Nation-Building, Pluralism, and Democracy in Israel

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Israeli society is highly diverse and heterogeneous—characteristics that can be traced to the way in which the country was formed. In most "immigrant countries," a large nuclear population absorbed waves of immigrants. In Israel, immigration itself created most of the core population. Immigrants and their offspring make up the vast majority of the Jewish population and a significant majority of the population at large.[1] Therefore, state-building and the forging of a cohesive nation are naturally topics of utmost importance for Israel.

The expression "nation-building" may sound strange when applied to the Jewish people. After all, Jewry is one of the oldest of peoples, and it has maintained its identity for thousands of years. However, 1,900 years of exile took away one of the important shared fundamentals of national life—territory. In this sense, Israeli independence in 1948 ushered in a new era in Jewish history and reintroduced the concept of nation-building.

The main difficulty Israeli society has faced since independence has been to turn various Jewish immigrant groups and a significant Arab minority into a cohesive national unit. The complexity of integrating the Arab minority into society with all the accompanying political issues is obvious; however, the integration of masses of Jews from various locations also pre-

sents problems. The Jews who gathered in Israel not only came from all over the world but also brought totally different life styles—as evidenced by language and culture, and by more trivial features such as cuisine and clothing.

The instinctive tendency was to attempt to conjoin the disparate immigrant groups or to use the historical Jewish term, to "ingather the exiles." This approach is closely associated with David Ben-Gurion, independent Israel's dominant, first leader. The original approach of the authorities at all levels was to pour all immigrants into a standard "Israeli cast." They did not succeed; life proved to be stronger. While, in the past, attempts to impose a culture simply did not work, it is simply unacceptable today given the importance of political correctness. Today, the prevailing approach is a pluralistic one that seeks to reconcile unity and diversity. Parenthetically, Israel is not alone in making this effort; it is conventional in many societies around the globe.[2]

Israeli society has three competing and complementary long-term goals. First, there is the effort to build a cohesive, functioning nation; second, the attempt to tolerate particularistic preferences of different subgroups; and third, the desire to maintain its democratic foundations. Efforts to cope with these three challenges are overshadowed by an overarching mission to defend itself against a continued threat against its very existence. The dynamic problems created by these three goals express themselves in a variety of ways, but especially in the following tensions.

The first tension sets the Jewishness of the Israeli state against its democratic nature. A second tension lies between the need to build a cohesive nation and the preferences of individual groups, which are both ethnic and ideological. A tenuous relationship between religion and state, and between different interpretations of what it means to be "Jewish" marks a third tension. And a final tension is the increasing coincidence of ethnocultural and socioeconomic divisions. While Jews and Arabs generally confront each other over the tensions between Israeli democracy and Jewishness, the other three tensions generally involve debates within the Jewish community, between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, immigrants and veterans, and religious and secular groups. However, it is important to recognize that Jews and Arabs are also increasingly divided along socioeconomic lines; nevertheless, this is often seen as an outgrowth of the larger debate over inclusiveness in a Jewish, democratic state.

The Arab Minority in a "Jewish, Democratic State."

When British rule ended in 1948, "British Palestine" was divided between Jews and Arabs by what became known as the Green Line according to a UN resolution. In the first two decades of Israeli independence, Arabs who preferred to remain in Israel were an isolated national minority on the economic, political, and social fringes with negligible influence on political and social developments.

Twenty years later, the after-effects of the 1967 war facilitated direct contact between Israeli Arabs and those on the other side of the Green Line (the West Bank and Gaza). This thrust Israeli Arabs into a unique situation: they shared citizenship with Israeli Jews but nationality with Arabs. For Israeli Arabs, their nationality was an obstacle to a full Israeli

identity while their Israeli citizenship prevented their full membership in Arab-Palestinian movement.

The encounter with West Bank and Gaza Arabs heightened and radicalized the national consciousness of Israeli Arabs, especially among the educated elites. In the political domain, Arab citizens have become increasingly inclined to organize in separate parties. In the early 1990s, the electoral ascent of these parties allowed them to form a political bloc that thwarted the possibility of establishing a Right-wing government. Moreover, the Rabin government was able to pass the Oslo accords in the Knesset largely because of its Arab members. In this sense, the Arab population is no longer a marginal and irrelevant player in decision-making processes. Instead, it has become a meaningful factor in the political mobilizations of the two large party blocs, Likud and Labor.

Arab voters gained additional influence during the institution of direct elections for the premiership. Arab voting, or more appropriately abstention, patterns did much to defeat Shimon Peres in 1996, as they chose to cast unmarked, plain white ballots. This recurred with even greater impact in the 2001 elections.

Recently, there has been a rising demand for the remaking of Israel from a Jewish democratic state into "a state of all its citizens." However, this clashes with the very essence of Jewish statehood (especially with an Arab-Palestinian state alongside of it). Moreover, it is becoming a major obstacle to the collaborative building of an Israeli nation that balances democracy with limitations that stem from its underlying raison d' tre.

The Ethnic Divide—Within Jewry.

The second combination of goals that seems on a collision course is the building of a cohesive nation while at the same time respecting the preferences of large, distinct ethnic groups. This collision is epitomized in the social status of Sephardim (Jews of Asian-African origin). Accounting for almost half of the Jewish population, the Sephardim are by no means a marginal group.

The vision of "ingathering of the exiles" never materialized because of an ethnic gap that refuses to close, even though it has narrowed. The initial barriers have left a distinct imprint that is now reflected in socioeconomic inequality between Sephardim and Ashkenazim (Jews of European descent). Disparities in economic resources, social status, and schooling between Ashkenazim and Sephardim also became visible and charged in the 1960s and 1970s. The cumulative frustration gave rise to protest movements, including the prominent Black Panthers.

Throughout the years, attempts were made to establish a partisan political camp that would advance the particularistic interests of the Sephardi communities. These attempts usually failed. As an alternative their representatives preferred to fit into the existing party constellation, sometimes using the hardships of the Sephardim to leverage their political advancement.

This changed when ethnic estrangement feelings among the *haredim* led to the creation of Shas—a Sephardi *haredi* movement—in the 1984 election campaign.[3] Over the next fifteen years, Shas became increasingly successful, and in the 1999 elections, it garnered seventeen Knesset seats and became the third-largest parliamentary party. In the

1990s, Shas, which came into being as a protest against the Ashkenazi *haredim*, became pronouncedly Sephardi-ethnic. Most of its constituents are religious or semi-observant Sephardim disillusioned with the promises of both Likud and Labor. Importantly, most of the public enced considerable downward economic mobility. Those with higher education levels found this especially distressing.

Against this backdrop, Russian immigrants developed an umbrella association that eventually evolved into an ethnically based political party.[5] The immi-

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represented by Shas, unlike the Ashkenazi *haredi* sector, is fully engaged in Israel's social and economic systems. Most Shas voters enroll their children in public schools and not in separate institutions that Shas has established. This indicates that Shas's *haredism* is evidently embodied only to a limited extent among its constituents even though they choose to identify themselves with the movement.

More recently, the tension between different Jewish communities has become intertwined with the migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union, who within less than a decade have become Israel's largest population group. The social integration of this immense population may prove to be decisive for the cohesion of Israeli society. The "direct absorption" policy exposed them to market forces during the first and most critical phases of their integration.[4] This caused a great deal of distress, both at the physical level—in terms of their ability to meet their own basic needs—and at the psychological level. Many immigrants accepted jobs of lower occupational status and experi-

grants' electoral potential was first discovered in the 1992 Knesset elections, when the parties of the Left replaced those of the Right. Although the immigrants contributed only three or four Knesset seats to the victory of the Left, they were perceived as the main contributors to this victory. This perception gave them a sense of political clout that was translated into real political power in the 1996 election campaign. As they continued to amass power, the immigrants moved rather quickly from social marginality to a firm position in the sociopolitical center.

It is difficult to predict whether the preservation of a distinct "Russian" community within Israel will last. There is a possibility that this community will gradually carve out a meaningful position in Israel's formative pluralistic-sectoral structure, at least in the medium term. It is not clear how this will affect their identification with the Israeli collective and their Israeli identity in the long run. To make sure that the trend heads in a positive direction and with sufficient intensity, more efforts to settle their social and economic problems are needed.

Conditional Democracy?—Religion and State.

Another tension between Israeli democracy and Jewishness reveals itself when one reads "Jewish religious" instead of "Jewish." Israel's religious-secular division reflects ideological and cultural differences, and debate over the status of religion in Israel concerns the very definition of Jewishness: can Jewish nationality and Jewish religion be separated? Historically, it is generally agreed that Jewish identity in the Diaspora was defined in religious terms. However, the secular revolution in the West and modernist national thinking created new ideological options. Incorporating modernist national content into Jewish identity facilitates a Jewish affiliation that is not necessarily related to religion. However, since the Law of Return—which stipulates the rules of immigration into Israel—is based on the immigrant's Jewish affiliation, a full separation of religion and state in Israel is problematic.

Public controversies over religious issues in Israel are as old as the state itself. Legislation that imposes religious norms on the public at large has aggravated social tension by evoking charges of religious coercion among secularist circles. In contrast, various rulings of the Supreme Court have infuriated religious groups, especially haredi. Controversies over affairs of religion and state focus largely on constitutional and legal issues. Still, Israel's management of the religion-state relationship is not merely a matter of constitutional principle; it is a question that resurfaces in many practical concerns.

Due to the highly problematic and political nature of separating religion and state, Israel has not as yet managed to draft a constitution.[6] In all matters pertaining to marital status, Israeli law invests *halakha* (rabbinical law) with binding legal status for Jews.[7] Additional statutes enforce religious norms, such as partial observance of the Sabbath in the public domain on all Israelis, and ensure the provision of religious services by the state. The transformation of *halakha* into binding law in cases of marital status for all Jews has created inconsistencies between the definition of a "Jew" for the purpose of the Law of Return and in terms of other issues (marriage, divorce, burial).

When immigration authorities examine prospective immigrants' eligibility to move to Israel, they determine applicants' Jewishness by applying a very lenient test.[8] In regard to personal status, however, more stringent religious rules apply. Consequently, when immigrants turn to the religious establishment to settle their personal affairs, many encounter serious difficulties. Amidst the resulting severe tension, there have been cases where immigrants who were victims of Palestinian terror were not given a Jewish burial, despite their Jewish self-identification, due to official intransigence. Such clashes, irrespective of how they are resolved, invest the conflict among goals on the religion-state axis with great intensity.

At the same time, rising fundamentalism among Orthodox Jews has prompted parts of this community to lean increasingly toward cultural and social segregation. When segments of the religious population went on a broader offensive, large allocations of state resources to the *haredi* sector led to a secular counter-reaction. This, in turn, served to re-ignite basic controversies that had been dormant before the rise of Orthodox political influence. The most conspicuous manifestation of the counter reaction was the impressive performance of

the Shinui Party in the 1999 elections. Shinui, which had been on the verge of dissolution, obtained six Knesset seats largely due to an aggressive election campaign that centered on the slogan, "Stop the haredim from taking over the country." Therefore, even in Israel's sixth decade of independence, the relationship between state and religion, and Jewish ethnocultural and religious identity remains problematic.

Economic Disparities and Their Ethnic Incidence.
There is much evidence that demarcation lines of social gaps tend to coincide with ethnic divisions, i.e., the lines that separate Jews from Arabs, Sephardim from Ashkenazim, immigrants from veterans, etc. In other words, socioeconomic disparities—which exist in every society—reinforce ethnic separation in Israel. The overlap between socioeconomic disparities and ethnic divisions are making nation-building much harder to achieve. Unfortunately, this has been the state of affairs in Israel for quite some time.

Israel's great challenge at the dawn of the twenty-first century is to reverse the trend towards increasing economic gaps. One manifestation of the gaps in recent years has been severe unemployment, especially in towns inhabited by members of weak population groups. Economic policy in the second half of the 1990s pursued price stability, almost to the exclusion of all other goals. Even though it accomplished much in this regard—among high-inflation countries, including Brazil, Argentina, and Turkey, only Israel managed to almost fully curb inflation—Israel paid for this dearly in terms of growth and unemployment. Evidently, Israel's economic leaders may not have realized that the social cost of this policy

was too high, and perhaps the nation-building process should have been given higher priority.

The regional-development process also fell short of expectations. Peripheral towns were left behind and hardly benefited from the economic prosperity that central parts of the country enjoyed during part of the last decade. It seems that these regions are continuing to pay for planning errors that were made in the 1950s.

Notably however, there have also been some successes in the past decade, as some development towns such as Yoqne'am and Migdal ha-'Emeq have found their way to prosperity by simultaneously taking in immigrants from the former Soviet Union and attracting entrepreneurial business activity, especially in high-tech industries.

Concluding Remarks.
Total segregation—the lack of any interaction among groups—is inconsistent with social cohesion. On the other hand, the existence and recognition of lines of diversity are not necessarily adverse to socio-national solidarity; in fact, such lines sometimes facilitate coexistence. This is true when the actions of one group do not drastically harm neighboring groups, either because the group lacks the strength to cause such harm or because it deliberately refrains from doing so. To achieve such a situation, the various groups must be aware of the minimum requirements of the nation at large, and the nation's leaders must act in a way that respects the groups' particular needs. In this matter, it seems, Israeli society must still pass five difficult tests.

First, on the "Jewish and democratic state" axis, the willingness of the Arab

sector to integrate in the Israeli society, and the state's willingness to facilitate it, will be put to test. This requires that Arabs accept the basic fact that Israel is a Jewish state. This acceptance lies at the core of the compromise embodied in the

religion that they come to know most intimately are the hurdles that religion officials place in their path when they apply for certifications to marry, divorce, etc.

Third, with respect to the religion-state relationship, it will be necessary to

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partitioning of Palestine into two contiguous national identities, one Jewish and one Arab (or Palestinian, if they so prefer). In turn, the Jewish majority and the central governing institutions will have to invest the term "democratic" with more meaningful content. Most importantly, it will have to make an effort, not only to narrow the economic and social disparities, but it will also have to acknowledge the Arabs' sectoral, not just personal, needs. This must include an increased sensitivity to the problematic dual identity of Israeli Arabs as Palestinians and Israelis.

Second, to further the nation-building process, the integration of immigrants from the former Soviet Union into Israel's Jewish population at large must be enhanced. The melting-pot approach is dead, but its alternative is not the formation or preservation of barriers between ethnic groups. Importantly, the immigrants came from a country where authorities had brutally severed relations with Jews abroad and stifled Jewish life for seventy years. The lack of Jewish culture among the immigrants is unlikely to resolve itself automatically. Unfortunately, "Russians" who wish to retrace their steps to mainstream Judaism encounter only obstacles. The aspects of the Jewish

keep both poles of the relationship separate and concurrently related. As issues like the imposition of Sabbath observance by public policy are continually being litigated in the courts or imposed by administrative measures, the self-perceived victims are showing rising signs of opposition. In these matters, the "status-quo approach" is steadily eroding in both directions and will require more systematic treatment.[9] Within this general topic, pressure to correct the distortion concerning the ultra-Orthodox population group, whose young do not serve in the army and many do not participate in the labor force, will mount.

Fourth, one of the pillars of democracy is freedom of association, especially in the form of political parties. In this respect, Israel appears to suffer from an "excess of democracy."[10] The profusion of parties not only impairs the efficiency of governance, but also helps to create social fissures. In the 1990s, election rules were changed to allow for direct election of the prime minister, but this only strengthened various splinter parties. Deliverance, it seems, will not come from any form of technical change, but from a more comprehensive educational and public effort. Destabilization of gov-

erning authority is a grave and present menace to democratic rule.

Fifth, strengthening of civic society is meant to create a complement, not an alternative, to government. Civil initiatives are proliferating in Israel, especially in the defense of personal rights, quality of governance, and the environment, to name only a few. The great test in this matter is whether the two sides, civil society and government, will have the wisdom to regard each other as partners and not as rivals.

These issues are by no means simple, and they are further complicated by the need to cope with a continual security threat—a daily burden that few countries have to endure. Some consider the security factor a catalyst that can strengthen the nation; others view it as a weakening agent. Either way, it is a factor that will continue to impact Israeli society and its nation-building process for some time to come. On the positive side, Israel has already passed major parts of these tests quite successfully, overcoming some social obstacles while constructing an advanced economy at the same time. There are good reasons to look towards the future with optimism that Israeli society will maintain the delicate balance between preserving unique group identities and forging a cohesive society.

NOTES

1 According to the *Annual Statistical Abstract 2001* published by the Central Bureau of Statistics the accumulated direct contribution of net immigration to the population growth was approximately 42 percent. The remaining 58 percent is attributed to natural increase. This is, of course, an underestimate since the immigrants themselves also contributed a major part of the natural population growth. See "Annual Statistical Abstract 2001," Shnaton 53 Table 2.2, http://www.cbs.gov.il.

2 See for example the manifest of the group organized by Amitai Etzioni and others, http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/DWU.html.

3 Outside Israel, the Haredi community is commonly referred to as Ultra-Orthodox, a term that distinguishes Haredim from other religious groups. This definition fails to convey fully their uniqueness within Israeli society. For example, they are exempt from compulsory military service and, by and large, do not participate in the labor force.

4 As opposed to the previous, more organized method which referred the immigrants to "public absorption centers" for a limited, transition period.

5 The Russian immigrant group grasped relatively quickly the importance of organizing a political mechanism to represent their rights. Other immigrant groupings have not been so fast or successful in their attempts to become politically active and significant.

6 A Declaration of Independence was signed on May 14, 1948 at the convention where the State of Israel was established. This declaration refers to the country as a "Jewish state in the Land of Israel which will guarantee complete equality of social and political rights without regard to religion, race or sex." The Supreme Court in its major rulings has used this declaration in the way that other countries use a constitution.

7 The same applies to Christian, Muslim, and other faiths in Israel, all of whose marital matters are determined by their respective religious authorities.

8 The intention was to create a law that would enable and benefit all Jews (defined in the widest way). In order to do so, the criteria set in the law used, as an act of historical justice, a counter mirror of the Nuremberg Laws (1935), in which the Nazis defined someone as Jewish if one of the grandparents was Jewish.

9 The "status quo" remains non-formalized and is more of an underlying perception that encourages a dialogue between the religious and the secular in matters of State. The term itself is found frequently in political discourse. The source of it is a document written in October 1947, even before the establishment of the independent state, by a prominent religious leader. See Yoel Rappel, "Religious and Secular Relations in the First Year of Statehood," *Idan* (1988): 131.

10 See S. N. Eisenstadt, *Paradoxes of Democracy: Fragility, Continuity and Change* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center, 1999).