *Tarbut haim*, a “culture of living.” I will therefore devote the first part of my speech to this expression, and to how it manifests itself in everyday life.

My fellow Knesset members, we are the heirs of an ancient people, with a rich intellectual and cultural heritage second to none. Our society, however, is still in its infancy, and like any new creation, is not yet fully formed. It sees itself, and rightly so, as the legitimate heir to the entire intellectual and cultural legacy of the Jewish people through the ages. Yet sometimes it behaves as though everything in it has been created from scratch. Continuity and revolution, tradition and innovation mix together in dizzying confusion. On the one hand, there is a deep and powerful sense of history within Israeli society; on the other, a no-less-powerful tendency

towards the ahistorical. The latter is particularly strong among those who were born or educated here; within them these two tendencies strive together, coexisting in one culture like two chambers of the same heart.

I will not dwell here on the historical roots of this conflict. It is enough to say that it did not begin here: It can be seen in our literature of recent generations, and as early as the Second Aliya it was visible in one form or another. It was given clear and concrete expression, however, in the lifestyle of the members of Hashomer,* who, having turned their backs on their Western past, and in their enthusiasm to revive their ancient, Eastern identity, adopted the external trappings and romanticized way of life of the “Wild East.” And indeed they had faithful heirs: The barefoot pioneers, members of the Workers’ Brigade, who were mighty in spirit and refused to accept reality as they found it, instead rolling up their sleeves to lay the foundation of a different reality for themselves and their people.

It was Avraham Shlonsky, himself a member of the Workers’ Brigade, who best described their world and their state of mind in his satirical work, “From Tomato to Symphony”:

Thus danced the children who had rebelled, who carried the weight of their past; and their present, longing for a different future, was impatient to move on.

Their past—city and town, their childhood home, its lifestyle and customs, and a classroom, with its concepts and values—all of these were suddenly rejected in their passion to change and cut themselves off, which they needed to do in order to begin laying down new roots: In new surroundings, with a new morality, with a hierarchy of values turned upside down. With a kind of mental “burning of the *hametz*”....

We tried to discard the entire culture, so bowed down were we from study. We made ourselves ignorant and went barefoot, to please ourselves, and to spite others.

* An organization of volunteers who guarded Jewish settlements in Palestine in the early 1900s.

From the beginning this was a kind of anti-culture, deliberately rough and masculine; an antithesis that was barely conscious of how closely tied it was to the thesis against which it rebelled. Yet in the end, when they got over their “childhood malady,” these pioneers laid the foundations of a living Hebrew civilization, whose society and institutions are awe-inspiring.

Members of the Knesset, nothing is more natural than a people’s longing to live a normal life in its own land, to live, as we say, “like all the other nations.” Yet there is no reason we should want to be like the others. A normal, healthy nation desires, above all, to remain faithful to itself and to its heritage. After all, the other nations are not all the same—each has its own unique qualities. Therefore, we should not look to become “like all the other nations.” Judaism has contributed something, to put it mildly, to the family of nations, and we have every reason to be proud of our religion and to show respect for our past.

Along the way a number of futile attempts have been made to answer these yearnings for normalcy. One of these was Canaanism.* Another was an exclusive focus on the Bible and the disavowal of two thousand years of exile, with its enormous creative achievement in all spheres of thought, culture, and practice. Does this mean that we can and should accept our past in its entirety? Certainly not. Every heritage, even one considered revolutionary in its time, tends ultimately to ossify, to atrophy, to become closed within itself. Not everything that sustained a people in the past can and should sustain it today. Even values and culture must follow the laws of natural selection. Yet every value that retains its essential quality can undoubtedly be applied in the here and now; being old does not automatically render something out of date.

Culture has been compared to a bow and arrow: The farther back you draw the bow, the farther your arrow will fly. If we do not draw our cultural

* A cultural movement that started in the late 1930s, which rejected the Jewish heritage and identity in favor of a primordial, secular relationship to the land. Canaanism found expression in the works of literary figures like Yonatan Ratosh, Binyamin Tamuz, and Aharon Amir, and artists like Yitzhak Danziger and Rudi Lehmann.

bow back far enough into the past, if we fail to draw sustenance from our own sources, not only will our sources be lost, but we, too, will wither. At the same time, we cannot and should not attempt to wall ourselves in, to withdraw from the world. The days of spiritual “autarky” are over, never to return—if, indeed, they ever existed at all, at any point in human history. We must therefore be attentive to both our great past and our present. We must remain faithful to the place in which we live, and at the same time be open to the wider world and the winds that blow within it.

There are those who fear that we might become, God forbid, just another province in one of the most backward parts of the world, with all the difficulties this would entail. I do not wish to make light of this fear, but the fear of being thought provincial is one of the hallmarks of the provincial. Fashioning a cheap Israeli replica of Western culture, without fully understanding its deeper currents, might be even worse.

Honorable Knesset, the question of the spiritual and cultural identity of Israeli society was not answered with the establishment of the state. By “spiritual and cultural identity” I am referring specifically to patterns of behavior and the “culture of living.” Shaping the patterns of life, culture, and society in Israel is a long-term project. But it begins with our own generation. Everything here is subject to ongoing, tempestuous, rapid change. In this situation, the lack of fixed norms is sometimes painfully felt. While a small group united around a great idea could perhaps do without these norms, a people and a society cannot.

The problem of norms became far more tangible with the arrival of large waves of immigrants after the establishment of the state. True, every group of immigrants is changed through contact with our society; but each wave of immigration affects us as well, and in numerous ways: In its impact on the economy, on social and class structure, on fashion, religious custom, song and dance, food, and mores. Yet because of our shared foundation of Jewish nationalism, we are, in the end, one people, since a people is above

all that which defines itself as such. Our country is a meeting place of traditions and cultures, and therefore also a kind of arena, where traditions, customs, and cultures vie with one another, sometimes publicly, but more often subtly. It is also a country where no small number of traditions and subcultures are in a state of crisis. Among certain ethnic groups, this crisis includes the painful destruction of the family unit, and in particular the figure of the father, and this destruction usually means the collapse of the entire value system that this figure represents.

Other ethnic groups face hardships of a different kind: Dislocation from their native cultural and social environment, as well as adjustment to a new language, and integration into a society that is not always welcoming. Sometimes the crisis takes a different form altogether: Many people came here in search of a clear answer to the question of spiritual and cultural identity, and they look to us to provide it. Yet to a religious person, we are too secular, and to a secular person we are too religious. Either way, we come up short.

Honorable Speaker, our society is very complex. It is multifaceted, variegated, and full of contradictions. I almost called it a “world-society,” because every tribe that came to Israel brought with it, along with its unique form of Judaism, the unique national culture of the land from which it came. True, the joy of the immigrants at arriving in the land of Israel is not what it would be in a time of peace. They have returned to the land of their forefathers, but cannot find rest in it. The scars of war and the bitter struggle that has been forced upon us penetrate deep into our souls, even when outwardly we radiate faith and self-assurance. If that were not enough, our people carries with it a history of traumas the likes of which no other people has endured. Everything that we suffered throughout the generations—all the anxiety, the fear, and the longing—naturally finds expression in our society, for better or for worse.

There is reason to fear that the prolonged, intense militarization of the country may damage our sense of humanity and that of our children. It may spawn in them an inflexibility and a recklessness that will leave their mark

on all our relations, tomorrow if not today. Add to that the scars of the past, particularly the Holocaust, and we can see the effect this tension has on our way of life, and on the less-than-ideal relations today between man and his fellow man, and between man and the society in which he lives. With your permission I will provide a few examples.

First, a lack of tolerance, which sometimes leads to violence, and often wanton violence. This is a relatively new phenomenon, the likes of which we never experienced previously, either in exile or at home. Like idolatry, it is contrary to everything for which Judaism stands.

Second, the slaughter on the highways. This, from a nation whose children show the utmost sensitivity to human life on the battlefield, and are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to save a wounded comrade. A society that unites as one family to mourn the loss of one of its sons on the battlefield nonetheless shows criminal disregard for human life.

Third, hooliganism in places where young people congregate: On the playing fields, in the movie theaters, and even in the concert halls and playhouses; this from a people who in every generation was sustained by the book, the life of the mind, and a respect for intellectual creativity.

In this context it is also worth mentioning our general unruliness, both in public and in private. With the radio playing at full volume, and people talking so loudly as to drown out everyone else, we can barely hear ourselves think. And our spoken Hebrew, once so florid, has swung to the opposite extreme: Its simplicity is not of the good sort, but rather it is vulgar and grating.

And then there is our tendency to desecrate our countryside, our antiquities, our rare flora, and our historical sites—and this from a people who preserved the vision of the land of its forefathers in its festivals, its prayers, and its very heart, even when in exile. We are a historical people that at times appears to lack even the slightest sense of history, ancient or modern.

There has, moreover, been a sharp decline in the reading of books, particularly those that demand effort and patience; in musical or choral

activity undertaken purely for pleasure; in participation in sports; and in other edifying hobbies. It is true that our society does not have an abundance of free time, but what little time we have is not well spent. Instead, we see an increasing involvement in the more passive forms of culture, and a decrease in independent endeavors, such as literary, artistic, or theatrical societies.

And then there is our indifference towards our surroundings. There is a jarring difference between the care we take to beautify the inside of our homes, and the filth and neglect we find outside, in our yards and on our sidewalks. It is a kind of esthetic split personality. And, lest I be accused of favoritism, I will not overlook the unesthetic appearance of a large number of our schools, courtyards, and playgrounds. I realize that this is a budgetary problem as well, but we have all seen that even a humble cabin can be made esthetically pleasing, inside and out, and surrounded by manicured lawns and gardens. In this connection it is impossible not to mention the cheap and tasteless flashiness of the *nouveaux riches* and their imitators, for whom everything is skin-deep, and everything is done solely to impress others. Another example is the new, showy artistic productions, upon which, with your indulgence, I will not bother to expand.

Some of these phenomena are rooted in ethical problems, both personal and public, and some in esthetic ones. But all of them are evident in both high culture and low culture.

Colleagues, members of the Knesset, I am afraid the picture I have painted does little to gladden the heart. However, it is said, "When worry fills a man's heart, let him speak of it." (Proverbs 12:25) I do not pretend to offer a complete picture. I could have also enumerated our major achievements in the fields of higher education and scientific research, which have received international acclaim. I could have spoken about our musical life, the envy of great nations with more continuous musical traditions than our own, although there are those who already worry, justifiably, about whether we will continue to have an audience for serious music in our country. I could have mentioned our great achievements in the plastic arts

and in dance, or our extensive theatrical offerings and our publication of original books in ever-increasing numbers, and so on. The time for this discussion will come, when I present the Knesset with the budget for the ministry I have the honor to head. However, as I noted at the beginning, my goal is to remain focused on the issues specific to our culture and our way of life.

I will now proceed to an issue that makes Israeli society and culture unique: The problem of pluralism.

There are two peoples living side by side in our country: The majority are Jews and the minority, albeit a sizable one, are Arabs. I will begin with the problem of the minority, which is further divided into Christians and Muslims, Druze and Circassians, sects, clans, and Bedouin tribes. Does Israel have room for a unique Arab culture? The answer is yes, absolutely. It is a fundamental right of any minority to teach its children—in its own language—about its culture, religion, and heritage. Together with Israeli Arabs, we long for the peace that will enable them to develop full and close cultural ties with their brethren in neighboring countries.

The Jews, too, are divided, according to country of origin and cultural background; by ethnic groups and classes and parties; into secular and religious. The secular community may be further broken down into different worldviews, streams of thought, and movements actively engaged in building the country; the religious community may be broken down into different schools of thought, and into those who take an active part in building the country, and those who do not.

Is it justified for our educational system to be divided into different streams? Again, the answer is yes. Everyone must be allowed to live and to teach his children in accordance with his faith, so long as there is a shared foundation. It is a basic right of parents in a democratic society to have a say regarding the religious framework in which their children are educated. I can testify that it is actually the largest group among us, which advocates the

idea of labor as essential to the survival of the Jewish state, that has not succeeded in transmitting to its children the idea of labor as a value to the degree it deserves.

As with culture, in education it is not diversity and different emphases that we should fear, but rather the possibility of blurring our self-image, of fostering a lack of individuality and an amorphous kind of mediocrity. I have never believed in the shallow concept of Israel as a “melting pot.” I would prefer to speak of ethnic groups and immigrant communities learning to live together, rather than assimilating into one another. Although our life may at times seem as heated and turbulent as a melting pot, people are not inarticulate metal, nor are intellectual and cultural traditions raw materials to be melted down and shaped anew. No one has the right to engineer the spirit, nor can the spirit be engineered.

Even if one may speak of a melting pot, there is clearly more than just one. What would the Israeli melting pot contain? If we say, everyone who lives in Israel, then we are naturally including Arabs. But if we mean a Jewish melting pot, which one? Religious? Secular? Again, even these groups are further divided into sub-groups, according to their roots and their history. This situation has obvious implications for our culture: Communities and individuals all have the right to preserve their uniqueness, so long as this is what they desire.

Educational and cultural integration does not imply the rejection of individualism. Nor does it mean simply nurturing the weakest among us, but rather maximizing the potential of every individual and group. Integration means a meeting of equals, despite their differences, on the basis of what they have in common, in order to preserve what they have in common. Mutual influence and cross-fertilization? By all means. But there is a difference between cross-fertilization, on the one hand, and negation or imitation of the other’s culture, on the other. For someone who imitates a culture wholesale—as opposed to integrating it into his own—is erasing his own identity. Put simply: Unity, yes; uniformity, no. For us, pluralism demands, first of all, openness to the other, to those who are different, and

mutual respect among those who differ. Where mutual respect and openness are lacking, intolerance spreads; intolerance breeds suspicion, suspicion leads to alienation, and it is only one step from alienation to violence. Every segment of our people has something to give to the others, and something to learn from them. Our pluralism is a historical fact, and the wisdom of coexistence a basic condition of our existence. I consider this problem to be even more serious than the external threats to our existence.

In time we will achieve a synthesis, for every culture is a synthesis of past and present. When we do, it will no doubt reflect the complexity of our situation, an inevitable result of our special circumstances. To accelerate this process, however, we will have to strengthen our independent Jewish roots, which are shared by our entire people, and to integrate them with the highest universal values.

Honorable Speaker, it is not by chance that I have refrained from mentioning the problem of language. The Hebrew language is, without a doubt, the most important element of our culture's foundation. Without it, our people would long ago have been silenced. To be cut off from our language is to be cut off from the whole of our great spiritual and literary heritage.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has done tremendous work in the area of language instruction. But no one should delude himself into thinking that with one or two thousand words we will succeed in passing on the different elements of our cultural heritage to the thousands of adult immigrants to our country. It is clear that in addition to teaching the language, we must offer them a common cultural framework, using pluralistic means rooted in language—such as a sort of “pocket library for the Jewish people” containing the best of our literature, Jewish history, and the history of the land of Israel and of Jewish settlement in the land, all in the

immigrants' native tongues. This is one way to accelerate the cultural integration of adult immigrants in Israel, and like education, it will lead to greater social integration as well. If we do not make this effort, there is a danger that, culturally, they will continue to live the inner life of an immigrant.

I do not fear for the future of Hebrew in our land. Its future is assured by the Hebrew school system, and by its being the mother tongue of the younger generation. What is not certain, however, is that their parents will read Bialik and Agnon, Burla and Hazaz, Shlonsky and Alterman, or the new generation of writers, unless they are translated. Indirectly, the translation of our country's great literature will also serve as a cultural bridge between Israel and the diaspora.

There are additional ways to accelerate cultural integration. Theater, for instance. I cherish artistic freedom no less than academic freedom, and we dare not interfere with it. However, it is difficult to understand why, in a land of ingathered exiles, the Hebrew theater has not seen fit to stage new productions of the best of our own original repertoire. After all, there is always a new audience, thirsting to see a reflection of itself and its people in the looking glass of national culture. It would also be valuable for young people who have not yet seen and enjoyed these plays.

Another method is television. If there were a second channel, we could dedicate it to educational programming, for the enrichment and cultural edification of the entire population, above and beyond the artistic and cultural programs that already appear on the existing channel. Important steps have recently been taken in this direction. We could do great things with another channel, even though the accountants might see it as pointless. In Israel, there is indeed a shocking disparity between the investment in "bricks and mortar"—in mute buildings—and the investment in human culture.

Members of the Knesset, just as today's youths are tomorrow's Jewish people, the investment we make in culture today will determine how the

culture of tomorrow looks. I will confess that for many years my ministry has been much more a Ministry of Education than a Ministry of Culture. The time has come to ensure a greater balance between the two.

Just as a political democracy that is not social is only a partial democracy, so too, a political and social democracy is not complete unless it is also cultural. That means investing in arts and culture. This is a kind of equilateral triangle whose sides together create a fully integrated democracy, a model society, at the center of which is the material and spiritual well-being of the individual, his personal and public dignity, his self-confidence, his rights within society, and his obligations to it. Or, in one sentence: It is an ideal society that puts man at its center.